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So, What Do You Do?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

January
2008

I hope everyone had a lovely holiday season and feels positive about 2008. Did you attend any parties in the past few weeks? Did any conversations include the question, “so, what do you do?” How did you answer?

If we say “I am a volunteer resources manager” or “I run a volunteer program,” what exactly does this communicate to the average listener? How do we feel (honestly) when we state our profession to strangers? Do we expect our identity to be valued or treated as interesting, or do we dread watching people’s eyes glaze over?

While social party chatter may not seem too important, it can reveal some significant things. First, it gives us an opportunity to listen to ourselves outside of the usual settings in which we talk about our work. It tells us how confident or proud we feel about ourselves and what we do for so many hours of our lives. It provides perspective on what the public – and therefore what prospective new volunteers – think or expect when we introduce ourselves during outreach efforts. As we gain these insights, we also might consider what this tells us about how the executives and staff of our organizations view our role.

In 1998, Sarah Jane Rehnborg wrote a still-relevant guest Hot Topic, [The Limits of the "V" Word](#), in which she declared: “We are selling ourselves short by not clarifying our language and by lumping all manners and forms of service within one broad and reasonably useless classification of *volunteer*.” The debate over the vocabulary of volunteering has only deepened it the last decade. But I want to expand the issue to how we “sell ourselves short” whenever we identify ourselves by our titles and not our *purpose*.

Let’s Play with Words

Periodically I do a workshop exercise in which I challenge participants to tell me “what is your role – your *purpose* – in your organization?” Initially, people respond with a list of volunteer management tasks and activities. I yawn. These tasks, which must be done well, are the strategies and tactics for

accomplishing our purpose, but they have little meaning without a vision of our work. So, what do we do?

I've been playing with different ways to express our work – to find ways to startle, surprise, and educate those who don't really understand. The process is fun and revealing.

Try reading the following statements out loud and consider whether you identify with them. (And you know that, at the end of this essay, I'm going to ask you to add your own!)

- I provide people with the opportunity to make a difference to a cause they care deeply about.
- I tap the community for non-cash resources.
- I create a conduit to allow concerned citizens to donate their talents and skills to our important cause.
- I friend-raise.
- I build a bridge between the resources of the community and the needs of my organization.
- I look for the potential of people to give of themselves.
- I foster revolution by channeling people's concerns about our cause or clients' needs.
- I challenge people to put their bodies where their beliefs are.
- I give people a way to improve their mental and physical health while helping others.
- I transform powerlessness in the face of world problems into empowerment to make a real difference in our specific situation.
- I gather individuals into collective clout on behalf of our cause.
- I allow people to rise to the level of their abilities, not the restrictions of their resumes.
- I invite people to give away their skills in return for satisfaction.
- I create a community of caring.
- I open the door for any concerned person to participate productively in our institution.
- I deal in the best of human nature.
- I make sure people enjoy working hard for no money!
- I manage a priceless work force.
- I manage a workforce that is limited only by my imagination as to whom to approach for help.
- I stretch the budget of our organization by engaging skilled people beyond what we could otherwise afford.
- I defy daily the widely-held stereotype that people are selfish and uncaring.
- I find buried human treasure.

Just like the two workers chiseling marble, one saying "I hammer stone" and the other "I am helping to build a cathedral," it's all in the attitude. And, if we express our work with a consistent vision, it will have a ripple effect. We'll feel proud, volunteers will feel fulfilled, our organizations will recognize the value of our role, and we can indeed change the world. How's that for a new year's wish?

So, what do you do?

Spend a few fun moments and brainstorm a creative description of your role. Be as specific as you like. And, don't worry about perfection. Remember, you may just perfectly describe the role of another Hot Topic reader!

Related Topics: [Volunteer Resources Manager, Role of](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#) | [Philosophy](#) | [Profession of Volunteer Management](#)

Posted 5 February 2008 by Karen Kogler, The Equipper Church Volunteerism, Palatine, Illinois USA

Like so many, you got me thinking, too, Susan, leading me to think about the way volunteers in the church, where I serve, talk and think about what they do, which led to my article in this month's church volunteerism newsletter I write, available at <http://theequipper.org/newsletter/>. Thank you for all you do to keep us thinking and healthy.

Posted on 30 January 2008 by Susan Lebovitz, SAFEHOME, Volunteer Manager Overland Park, KS USA

Regarding the January Hot Topic... I expand our agency's ability to provide the best services available. I also provide resources for creative problem solving! Words and attitude make a huge difference.

Posted on 29 January 2008 by Jenny, Hospice Care, Coordinator, Hobart, Tasmania Australia

I experience the 'double whammy' when asked what I do - as I manage volunteers in a hospice programme. 2 problem words at once - volunteer and death! Mind you, I get interesting responses ranging from one woman who said "Oh yuk" (leaving me speechless - quite a feat!) to "you must be a very special person" (which makes me want to vomit - I take the view that everyone is special to someone, sometime - e.g. the plumber when your toilet is blocked. A hairdresser once stepped back a full pace from my chair, and cut my hair at arms length without uttering another word - must have thought I was contagious.) I just regard it all as part of life's tapestry and not too seriously. The clients REALLY appreciate what we do, and that's what matters.

Posted on 23 January 2008 by Miriam Leslie, Make-A-Wish Northern Alberta, Volunteer Coordinator, Edmonton, Alberta Canada

Wow--nice to see a hot topic with hot responses! Thanks for the article, Susan. My buttons were popping increasingly as I read through your list. GREAT conversation openers and potential recruiting messages!!!

Posted on 17 January 2008 by Jenetta, Edinburgh, Scotland.

Thanks for a thought provoking article and some fascinating responses. I enjoy supporting and training some wonderful volunteer managers. In my experience you have to be a very, very special person to do this job well and the majority of your respondents illustrate the priceless satisfaction they get from their roles. To most people in this role the rewards go way beyond status or monetary ones and they don't mind that much what other people think of their chosen profession!

Posted on 15 January 2008 by Elizabeth Ellis, MN DOC, Volunteer Services Coordinators 2007, Minnesota

In support of the MN DOC mission, I'm responsible for enhancing services and programs for offenders in our minimum security facilities by cultivating community engagement and leveraging resources with skilled and dedicated volunteers who deliver programs and services to better prepare offenders for their release.

Posted on 11 January 2008 by Tim Burns, Volunteering New Zealand, Executive Director Wellington New Zealand

I advocate on behalf of more than one million New Zealanders who contribute in some way to their community because they want to and their reward does not come in dollars and cents.

Posted on 8 January 2008 by Angela Burford, Arlington Heights Memorial Library, Volunteer Coordinator, Arlington Heights, Illinois USA

My job is about managing a volunteer program that is regarded highly by the board, management, staff and patrons for the contribution it makes to the library. The most important part of my job is to place all of our volunteers (200+) in meaningful positions where they are happy, productive, recognized for their efforts, able to use their talents and skills and are well supported.

Posted on 8 January 2008 by Debbie Kennedy, Administrators of Volunteer Resources - BC President British Columbia Canada

A few years ago our provincial association brought in Toastmasters to help us with this very topic and here's the result...

"I am a professional manager of unpaid human resources. In managing the volunteer base of my organization, I contribute significantly to the bottom line. I am a connection point between paid and unpaid staff to unite and achieve the mission and goals of the organization. I am a coach, leader and communicator. I AM a Manager of Volunteer Resources".

Posted on 8 January 2008 by Lucy Bloom, National Center for Fathering, Kansas City, KS USA

At the National Center for Fathering, we believe that every child needs a father figure they can count on. Someone who knows them, loves them, guides them, and helps them achieve their destiny. By building volunteer driven initiatives across the country, we are working toward an America where no child goes unfathered.

Posted on 3 January 2008 by Becky Markt, YC2, Coalition Coordinator, Columbia, Missouri USA

A friend of mine worked on a Navajo reservation for a time while she filmed a documentary about Native American children. An older Navajo lady was very helpful in arranging the interviews with the children for her. She asked the lady what her job was on the reservation. She replied "I tie people's shoes together so that they can walk together down a path toward a desired destination." My friend and I believe this is a great description of coalition work and volunteer management.

***Posted on 3 January 2008 by Liz Adamshick, Adamshick Consultant, Consultant,
Mt. Vernon, OH USA***

I direct the traffic of selflessness. I am a care broker.

***Posted on 3 January 2008 by Hillary Roberts, Project Linus NJ Inc., Pres.,
Keyport, NJ USA***

When I am asked "what do you do?" I talk about the agency's mission. It is my feeling that everyone reporting to the agency shares a responsibility to the mission. Charitable missions should be easy to explain.

How do I see my role at the agency...? Simply put: I choreograph the time and considerable talents of a large volunteer network. Anyone who works closely with a large group of time-givers knows it's a dance that requires flexibility and grace.

***Posted on 2 January 2008 by Colleen Watts, Health Sciences Centre, Manager, Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada***

I often say, "I have a great job because I get to work with the only people in our hospital that don't 'have to' be here." They come because they want to help others. Everyone else in the hospital is here because they are ill, are accompanying or visiting someone that is ill or it's their job to work here."

***Posted on 2 January 2008 by Kitty C. Pilger, The St. Luke Hospitals, Director Volunteer Services & Special
Projects, Ft.Thomas/Florence, KY USA***

I provide over 25 FTE's to my organization at no cost to them.

***Posted on 2 January 2008 by Nusrat Symons, Interfaith Community Services, Volunteer Coordinator,
Escondido, CA USA***

Description of my role as Volunteer Coordinator: I'm a matchmaker; I fit together passions and talents of volunteers with needs in the organization.

Posted on 2 January 2008 by Volunteer Coordinator, Carlsbad USA

My official title is Volunteer Coordinator and I have been asked many times if this is a paid position. One of the challenges with this title is what it conveys to fellow employees about how the organization views volunteers. While those in the volunteer management field know how important volunteers are to the goals of the organization, employees may think of us as entry level employees and therefore lower their view of how important volunteers are to the organization. My feeling is that our title and our place on agency org-charts tend to make it easy for employees to distance themselves from integrating volunteers into their departments.

Posted on 2 January 2008 by Joyce Makinen, Public Museum, Volunteer Manager, Grand Rapids, Mi. USA

I manage a mid-size program in a public museum. My priority is always the volunteers. I will always listen to a volunteer. I am able to handle my responsibilities in thirty hours because we have created a volunteer coordinator position. We have a volunteer scheduled for a morning and afternoon shift

every day. They are in charge of volunteer scheduling, checking in volunteers, informing volunteers of upcoming needs, taking care of cancellations, calling volunteers, making the coffee and putting out the cookies (most important) and handling most of the day-to-day activities. This gives me time for retention, recruitment, recognition and working with the staff. Many of the coordinators have been volunteering for ten or more years. It is a wonderful system.

Posted on 2 January 2008 by Elizabeth Hendrix, American Cancer Society, Volunteer Coordinator, Des Moines IA

I SAVE LIVES, every day (working for the American Cancer Society.)

Instantly I get interest with that opening. Then I get more specific, and say I give people opportunities to Fight Back against cancer. I tell them how many of our volunteers are survivors and how empowering it is to fight back against the disease. I talk about the families who join the fight. I share some of the direct patient services we provide to patients and families and only then talk about the creative ways volunteers help us raise funds and friends and then I talk about the variety of other volunteer opportunities that keep the offices going. I remind my volunteers of my belief that everyone is a part of the cure, be they a research scientist or someone who stuffs envelopes for fundraising appeals. It is wonderful to be able to offer people an opportunity to fight back actively against the cancer that takes so much away from our lives. As a survivor myself I can empathize with my volunteers and share with them how our services helped me and my family during treatment!

I came to this job five years after treatment and am thrilled to be able to use my experience to FIGHT BACK.

Posted on 2 January 2008 by Dawn, Muskegon County Museum, Historic Sites Manager/Volunteer Coordinator Muskegon, MI USA

I simply say "I get to work with a wonderful group of people who wish to honor our community's past by giving their time as volunteers for the museum." I do wonder though if it is boredom we see in the eyes of the asker, or fear that if they show much interest, we will try to recruit them.

Posted on 2 January 2008 by Joan E Thompson, Mayflower RSVP, Inc., Executive Director, Plymouth County, MA USA

I loved reading the examples, Susan. Thank You!

I don't believe there is a single "right" answer to the question. The best answer to a casual inquiry will trigger an interest in learning more about your agency and/or your role.

The vision for a volunteer operating system varies as widely as the client base for which each one exists. But getting to the purpose for each is absolutely the "heart" of the matter!

So when I am asked "What do you do?" I reply: "I help people improve the lives they most care about, and then be able to figure out for themselves just 'how much!'" Can you tell I'm not with the volunteer program for a single agency? Rather, I'm with an agency whose mission is to engage

volunteers in activities designed to bring about the change (impact) needed in their local community. The deeper each volunteer understands the change to which they've contributed through RSVP, the greater their likelihood of translating the elements in planning & tracking change to the rest of their life, including other volunteer activities.

Thanks for keeping us thinking!

Posted on 2 January 2008 by DJ Cronin, Greenslopes Private Hospital, Volunteer Services Manager, Brisbane Australia

Well Susan, that question was posed to me over the holiday season. I answered that I managed a volunteer service in a hospital and before the person could pose the questions – “Oh, how noble of you,” or “are you paid” I launched into what the volunteers do and what programs are provided to patients. And how it is all managed and coordinated.

I'd like to strike out and say that the time has come for us to stop worrying or procrastinating on such matters.

The time has come for us to demonstrate some self confidence in ourselves and our profession.

The time has come for us to stop fretting over our titles or the word “volunteer.”

The time has come for us to grow up and perhaps accept that there is no black and white definition for what we do just as there are no black and white definitions for volunteering!

Because who makes those solid definitions in the first place and who has written the definitive bible on volunteer management or volunteerism itself. The experts? Who's an expert these days in an ever changing and quickly evolving world?

How do we get past our volunteer management insecurities? For me, it's moving beyond the questions that we have been asking over the last ten years. The same questions. The same insecurities. Mostly – how do others perceive us? What will others think of our jobs? Why don't our agencies give our positions more respect etc.

Don't worry – I've been there I can tell you. Wondering what people would say when I informed them that I was a volunteer coordinator. Seeing the eyes glaze over. Watching the conversation being changed. But I think a lot of that comes down to ignorance. People simply not understanding our role. And it has been our responsibility, over the years, to articulate, as best as we can, what we do. So, to me, it's about self confidence. Self confidence in what I do and achieve in my role and the self confidence in being able to articulate this.

While I love your “play with words” in describing what we do, and it so accurately reflects our roles, I do wonder if we are, as a profession, a little “stuck” on some of our debating issues thus allowing other issues to perhaps go unheeded.

I believe that our roles are ever changing along with the world we live in. Volunteering, to me, is not even a concept set in stone. And I, as a volunteer and as a volunteer manager am glad for that. I enjoy the fluidity of the world, the constant movement, the bright areas as well as the grey ones. I've had it with dogma and been told that this is the way it is because this or that person has said it is so.

We live in interesting times and work in very interesting positions.

So forgive me Susan for not answering your "What do you do" question directly but thank you for allowing me to say that we need, as a profession, to have a little more confidence in ourselves.

And if we are lacking in confidence then I wonder why.

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