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## The Power of Difference

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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There's a popular television show called *Numb3rs* right now. It revolves around two brothers, the older of whom is an FBI agent. The younger brother, who was a child genius, is now a university professor of mathematics. They're both sexy, of course (this is TV). The whole point of the show is that every week, no matter what the crime presented, the PhD math whiz helps solve the crime using math. After a season of simply helping his brother through inspiration, he has now become a full-fledged FBI consultant with a seemingly endless set of questions to which he can apply game theory, chaos theory, and other mathematical calculations.

What I love about this show is that it so clearly demonstrates that – no matter how skilled, experienced, or brave the FBI agents – someone with different talents and a new perspective can contribute to successful results. Which brings me to volunteers.

I have come to believe that the key to increased impact – and to resolving the ever-present tension between employees and volunteers – is intentionally recruiting volunteers who, by design, are as *unlike* the paid work force as possible.

### Tradition Tends to Backfire

The most commonly-used model for volunteer involvement is to carve work for volunteers out of the to-do list of paid staff. In other words, volunteer roles are designed as unpaid staff *assistants*. It then follows that new volunteers must have the qualifications to help with employees' jobs (but not *too* qualified, so as not to be threatening, of course). This sets up several uncomfortable dynamics:

- The paid staff is sharing work for which they are responsible and will be held accountable. So a volunteer who does not produce what is necessary leaves the paid worker holding the bag. Conversely, if the volunteer performs exceptionally, will someone wonder why the organization needs the employee?

- Because of this job-sharing dynamic and risk, paid staff narrow the qualifications they are willing to accept in a new volunteer. They look more and more for volunteers who are like themselves. And, if the volunteer resources manager proposes someone less or differently qualified, it's perceived as insulting to the professionalism of the employees.
- Labor unions see the volunteer-as-helper model as a way to avoid hiring more needed personnel and so put up obstacles.
- Volunteers, especially students or career changers, may approach the assignment as an "audition" for what they may hope will eventually become a paying job. If they're auditioning, they limit the options that are special to volunteering, such as the freedom to criticize or to say "no."

So resistance and potential conflict are inherent in the situation of volunteer-as-assistant. For the right work, the right employee, and the right volunteer, it may be successful. But why not start from a stronger footing?

## Recruit to Find Differences

A much more creative model, and one with great potential for genuine impact on the cause you serve, is to stop looking at the job descriptions of paid staff and instead take two new directions: put unexpected skills to work for your organization and focus on expanding service to clients/consumers.

A long time ago when I ran the volunteer program at the Philadelphia Family Court, I was approached by the head of the Geography Department at a local college. She was seeking internship placements for seniors in which they could apply their knowledge of geography – was there anything they could do for the Court? Well, it was obvious that this was not a talent I had actively been seeking! But, being a good volunteer program manager, I didn't blurt out my initial response. Instead, I talked with her about what, exactly, did *she* have in mind? And we ended up accepting two students who used the most recent Census Bureau data to pinpoint where in Philadelphia we'd have the most success in finding male volunteers with different racial and ethnic characteristics, cross-referencing those locations with the residences of the boys on probation.

Three other real-life examples of engaging unexpected talents are:

- High school art students infused cultural education into an anti-littering campaign by offering to paint the trash cans of the community with quick art lessons about the work of famous painters.
- Community-minded accountants offered their skills and knowledge to grassroots advocacy groups needing to understand city budgets, corporate annual reports, and other financial documents.

- A Texas mini-grant program sought “Math in the Service of the Community” projects – *before* television got the idea!

One of my favorite books on stimulating creativity is Roger von Oech’s *A Whack on the Side of the Head*. One of the exercises he proposes is to envision two people who are complete opposites, or at least totally unlike, having a conversation. What would a police officer and a clown talk about? An airline pilot and a chef? And so on. By considering points of similarity, whole new worlds of possibilities emerge. Just like letting geographers talk to probation staff.

All organizations have mission statements addressing causes that are multi-dimensional, and the complexity of our world is only increasing. So how can a basically homogenous workforce hope to solve all the problems? Paid staff are generally between the ages of 21 and 65, have similar or compatible educational backgrounds, and tend to represent only a few social and economic strata. There are no such limits when it comes to volunteers.

For example, by consciously recruiting a volunteer corps that more closely matches an organization’s clients, rather than their employees, a huge knowledge base of first-hand understanding of the issues clients face is brought in house. Or, by making an effort to recruit volunteers from a long list of different occupations, the organization gains both an interdisciplinary approach to finding solutions and an ever-increasing circle of new contacts for additional resources, fundraising, and more volunteer recruitment.

Consider the following question: *What do our clients/consumers need that would support them in making the best use of our services, but which no one on staff is hired to do?*

Let’s say your organization does family counseling and has a sizeable low-income client base. Rather than find volunteers who can do counseling, what about finding volunteers capable of guiding clients in banking and budgeting? Finding better low-cost housing options? Arranging summer camperships for the kids? You can see that these sorts of activities do not conflict with the employee’s focus but certainly support the family in different ways that the employee helps to identify.

Here’s another example: running an animal shelter. Rather than relegating pet-loving volunteers to mucking out cages – or disappointing them because they are not permitted to play with the animals -- recruit people with special skills who can: develop online searches for “adoptive” families or to reunite lost pets with owners; write age-appropriate guides for children and teens about pet care; follow up on placed animals to learn how the shelter could have been more helpful to the new owners; and more.

The benefits of recruiting for differences are enormous:

- The pool of potential volunteers is limitless because you are no longer looking for only a narrow group of people with similar qualifications.

- You will find it easier to recruit more highly-skilled people because the types of things you are asking volunteers to do will be more challenging and appealing than simply “helping the staff.”
- If you design assignments well, employees are not threatened by volunteer engagement and, in fact, truly welcome it because they see how volunteers do so much more than would have been possible before.

If you can't picture what sorts of “different skills” might work in your setting, try looking around your neighborhood. What sorts of businesses or facilities are within a few blocks or a mile of where you're located? Go and introduce yourself and pose the question: “How might we collaborate by matching the needs of our organization with the talents of yours?” If nothing else, you'll have some fascinating conversations!

What's *your* best example of a volunteer with clearly different or unusual qualifications or characteristics? How did he or she happen to come on board?

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***Posted on 24 February 2009 by Priscilla Prather, University of North Texas - Student, San Antonio USA***

Interesting to see how intimidating a volunteer can be to an established employee, a company, or even a labor union. “Put unexpected skills to work for an organization and focus on expanding services to clients/consumers.” – (quote) is a FABULOUS idea! I could not agree more with the idea of placing volunteers in positions that might actually be at the other end of the spectrum from the employee they will be matched with. Yes, there may be times when that match is a little uncomfortable – but who ever said anything was easy? Anything worth doing always takes work! Think of a marriage...there are many personality tests that are given from Myers Briggs to Strength Finders. These indicators can prove how well these couples will get along with one another or work with one another based on their strengths and weaknesses. So many businesses today are finding it to be a true addition to know what their employees strengths are so that their company can play to the strengths of its employees rather than always trying to place a round peg in a square hole.

Even for volunteers, no one with any skills, that they are willing to offer for free, wants to be a gopher in an office full of people that possess the same skills they do. The “Unmatched Volunteer” would provide for a far better reaching potential in the long run. By the same token – we might try and take a deep breath and not be so threatened by the volunteers that are placed there to help us. Life is much easier when we breath deep and enjoy our time here... it is about those we serve right?

***Posted on 19 February 2008 by Jacquelyn, University of North Texas - Student, Corinth USA***

Susan brings out the fact that we all have a purpose and can contribute or give something of value to our fellow man. Volunteer managers can recruit to find differences that will have a great impact on a volunteer program and the paid staff. Recruiting in this manner will make the paid staff feel less threatened. Also volunteers will feel more challenged and not made to feel that they are simply there to help the staff.

***Posted on 5 February 2008 by Colleen Kelly, Volunteer Vancouver, Executive Director  
Vancouver, BC Canada***

Susan, we love your topic! It is a new way to think about engaging the specifically skilled volunteer that has amazing ability - and passion for our organization's cause. Although you mention recruiting people who are very different from employees, your examples are also about REACTING to the special skill set that walks through our door. Your column provides many ideas about ways we can engage those different skills when we have an opportunity. Yes, we can do this with market analysts and MBA's and retail entrepreneurs and... It is about making time to find the right fit for the skill. It is about building capacity in our organizations with people - an often overlooked and very valuable resource!

***Posted on 5 February 2008 by Ginny Herring, AVACA & self employed, Pres and VM Consultant, Phoenix, AZ USA***

This is the best articulated and most succinct article I have ever read regarding diversity in volunteers. There is so much information contained that it should be read and re-read and put to use. Thank you.

***Posted on 5 February 2008 by Hillary Roberts, Project Linus NJ, Inc., President, Keyport/NJ USA***

You've chosen a hot topic I can really relate to. When I interviewed for the "leadership post" at PLNJ in 1999, I had no prior experience as a knitter, crocheter or quilter and some 10 years later, knitting is still my "work in progress" skill. What I brought was exposure to textile designers, fashion houses and the New York garment scene from an early age--my parents and grandparents worked in facets of the garment district their entire lives. I have a passion and deep respect for textile artists. So, when I was introduced to Project Linus, a charity that creates and donates handmade blankets and other items to fragile children, those close to me knew the personal connection I found in the mission. I've enjoyed recruiting volunteers over the years, using my own unique experience and diverse work background as a simple guidepost.

I couldn't agree more than we all need to celebrate our different skill sets and practice CURIOSITY. Don't we want to attract individuals and groups with something special to offer?! Don't we see the benefit to having a volunteer network of talented time givers who can enhance our mission, share their passions with our clients and bring about new ideas and community partnerships as a result of their first rate skills! I know I do and I know our agency has quadrupled in size because we have a "welcome mat" approach to volunteers.

Where we may fail is in thinking we can't be taught "new tricks." I'm still an enthusiastic part of this agency because I remain curious about the next volunteer who contacts us interested in sharing their time and talents with children. The power of difference is such a unexpected gift. Unwrap the power!

Energize, a program of Adisa <https://adisagroup.com/>

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