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Making Ongoing Volunteering Valued and Visible

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

September
2009

During the amazing and celebratory opening session of the National Conference on Volunteering and Service held this June in San Francisco, First Lady Michelle Obama and at least four of the other famous speakers proposed a future scenario:

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, in time to come, when we meet someone and are making conversation, one of the top five things we choose to talk about will be: "...and where do you serve?"

They were referring to the integration of volunteering into daily life in a "taken for granted" way, as well as elevating it to a subject of great interest in getting to know one another. How do we start today to foster natural discussion about volunteering and also to shine a light on ongoing service that is already so pervasive, yet invisible to many?

Job Applications

Well, we might start by actually *asking* people we meet about the things they do to help others, advocate a cause, or contribute to their community. Add a question about service to business networking sessions, in icebreakers of any sort, during lunch at the next conference. Make it a question in speed dating!

Even more intentionally, ask about an applicant's voluntary community work on any job application and discuss that volunteer work in greater depth during the job interview. I am talking about *any* new hire, not just in nonprofits and not just for people who are going to be working with volunteers on the job. After all, what we do as volunteers often says much more about us – who we are as people – than our paid work experience. That's especially true for young people whose volunteering may demonstrate a wide range of advanced skills not necessarily revealed in the usual low-level paying jobs students tend to get. Similarly, anyone returning to the work force or trying to change careers may be able to leverage community service experience more successfully than a seemingly-unrelated job background.

Check your organization's job application form. Does it specifically ask about volunteering? If not, recommend that it does.

Further, help volunteers who work in your organization to represent their service the most positive way on their resumes. Don't let anyone bury or de-value volunteering by sticking it at the end of a resume under a heading like "Other Experience" or "Community Work." Instead, explain and integrate volunteer experience in with paid work – unapologetically! Remember that the purpose of a resume is to get a personal interview. An interesting volunteer background may intrigue a prospective employer into wanting to meet the applicant.

Introductions

Another idea is to advocate for adding someone's volunteer profile to any public introduction, at any time. Consider the impact if a person's volunteer work were naturally included with other pertinent data in such situations as:

- The credentials of political candidates running for office
- Each person on a panel of expert news analysts on any of the dozens of talk shows on broadcast and cable media
- Every keynote speaker at any and all conferences
- Presenters at celebrity awards shows
- Appointees to committees and commissions

Make sure you add volunteer information about your executive director when introducing her or him at your next recognition event!

In 2001, for the International Year of Volunteers, I designed a project for UN Volunteers, the coordinating body. We printed up nametags for use at any type of conference held during 2001. It provided an area for the usual "name, organization, location" information, but added a space at the bottom to complete this sentence: *"In addition to my official identity above, I also volunteer by doing..."*

At one international gathering where this nametag was used, it was quite remarkable to see what people wrote. And guess what? They ended up talking more about what they did as volunteers than the same-old/same-old topics.

Propose such a nametag at conferences you may be helping to plan – including those for volunteer program managers. If all else fails, take any nametag you're given at an event and insert one or more of your volunteer "identities" on it to start discussion.

Single Days of Service

This month in the United States we have the newly-designated September 11th "National Day of Service and Remembrance." As with all such days, there will be media attention on a wide array of

group volunteer projects eliciting a burst of a few hours of energy on something tangible and photogenic – painting walls, cleaning up vacant lots, running a community picnic, etc.

But the problem with all such days of service is that they focus only what is being done *that day* – which keeps *sustained* volunteering in the shadows. Often sustained service is hard to capture in a photograph or a 30-second sound bite, yet it is the ongoing volunteer assignment that ultimately has lasting impact. How do we raise the visibility of more intensive service in the midst of hoopla about one-time enthusiasm?

I'd love to know what you think, but here are two ideas to get us started:

- Invite ongoing volunteers to plan something they can do collectively on September 11th, Make a Difference Day, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, or whatever event is bringing out episodic volunteers. Try to make the one-day group effort relevant to the year-round work. For example, volunteer tutors in a literacy program – which requires weekly, dedicated tutor/student sessions over a long period of time – might use the day of service to run a book drive, hold a fundraising read-a-thon, or make a classroom more attractive. This effort would have intrinsic benefits for the literacy program but, to the point here, can then be publicized along with anything else going on to commemorate the day. It might recruit new volunteers who learn about the tutors' work or at least give the tutors some recognition. (And why not do a service project that also includes the *students*, volunteering alongside their tutors?)
- Piggyback on stories about special day-of-service activities. So, if there's a news item about a new playground being built by volunteers in five hours on one day, praise that worthwhile effort and explain to your local media that children's play is vital to your ongoing work and that they may want to do a story about the volunteers who run after-school programs for both homework help and recreation.

Visibility and acknowledgement of volunteers needs to grow incrementally in an organic way. Each of us can take action to interject discussion of volunteers in unexpected places and in what we learn or share personally.

The American entertainment industry is stepping up to the plate the week of October 19th with a plan to incorporate volunteering and service into the lives of fictional television and movie characters. This is a great idea if done well (I raise some cautions in a [2003 Hot Topic](#) about this). If the campaign succeeds, and if such mentions of volunteering continue over time, we'll have even more to discuss in conversations with colleagues and friends.

- *What ideas do you have about using September 11th and any other day of service as a platform for shining a light on ongoing volunteering?*
- *Have you ever made a conscious effort to include volunteering in the introduction of someone famous or important, and what happened?*
- *How else can we make discussion of volunteering natural and ongoing?*

Submitted on September 8, 2009 by Cheryl H. Barber, BCS YES!, Director of Development, Valley Forge, PA USA

In addition to Susan's insights, there is another that I wish to present for your consideration. 'Traditional' volunteers and those new to the volunteer movement, are increasingly being called on to observe the organizational structure in a way that many perceive as counter-intuitive to volunteering.

Volunteers are being asked for resumes and related job experience. They are being given volunteer job descriptions and performance evaluations. They are asked to sign either non-compete or confidentiality statements. They have a file in the organization's Human Resources Department which may include criminal background checks and similar types of clearances.

In turn, the paid volunteer coordinator's major focus is on ensuring adherence to organizational policies governing volunteers, rather than on facilitating the volunteer's desire to provide organizational support with his or her unpaid time and talent. This dichotomy has fueled the 'rift' between the paid volunteer coordinator and the volunteer leader. Volunteers must 'embrace change' in the self-same manner that paid staff are asked to do. The paid volunteer coordinator must likewise embrace the role of 'facilitator of change' while supporting and validating the priceless work of the volunteer.

Submitted on September 3, 2009 by Carla Lehn, California State Library, Library Programs Consultant, Sacramento CA USA

Thanks so much for raising this important topic -- I like "event" volunteering as much as the next person, but it shuts out discussion of what committed on-going volunteers do every day! California libraries are working hard to gain visibility for their on-going opportunities on September 11 -- like a "Scrabble-Thon" for Literacy in Santa Barbara . . . but I also loved it when the Huntington Beach Library created a list of their ongoing volunteer activities for the week of September 11, as a way to highlight what goes on there every day.

Comments from Readers

Submitted on March 3rd, 2016

C Sorman, Volunteer Leadership Council, Chair, The Children's Tumor Foundation, Chesterfield, United States

In my recent job interviews I have spoken at length about my responsibilities as a Volunteer Leadership Chair. I have been out of the work force for a few years and have had the opportunity to devote many hours to my service. Unfortunately, my experience as a volunteer has not earned me the credibility that a paid job might have in terms of abilities and

experience. I find that somewhat disconcerting, yet due to my inability to land the paid job, I am continuing to get the ultimate satisfaction through my service work.

Submitted on March 4th, 2016

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

I am sorry to hear that you have encountered employers who do not value the expertise represented by your leadership role as a volunteer. The only hint I might offer is to not immediately use the word "volunteer" in your resume or self-introduction. It's merely a pay category, after all. So talk about the skills you have demonstrated that relate to the paid work world.

Also see Mary Agnes Williams' post in our A-Z Library, "[Helping Volunteers to Market Their Experience on Their Resumes.](#)"

Best wishes!

Submitted on May 18th, 2016

Diane Owens, Internal Communications Manager; Employee Newsletter Editor, government, Charleston, South Carolina, US

I work for a large government agency. We recently did a survey asking employees to report their volunteer hours during 2015 (so officials at the base where we're located could apply for a volunteerism award; our agency and others were included). Employees' volunteer efforts were astounding, with more than 28,000 hours reported (and I know a lot of people felt as if it was "bragging" to report, so they didn't). The places they volunteered were quite interesting, too!

I'd like to do something with this information -- besides write an article about it in our employee newsletter -- to promote volunteerism in the community and encourage others to do it. Do you or any readers have ideas?

Submitted on May 24th, 2016

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

Hi, Diane --

Thanks for your post. It seems to me that you could make something of the fact that government employees (who, of course, are also taxpayers and voters) give back to the community. In fact, maybe you should call the Governor's press office to discuss your

survey -- maybe you can get a bigger survey done of more employees. Then there is a bigger story, too.

However, I want to be sure what you asked your employees. Did you ask: "What volunteer work do YOU do in your free time, outside of our agency?" Or did you ask "Did you donate time to this agency above and beyond your paid work hours to do more for our service recipients?"

Please note that this second question poses a big **problem**. That's because the only volunteering really limited by the Fair Labor Standards Act is unpaid services by employees when given to the same organization in which they work! Even if this is done totally voluntarily, the FLSA still sees this as potential coercion and avoidance of overtime pay. If you are doing this, please be careful! The only way it works is to ask employees to "apply" (in writing) for a volunteer position that is totally separate from the work for which they get paid -- and on behalf of a program or client group with which they do not work in their daily job.

In truth, most employees should be urged to "take a break" from their place of employment and do volunteering elsewhere -- it's better for them and also cross-fertilizes ideas. You can even organize a cross-agency recruitment effort in which different government agencies attract public employees specifically from other agencies to become their volunteers.

But if you have learned what your employees do outside of the agency, you definitely have a great story to share about "misconceptions of government workers." Go for it!

Best,
Susan

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