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## "I Don't Have Time"

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Time deprivation – or, at least, the perception of having less and less time to do the things we want to do – is a growing malady around the world, affecting the work world, family life and, of course, volunteering. Yet the standard earth day remains 24 hours in length. Here's the paradox: *We all feel that we don't have enough time, yet we all have all the time there is.*

Many social observers have analyzed why the speed of life seems to be accelerating. We are: working longer hours at paid jobs; over-scheduling activities for ourselves and our children; caring for older parents or raising our grandchildren; spending hours on e-mail and Web sites. Divorce, for example, is a time sucker. Even in a bad marriage one of you can go for milk and the other for the dry cleaning. When you divorce, you *both* have to go for milk *and* the dry cleaning.

Without a doubt, every recruiter of volunteers hears "I don't have time" as the most often expressed reason to refuse an invitation to participate in a project. Similarly, those who coordinate volunteer services also express the frustration of "I don't have the time" to do all sorts of things from expanding a program to reading professional books or Web resources. What can we do about this except wring our hands?

### **Time and the Volunteer**

Naturally virtual volunteering and one-time days of service are responses to the lack of time expressed by volunteers. But it's still possible to engage people in more intensive service, if we pay attention to their needs.

- *Revisit volunteer position descriptions from a time perspective.* Ask why volunteer work is structured the way it is now. Of course, if you're running a lunch program, volunteers have to be on site at lunchtime. But for most other work, question whether you truly need to require a set schedule. Is it more important to have volunteers on site at specific times or to have an amount of work completed by a determined due date? If the latter, allow more flexibility. Also, can a volunteer position description be broken into several smaller ones so that the work can be shared? Might a team of volunteers be assigned to the same project and promise to staff

a shift or complete the tasks on a schedule they rotate among themselves as they wish?

- *Identify time wasters and do something about them.* Every meeting requires commute time, so perhaps it would make sense to hold fewer but longer meetings, focusing time spent on what's important (group discussion) rather than on sitting in a car more often. Similarly, does the volunteer have to come on site? Can we audiotape some messages and make them available online, even to download onto a portable listening device like an iPod?
- *Meet multiple needs.* Busy people make choices and gravitate to activities that accomplish more than one thing on their to-do list. For example, if there's a choice between two volunteer opportunities – both serving important causes and allowing the volunteer to exercise civic responsibility – any sane person would select the one that provides additional personal benefits. For example
  - Meeting new friends (possibly *single* new friends!) – especially important for prospective volunteers new to a community or recently divorced or widowed.
  - Learning something new while volunteering that, in turn, will be helpful in the person's paying job or look good on a resume for future job hunting.
  - Being able to volunteer with one's children as a family activity, rather than having to make the choice of spending even less time parenting than now.
  - Simply having fun – time-deprived folks need a recreational outlet (by the way, it's possible to do hard work and still have fun!).
  - *Stop rewarding hours contributed and start honoring service provided.* One way we imply that we value loads of time is to give recognition for 100 hours, 2 years, or other intensive service or longevity. By all means continue to thank such devotion. But understand the message this sends to new volunteers: give us more, more, more! Instead, focus appreciation on tasks completed (reorganized the center's library, ran 10 holiday parties, mentored 178 teenagers). Create awards such as "Did the Most in the Least Amount of Time Medal" or "Most Effect Short-term Project Award" to celebrate those who accomplished something on your behalf even if episodically.

### **Time and the Volunteer Program Manager**

In 1999, Andy Fryar contributed a guest Hot Topic on "[Volunteer Managers and the Time Management Trap](#)." His points still hold true, especially our need to analyze if we're spending our time on the right priorities. Here are some other ideas:

- *Consider your work schedule.* Should your office hours be Monday to Friday, 9 to 5 or some other standard business schedule? In general, I don't know why so many nonprofits keep "banking hours" when the people they serve have needs 24/7. The day of a volunteer program manager, of course, already spills over the standard day. We give recruitment presentations to groups in the evening; we interview applicants early in the morning or on weeknights; we offer orientation and training on the weekends. No wonder we're stressed! Would life be easier if your work schedule was Tuesday to Saturday, noon to 8:00? Or even noon to 8:00 just two days

a week? Not only would this accommodate the needs of volunteers, it would also provide you some quieter work time for a few hours a week.

- *Recruit volunteers specifically to assist you.* It remains common to find colleagues in volunteer management who do not work directly with volunteers in their own jobs. Not only is this poor role modeling for the rest of the agency, but it's downright silly! In 2002, I wrote a Hot Topic on "[The Missing Link: Where Are Volunteers at the National Level?](#)" Some of the ideas I proposed then would also be relevant to a single, local program. One suggestion I often make is to recruit "cyber-deputies" – volunteers who do all sorts of online work for you: finding places to post recruitment messages (and then keeping them updated); researching any question you have; doing "[industrial spying](#)"; keeping up with listservs and discussion forums on your behalf; finding new information for volunteer newsletters and training programs; and more.
- *Schedule thinking and reflection time.* There's a parable about a monk who was renowned for meditating two hours every day. He was then appointed as abbot of his order. A follower commented that he would now have to change his meditation habits and the new abbot replied, "you're right, I'll have to meditate three hours a day." If you are always running and doing, you can't be planning and evaluating. For the next year, schedule monthly "think tank" sessions and invite three to eight volunteers, and/or paid staff, and/or volunteerism colleagues to spend two to three hours with you to consider such things as:
  - Outside trends that are having an impact on your agency and volunteer corps.
  - Which volunteer assignments seem to be working the best and which have the most obstacles – and why.
  - How to "tell the story" of volunteer involvement in powerful ways.
  - Which assignments might be phased out and what new needs have arisen that should be met.

Vary the group each time or form a support team that grows more committed over the year of meetings.

Even more personal is taking time each week for some professional development, whether reading a chapter in a book or spending 30 minutes online discovering new ideas. This will only happen if you actually *schedule this in writing in your appointment book*, and then allow yourself to do it.

- *Never do anything that has only one purpose.* Just as I commented on volunteer assignments being most attractive if they meet several needs, volunteer program managers ought to maximize all the tasks they do. Taking photographs is a great example. Digital photography is a remarkable thing, allowing you to record events instantaneously and then have photos to use in recruitment presentations, on the Web to illustrate the work volunteers do, during a recognition event, to print out for a celebratory bulletin board display after a project ends, etc., etc. Similarly, make sure any reports you write for top management can be transmuted into in-house newsletter articles, press releases, and even personal notes to thank volunteers.

How have you responded to the modern time crunch, whether to support volunteers or to help you in your own work?

Related Topics: [Recruitment](#) | [Volunteer Work Design](#)

**Submitted on 25 September 2006 by Rafael Valenzuela, Catholic University College, Volunteer Program Manager, Lima Perú**

As a Social Psychologist, and Volunteer Manager (with my technical skills involved -yet underpaid) I would like to point out a classic experiment (Deci & Ryan) that showed how extrinsic motivators (e.g., money) can decrease intrinsic motivation (that is essential to volunteering). Volunteers should be "recognized" for being the way they are and for wanting to help (intrinsic), not "rewarded" (extrinsic) for completing a task, nor paid. Every volunteer group has its particular form, depending on culture and history in its background. In this sense, student-volunteers want to "learn and gain experience" and to "do something different and interesting", having the possibility to participate in creating the activities they perform.

Perceived Autonomy Support fosters their pro-social behavior and compromise (Gagné). Volunteers should be encouraged to be creative and proactive. For volunteering, the concepts of "self" and "identity" are very relevant, because the intrinsic motivation is closely related to the perception "I have of myself". One should explore the subjective triggers of specific volunteer groups' motivations one wants to foster. Also the concept of Values (Schwartz) showed significant correlations with volunteering here in the Catholic University in Lima, so we used it to develop messages "in line" with the associated motivations to get improved recruitment. Very happy to have found this page and posted to share.

**Submitted on 24 July 2006 by Carl Bromley,  
Local4All.com and multiple nonprofit organizations, Kittanning, PA USA**

Kudos to those of you who use volunteers as recruiters. As a volunteer for our local Blood Services Committee for the American Red Cross, my first few calls for a new blood drive are aimed at finding someone to call their friends, family, and neighbors to fill all the volunteer positions.

Success? Imagine making one ten-minute phone call that scheduled four walkers for an upcoming community blood drive... That's right, I recruited one recruiter! Within two hours I had a return phone call with the names and phone numbers of my four volunteer walkers.

Did I need to call them? Only to say "Thank you"... my recruiter took care of all their questions for me! Her training was part of the first ten-minute call.

**Submitted on 24 July 2006 by Kathleen Richardson, Southeast Steuben County Library, Volunteer Coordinator, Corning NY**

Our board has been receptive to the ups and downs of time needed to establish and fine-tune our volunteer program. What started in 2001 as a 20-hour position quickly increased to 25, then reverted to 20 last year. This year I realized sixteen hours would work with our 100+ volunteers per

year (65 average per month). We're open fifty-five hours weekly and it's important to make personal contact with every volunteer as often as possible, so my schedule varies day to day, week to week.

My job description states that I maintain a volunteer program through recruitment, training, and recognition of volunteers. When I started the job, I thought it meant I was to do all recruitment, training, and recognition. I quickly revised my thinking and came to see it as my job to arrange for recruitment, training, and recognition...meaning find others to do a lot of the detail work. This is a big time saver. I used to do trainings. Now staff members train volunteers assigned to them. Several volunteers pitch in and help with my work. In the beginning, an IT manager worked at home to set up a volunteer data base. Volunteer assistants help me with time records, program scrapbooks, and volunteer recognition of all kinds, including the annual event.

Because I see the volunteers themselves as the greatest recruiters, I focus a large part of my time in contact with them. This library serves seven communities, and recruitment campaigns are not necessary. There's always someone who wants to help out. This gives me time to address local service groups, work with schools that approach us about group volunteering opportunities, and develop materials for our on-site volunteer display board.

***Submitted on 7 July 2006 by H. Roberts, PLNJ, Inc., President***

***Keyport/NJ USA***

At PLNJ, we've begun using job shadowing as a new recruitment tool/time management tool. Typically a veteran volunteer, handling a specific program area, recruits three new volunteers to "shadow" their day to day duties. In so doing, new volunteers are closely trained, delegation takes on a team-minded energy and everyone's time is more easily respected and accommodated.

What I've learned from job shadowing is that we can never place enough importance on the value of time spent learning a key role at an agency. Respecting that we all value time invested in mission, professional growth and client services makes for a stronger, smarter organization. I've enjoyed reading the posts this hot topic has inspired so far. I'd love to hear how fellow VM's evaluate and/or measure the amount of time needed to perform various volunteer tasks given the recruitment challenges and benefits corporate volunteer partnerships require.

***Submitted on 5 July 2006 by DJ Cronin, Greenslopes Private Hospital, Manager Volunteer Services,***

***Brisbane Australia***

I feel that taking time out for oneself is also very important. A few years ago, I found myself getting stressed with the amount I was supposed to do on a daily basis. I was running around the place like a headless chicken. Thus I was not enjoying my role and see now that my time management skills back then were poor and that I simply worried too much about pleasing everyone at the same time.

Did the volunteers notice? – you bet they did. One day on the verge of quitting altogether, I observed a colleague who worked with me. She always seemed calm as a breeze and seemed to carry with her a genuine peace which I was envious about. I dared to ask her what her secret was. “Why worry so

much?" was her answer. Her view was that worry was an unnecessary condition. "Does worry change your current situation and if not, then why worry at all? What will be, will be".

From then on I slowed down – not on the work front – but slowed down the incessant rapid thinking that went with it. I began to take more time out for myself on a daily basis. At lunchtime, instead of scoffing down a sandwich at my desk, I took a walk and sat on a park bench for half an hour. I read Eckhart Tolles' slant on being in "the Here and Now", I observed people pass by; I looked at the trees and noticed the clouds in the sky. I breathed! I stopped taking work home with me. When my day was over, it was over. No longer would I allow my mind to wander to work matters when I sat down to eat with my family. I stopped racing around at work and sat and spent time listening more to volunteers and their stories. I began finding out a little more about their lives. For sure, I would always spend some time with volunteers but I wasn't really present. You can sit and listen to a person all day but not hear what they are saying if your mind is busy! I had volunteers come into my office and say to me that it was wonderful to see me more relaxed and happy. I never realized how stressed I might have seemed but I believe we seldom do when we are lost "in it".

Was it an overnight transformation? – certainly not. Do I still let my mind get too busy and worried? Of course, on occasion. But now I have an insightful book on hand to browse through, or a park bench somewhere to visit. I can if I choose, surrender myself to stillness. You know the worn out cliché that says "stop and smell the roses". I've tried that, and they smell good!

***Submitted on 3 July 2006 by Kate Power, Greenpeace International, International Volunteer Coordinator, Amsterdam The Netherlands***

I think the Media Volunteer Centre is a great example of a project built around very quick (15 minutes and less) and very easy volunteering tasks.

Volunteers take a couple of minutes to update the database of environmental media contacts, which saves each environmental group from having to replicate the work.

So it means more efficient use of staff and volunteer time, more cooperation across the sector, and it keeps the cost of the database low. cool!

***Submitted on 3 July 2006 by Don Rhodes, Don Rhodes & Associates Limited, Advocate, Otago. Central Otago. New Zealand***

Great Hot Topic.....because it is an issue for every organisation around. I am a business consultant and constantly find managers in particular , lamenting the shortening of our days. Everything you have included in this article is very good, and can I add just one small additional comment.....

Focus on doing the job rather than the time at the job. In other words, many companies now find that if they give people a task and with that a timeframe in which to complete the task, we tend to manage a little better. Not always possible I freely acknowledge, but amazing how we still hang on to the perception things must be done between 9 and 5 or whatever. Keep up your excellent work. Cheers.

**Submitted on 3 July 2006 by Debbie Anderson, Niagara Health System, Coordinator, Volunteer Resources, Niagara Region, Ontario Canada**

I declare that I am not a master of time in anyway! What I have learned though is that it is essential to share the tasks of managing our hospitals volunteers. Any department that requests a new volunteer/position understands and receives training about managing their own volunteers. If they don't commit staff time to this function, I don't place volunteers there.

The other is having a dedicated team of skilled volunteers in my office. One manages the database, one checks references, a few photocopy and package mailouts. They all answer the phones and voicemail, send out requested applications, confirm hours of service and help with the necessary daily tasks. I couldn't do my job without them. Doing more and more with less and less resources, including time, means that we often have either too many volunteers reporting to us or we have to many job responsibilities outside of volunteer management. We have to adapt new ways and let go of some of the responsibility to others to keep sane and create the philosophy that volunteerism is part of the organization, not just part of the Volunteer Resources office.

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