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The Drive towards "Highly-skilled" and "Pro Bono" Volunteering

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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There is nothing inherently new about volunteers donating professional expertise, but in the past year a variety of summits and action campaigns have examined the potential of intentionally and strategically applying business talents to the nonprofit world. Perhaps the most developed initiative is "A Billion + Change", in which the President's Council on Service and Civic Participation and the Corporation for National and Community Service issued the challenge to leverage \$1 billion in skilled volunteering and pro bono services from the corporate community.

A Billion + Change makes a distinction between skilled volunteering and pro bono services, as explained in their report, "Toward a New Definition of Pro Bono":

Pro bono is decidedly different from corporate philanthropy, serving on a nonprofit board, volunteering to deliver nonprofit services, and donating in-kind products or services.

Pro bono is the donation of professional services that are included in an employees' job description and for which the recipient nonprofit would otherwise have to pay. It is a subset of skilled volunteering that gives nonprofits access to the business skills and experience they need to develop and implement sound business strategies, increase their capabilities and improve their organizational infrastructure.

By contributing business services and skills to nonprofits, corporate pro bono programs are improving people's lives while adding significant value to their own recruitment, productivity and profitability. In the FAQs on their Web site, they further say:

Skilled or skills-based volunteering is the practice of using work-related knowledge and expertise in a volunteer opportunity. In other words, skills normally used to generate income are provided free of charge to a nonprofit organization...

For some organizations, the terms pro bono service and skilled volunteering may be related.

A Billion + Change's attempt to distinguish pro bono from skilled volunteering leaves lots of gray areas, but the vocabulary does not matter so much as helping "companies identify a spectrum of ways to leverage their professional expertise to improve the scale, sustainability, and impact of nonprofits in communities across the nation and around the globe." Certainly this is an admirable goal, but it is based on a range of possibly questionable assumptions.

Explicit and Implicit Assumptions – Are They Correct?

As always, the emphasis of the new initiatives is on *recruiting the volunteers*, encouraging corporations to donate employee time and talent. But, also as always, it is not enough to push for service unless the basics are in place to utilize the offered expertise. The following are six premises that need to be challenged – not to negate pro bono projects but to assure their success.

Assumption 1: That other volunteers are unskilled or not skilled in important ways.

While it may not be the intent of proponents of "highly-skilled" volunteering to denigrate other volunteers, in practice that's what it sounds like. What do sites such as SmartVolunteer.org (no longer available) ("connects talented professionals with meaningful skills-based non-profit volunteer opportunities") think they imply about pre-existing volunteer work? First, the list of skills offered by volunteers already is enormous and, second, the best organizations have long been welcoming every level of donated expertise. Yes, too many have *not*, but let's not paint everyone with the same brush.

In the same vein, it makes sense for a company to deploy its employees, on company time, to use their expertise on behalf of the community. But what if the service is to be done on the employee's *personal* time? Not everyone wants to spend free time doing what he or she does daily; volunteering is an opportunity to pursue passions, engage with family and friends, and have fun – all of which can still result in meaningful service.

Assumption 2: That nonprofits lack "professional" skills.

Again, some do and some don't. Let's not fall into the trap of elevating business skills above all others. Today's economic crisis was brought about using business skills, remember? Further, the level of education required in many nonprofits is a master's degree and beyond – not a prerequisite in the for-profit world.

Assumption 3: That nonprofits want or are ready to use pro bono talent.

This is a tough issue. Naturally a nonprofit will be happy to get expensive services at no charge. But welcoming *help* is not the same as welcoming *input*. By definition, the types of projects appropriate for highly-skilled volunteers use the consultation model. The agency identifies a need or problem; the volunteer asks questions and makes recommendations; the agency implements changes. Even paid consultants face resistance in this process – and volunteers will, too.

Further, given the decision-making nature of pro bono projects, they need the engagement of executives and top managers. How ready are these administrators to partner with volunteers whose

expertise may occasionally be seen as a threat?

By separating pro bono work from “regular volunteering,” the new initiatives leave it unclear as to how volunteers will be introduced into the nonprofit. Will both the volunteer and the agency executive understand the need to enroll the expert time donor just as any other volunteer, including possible background checks, orientation, and reporting requirements? Will the volunteer resources manager be left out of the equation or seen as a valued coordinator? Therefore, will all volunteering in an agency be raised in visibility?

Assumption 4: That businesses can automatically apply their expertise to nonprofits and that their employees know how to take on the role of consultant.

Pro bono projects often require intensive and sustained effort. In the past, corporations have been easily frustrated by the nonprofit environment because of the intractable nature of the issues involved and the slow pace of change. Who is going to counsel business volunteers in how to adapt what works in the marketplace to what is done differently in nonprofit organizations? Does being skilled in business always mean that a volunteer understands how to be an expert consultant, offering strategic advice in a way that it will be accepted?

Assumption 5: That corporations are the most important source of needed expertise.

Who is going to issue the call to university professors to become volunteers? In all the attention to service-learning, rarely does anyone mention that students are not the only assets a school offers to the community. In fact, students come and go, but faculty remain year to year. And teachers who engage in community service themselves are much more supportive of what their students experience and learn off campus.

And what about trade unions? Nonprofits need plumbers, electricians, and chefs as well as accountants and marketing experts. “Professional” means trained and paid, not just white collar.

Assumption 6: That all volunteering is directed at nonprofits.

Once again, all the verbiage of pro bono projects is limited to “helping nonprofits.” Yet, in the case studies used to demonstrate the value of skilled volunteering, it is clear that proponents accept the importance of serving in public schools and other public institutions. Why not go even further? Wouldn’t struggling municipalities and states/provinces benefit from donated expertise in areas other than fire fighting, emergency services, and parks and recreation? Aren’t companies and their employers taxpayers with a stake in effective government? The Corporation for National and Community Service is behind the A Billion + Change effort yet, as a Federal agency, it is not permitted itself to accept volunteer services! Isn’t this the time to challenge such national policy and open the doors to skilled volunteers?

- *Are you aware of the new push to increase pro bono service and what do you think?*
- *Are you already engaging highly-skilled or pro bono volunteers and what’s been your experience?*
- *What would you like the organizers of such initiatives to know?*

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Submitted on 10 Nov 2009 by Zachary Marsh Pittsburgh Cares, Program Manager, SPRING Service-Learning Network, Pittsburgh, PA US

I am the program manager of The SPRING Service-Learning Network of SW PA through Pittsburgh Cares in the Pittsburgh region. My network and Pittsburgh Cares recently collaborated in designing an online database tool that is specifically targeted at "skill-based" volunteers, rather than just a regular volunteer. We target those with professional skills that are able to assist community agencies in need of "free labor" in a sense. We also strive to promote service-learning through developing an agency's project request that could possibly be used in conjunction to a service-learning course at an institution of higher education. The database we currently have is a great resource for faculty/staff, community agencies, and skilled volunteers and we are attempting to develop the tool so that it develops into a more interactive resource. Check it out at www.pittsburghcares.org/skillbank

Submitted 9 July 2009 by Christine Nardecchia, Volunteer Services Administrator, Dublin, OH, USA

We know that we have nuclear engineers, rocket scientists, PhDs, physicians, attorneys and the like who celebrate service and are willing to give in more creative ways that we can imagine together. This shake up about title and definition and meaning is so much to pile on our day-to-day grind. I, for one, LOVE that they are promoting service and volunteerism. If we feel inferior to it, it has to be on our shoulders to tell our stories. Work together. Be one. As a profession, it just seems VPMs AREN'T SELLING IT. Unless we are leaders within our own organizations, taking responsibility for both the failures and the successes, stepping up and creating these kinds of sites, engaging them in what our formulas of success are, this illusive, never-ending commenting of "no one understands" or "no one is ready for these volunteers" will never stop. Believe it or not, I am about to spearhead this effort within our City (project planning now, comes out this fall). Will we use another name? I don't know. Will it be successful? You bet. Will it accomplish the mission of service in meaningful ways? Make a difference? Slay the dragons we need to slay? Yes. Every day.

Just so you all know, I sent this e-mail to our friends at SmartVolunteer just now:

"Hi there,

I have been a professional volunteer services administrator for nearly 20 years in the non-profit, hospital and local government sectors. I have seen thousands upon thousands of volunteers give amazing time, talent and skills to hundreds of causes and needs.

While I celebrate your site and what it is trying to do, at the same time, I take issue with something fishy about its concept. Tell me, if you are a site called "Smart Volunteer...Smart People, Smart Giving,"

is there such a thing as "Dumb Volunteer, or, Not So Smart Giving?" for those who are not "professionals?" I am terribly perplexed by this notion.

There are many, many on-line resources for volunteer recruitment and we are seasoned at using them. We are also seasoned at building relationships. We are professionals who know how to find people, hone in on skills sets, see community needs, market, match, manage, build, organize, and so on. We are skilled at seeing possibility. However, there is a "closing of a latch" I sense as a professional volunteer manager when I read your site, implying that what the physicians, attorneys, educators, marketers, etc. do for our agencies on a daily basis is somehow not "smart." We've been doing this work since before...well, since before you can imagine.

Tell me more. Convince me to use your network..."

Let's open the dialogue and see what happens.

Submitted 20 July 2009: Update from Christine Nardecchia on her previous post

Update: I just received a call from SmartVolunteer.org in response to my e-mail to them. It was a very good conversation, and I somewhat relayed some concerns of the profession, or a typical practitioner in our field. They are absolutely respectful about the challenges and questions this type of volunteerism opens up-"Pro Bono" work. They come from a corporate background, targeting corporate individuals to give, as she put it, the 30 minutes on a train commute home to review the 990 an NPO needs, or develop the web site the sports team needs, or the graphic art for a new logo needed by a new initiative. Quite frankly, what SmartVolunteer.org speaks to is the type of short-term, skills based opportunity that many organizations aren't able to accommodate at times. They are making successful matches, and through corporate connections via Goldman Sachs & American Express, they are inspiring, especially in this economy, ways for execs and specialists to give time in a way that certainly is "volunteerism," just found in different ways. It's just another resource, another tool, a welcome site to post YOUR volunteer opportunities onto, and a welcome addition to the ever-expanding ways citizens can choose to give. I, for one, welcome the chance to recruit such execs, and build our capacity to accept their service to enrich our abilities and their connections to purpose!

***Submitted 6 July 2009 by Ellen O'Connor, NNORC Coordinator & Resource Specialist
Fairport, NY USA***

Susan - As usual you are right on the money. There is an assumption that I would like to add to your six. "Nonprofit organizations have the volunteer management resources to effectively integrate 'highly skilled volunteers' into their workforce."

It has been my experience during my 20-plus-year career in volunteer management that volunteer managers are the first to go in tough economic times. Even in the best times not enough resources are dedicated to volunteer management. I have yet to see any of the new volunteer movements, government funded or not, that dedicate any resources to volunteer management at the level of the nonprofit organization. To attempt to integrate volunteers into an organization and successfully

leverage the incredible resource they represent without effective volunteer management is futile. I often illustrate my point to the uninitiated as follows (and the higher position they hold in their organization, profit or nonprofit, the better): "Imagine that you arrive at work tomorrow and are presented with a person who is there to "help" you for four hours of your day. You don't know who they are, what they can do and you don't have a place for them to be, and, by the way, they will be back next week and the week after that and the week after that. . ." Obviously this is not a good experience for the volunteer or the nonprofit organization. Effective volunteer management, supported by adequate resources is an essential component of any volunteer movement. We truly should not put resources into increased recruitment of volunteers if we do not simultaneously dedicate resources to managing volunteers on the ground at the organizations in which they will work, no matter what the volunteer skills or expertise.

Submitted 2 July 2009, Anonymously

Can I just give Susan a big, fat AMEN!! to assumption #3. That's the big one to me. Very few of the 80+ non-profits I work with are prepared for any kind of skilled volunteer, much less a corps.

Submitted 2 July 2009 by H. Roberts, PLNJ-Blankie Depot, Pres., Keyport/NJ USA

Carol Bloemer, I agree with you 100% and would add that a long standing agency like the United Way is in the ideal position to educate for profit professional teams and further clarify important issues on the front lines when they encourage volunteer opportunity, engage in corporate fundraising and even while recruiting their own staff members retired from many for profit industries.

Client needs come first. Are we to assume the highly skilled individual is ready to tackle the needs of our clients? Understands a charity's mission statement? Understands service without profit? Where is the in-house training for that corporate team or individual before placement?

Can we all understand the difference between a hand out and a charitable contribution?

The United Way could do a much better job of bridging the many gaps and questions that result from for profit and non profit collaborations. Susan's article highlights many of the frustrations and exciting challenges that face all of us. Being in the position to establish new dialogues on a large scale requires that those entrusted with the task make the MOST effort.

Submitted 2 July 2009 by Carol Bloemer, Volunteer Center of East Central WI, Program Director, Appleton, WI USA

I love the Hot Topic and enjoyed reading the responses. It does really feel that the "waters are getting muddied." I like clarity and prefer swimming in clear water.

Volunteering is offering yourself, your skills, your time, your...whatever, without compensation. Those who are receiving stipends, pay (high or low wages), college tuition, or other monetary gain are doing a great service but are not VOLUNTEERS. They may act with a volunteer spirit and heart. They may be giving their all for a cause. They may be doing work that many of us wouldn't do for any

amount of money. But they are not VOLUNTEERS. Whether this service is domestic or overseas we are truly blessed that these people are doing the work that they do.

Let us be clear and not call any effort in the non-profit sector - volunteerism. Most of my colleagues could do less for more pay in the private sector but we are not volunteers.

There just has to be a distinction. If you come to my agency and offer your accountant skills on your own time you are volunteering. If your boss sends you, your company is making a donation of service.

Would love to hear from others.

Submitted 2 July 2009 by Karla Roth, Concord Hospital, Director of Volunteer Services, Concord, NH USA

On one hand I am delighted whenever national attention encourages volunteer engagement but, after 25 years in the field, I am impatient with government/corporate programs that strive to redefine volunteerism (it is already a big tent) and make assumptions about: what non-profits and the public sector need, what volunteers need and want to do, and what I do as a professional administrator. I am baffled why these initiatives seem to ignore the necessity of a competent and engaged volunteer manager supporting the needs of their organization with a professional program . Too often volunteer management has been delegated to clerical staff or managers' efforts diluted with competing responsibilities. But, isn't competent management a key to the success of volunteers in any organization or any community? Perhaps, instead of creating new definitions of service that we truly do not need because pro bono, skilled, stipended, and community service already exists in volunteer management , the emphasis should be on educating and advocating for professional volunteer management that would provide the best utilization of every volunteer.

Submitted 2 July 2009 by Mike, Volunteer Officer, UK

Great article. Speaking as someone who has recently moved from the private sector into the not for profit sector after 12 years, my view is that the skills, experience and knowledge of those working in the not for profit sector is seriously undervalued. The ability to take a more holistic longer term view when making decisions is a major strength, something that the private sector clearly lacks given the current economic crisis! We need to focus on taking the right type of consultancy from the private sector and get away from the fallacy that everything about the private sector is good and therefore useful.

Submitted 1 July 2009 by Anonymous, Policy Officer, Australia

I agree with all Susan's points and suggest that a positive aspect to volunteering highly skilled or pro bono services is that it is a more 'authentic' contribution of corporate volunteering (truly giving of oneself) than when corporations/companies send groups of employees to 'volunteer' (while being paid their salary!) in contrived projects that a non-profit can accommodate in a 9-5 setting.

Submitted 1 July 2009 by Colleen Kelly, Volunteer Vancouver, Executive Director, Vancouver, BC Canada

It is very interesting to see this topic today, Susan! As many of you will know today is Canada Day - just a few days before Independence Day, celebrated by our good friends to the south. I am taking

time on this Canadian holiday to write the first draft of a book about the ways organizations can (and must!) change to engage these specifically skilled volunteers we are now having walk in our doors. That has been the impetus for change. The people. They want to be involved with organizations now "as a whole person." At Volunteer Vancouver we believe that can be done. However it does mean it is important for organizations to pay close attention to the points Susan mentions in this Hot Topic. It is also important for organizations to have a critical, clear and stated focus on PEOPLE. Those we pay with money. And those we pay in tangible and often intangible ways - our volunteers. Organizations must change the ways they engage all the people. All together.

Thanks for writing about this, Susan! It will be great if "A Billion + Change" is able to work with organizations that have truly learned how to engage all the people.

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