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The Limitations of Seeing Volunteers Only as Unpaid Staff

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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At the moment I am consulting with several national organizations intent on re-envisioning their volunteer engagement strategies. Part of this process includes setting goals for volunteer participation and determining the best infrastructure to support volunteers. Our discussions usually surface a common mistake: picturing the corps of volunteers mainly as “unpaid help” assisting in the work of employees. From this grows the image of two parallel, connected work forces, all best organized using the personnel or human resources model. Yes, both groups are “human” and “resources” to the organization, but they are far from equivalent.

The differences between employees and volunteers are major and strategic. What follows is a grid that compares and contrasts both groups of workers in an attempt to show how treating them as the same except for level of pay is deceptive and limiting. They both are critical to meeting your mission, but need and deserve their own models of management.



See if this comparison table below helps you to change your own thinking about the distinct importance of both groups to your organization. Feel free to share the grid with others to start some important conversations up and down the chain of command.

Employees	Volunteers
<p>In any organization, the paid work force is a known quantity, predictable and measurable in a number of key ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We know how many job slots we have, even if there is some turnover in the people 	<p>In contrast, no organization can confidently predict what its volunteer corps will look like at any point in time – it is not predictable but it is also potentially unlimited:</p>

Employees	Volunteers
<p>filling them during a year – or some change due to new or ending funding.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We also know how many hours of work employees are expected to give – and to what tasks. • Except for occasional job-sharing arrangements, one employee fills one job position. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's possible to create a countable number of volunteer position descriptions and aim for providing a certain number of hours of service to clientele or produce outcomes that are measurable, but the number and types of individuals filling those positions will change constantly. • Some volunteers will contribute episodically, others on a regular schedule; some will come on site, others will serve online; and so on. • In the same vein, a volunteer position might be filled by an individual or several volunteers can work together in teams with friends, family, co-workers, faith communities.
<p>Part of our planning for employees is to provide them with consistent support and tools: a supervisor; a place to work; an official e-mail address; supplies.</p>	<p>Many models can produce successful results, but it makes no sense to set a <i>goal</i> of X number of volunteers per year. Head count does not equate to degree or quality of service.</p> <p>But head count <i>does</i> affect the amount of interviewing, screening, training, supplies, and supervision and coordinating time needed. Because we assume the very part-time nature of volunteers, we rarely plan or budget for their consistent support, even if their numbers grow and grow.</p>
<p>We cannot add employees to our payroll unless we first obtain funding for their salaries and benefits.</p>	<p>Though there are some financial considerations of staff time and other resources, we can add new volunteers at any time based on our recruitment efforts and the willingness of people to contribute their time.</p>
<p>Employees in the same job slot are hired to be similar in qualifications and skills. Such expertise permits your organization to provide the highest quality of service in your core programs.</p>	<p>Volunteers can certainly be found who are equally as qualified in the same skills as paid staff, which may be necessary for some roles. But as discussed below, perhaps the greatest value of volunteers is not to “assist staff,” but to <i>expand and diversify the expertise available to</i></p>

Employees	Volunteers
<p>While there may be demographic diversity, most paid staff are likely to be at least 21 and under 70.</p> <p>Employees have a defined scope of work and organization-defined priorities, and may have to operate within guidelines or restrictions imposed from legal sources.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because of funding sources (what was proposed to a private funder or what has been determined by legislation if a public agency), an organization can rarely decide quickly to change course and redirect paid staff attention to new issues. • Employees must center their efforts on the clientele who are direct beneficiaries of the funded services. • Employees must be equitable in spreading their time and attention across as many clientele as possible, and cannot (unless so funded) give endless individual attention to selected clients. 	<p>clientele. So there is great value in recruiting volunteers for skills and qualities that are intentionally different from those of the paid staff.</p> <p>In fact, the organization can accept unexpected offers of talent from new volunteers, adding services beyond what the staff might have identified on their own, but of clear value to clientele.</p> <p>Volunteers can be of any age, occupational background, citizenship, neighborhood, and more. In fact, by design, some volunteer corps are recruited to be more like the clientele than the employees, especially if recipients of service are under 21 or over 70, or speak a different language, or are dealing with specific health or other problems.</p> <p>Volunteers can always be asked to focus their attention on priorities, even those that were not anticipated in advance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteers, if they agree, can re-focus their time on whatever the organization identifies as most needed to be done right now. • As private citizens, volunteers can sometimes do things paid staff are not permitted to do (cross geographic boundaries, speak to legislators, attend public meetings). • Volunteers have the “luxury of focus” and can devote their time to one project, one cause, or one client. And the organization can even recruit several volunteers to concentrate on one client, if necessary. • Volunteers can be recruited to provide supportive services to the families, friends, and employers of clients, if such services

Employees	Volunteers
<p>Employees are an organizational <i>expense</i>. While we may solicit them for voluntary cash donations, that is not an obligation. When they leave our employ, there are no official ties (except perhaps retirement benefits).</p> <p>Employees are paid labor. As individuals they can care deeply about our organization's mission and give of themselves above and beyond their job descriptions. But they are defined by their work positions.</p>	<p>make the primary focus (paid staff role) more effective.</p> <p>While expenses to support volunteers should be budgeted, volunteers are time <i>donors</i>. We find ways to solicit them for financial gifts in addition to their hours of voluntary service (which already stretch what the organization can do with the funds on hand). We cultivate long-term relationships with them because they are community <i>friends</i> and can be advocates and financial donors long after they leave their volunteer positions.</p> <p>It is short-sighted to think of volunteers simply as <i>unpaid labor</i>. Their contributions go way beyond assisting in the delivery of services – and not all volunteers do direct service. Volunteers govern, advise, advocate, organize, represent us in the community, provide a link to the client perspective, add new ideas into our strategic planning. Their potential is limitless, if we unleash it.</p>

- What do you think of this comparison?
- What would you present differently?
- What would you add (to either column)?
- How should the differences between employees and volunteers affect the way these two groups are managed in your organization?

Related Topics: [Employee/Volunteer Relations](#) | [Executive Director, Role of](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#)

Comments from Readers

Submitted on September 2nd, 2016

Abigail Denecke, Philanthropy and Volunteer Coordinator, 1981, Alexandria, United States

Thank you for writing about this topic. Everyone should read your article!!

-Abigail

Submitted on September 4th, 2016

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

Thank you, Abigail. I hope it starts lots of conversations.

- Susan

Submitted on September 6th, 2016

Tony Goodrow, Better Impact, Ontario, Canada

I think there is room to consider volunteer time as an organizational expense (like staff time is considered such). Although volunteers are indeed donors, their time becomes an asset to the organization, just like any money donated. Any just like an organization should be strategic about how it spends its donated money assets, it should also be strategic about how it spends its donated time assets. Fundamental to that way of thinking is the idea that we are SPENDING volunteer time. And if it is something we are spending, it ought to be considered an expense.

Submitted on September 6th, 2016

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

I understand your argument, Tony, but it continues to focus on the monetary aspect of organizational life. Of course we "spend" the money donors give us, but that's separate from our *relationship* with those donors. We have a relationship with volunteers that is not simply the financial value of their donated time -- and a lot of what they give us is way past anything we can or should pay for.

This is a discussion that will continue (as it began long ago, too). But in this Hot Topic I wanted to distinguish volunteer contributions as different from those of paid staff. Thanks for broadening the perspective.

- Susan

Submitted on September 6th, 2016

Joan Perry, Director of Volunteers, Roper St. Francis Healthcare, Charleston, SC, USA

Thanks Susan! I especially like the part about building long term relationships no matter how long the volunteers are actively serving. Good points and well worded.

Submitted on September 6th, 2016

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

Thanks, Joan. I have never actually made that point in writing before, either, so I'm pleased someone resonated with it. :-)

- Susan

Submitted on September 7th, 2016

Arlette Cunningham, Manager, Jamaica Hospital, New York, United States

Thank you tremendously for this article. The comparisons are genuine. I believe they present strong argument for the volunteer program. We just touched on this subject at my hospital, needless to say this article will assist me in getting head staff to acknowledge the difference between the two groups and continue our conversation on shifting goals for volunteer engagement.

I love the article's heading.

Submitted on September 7th, 2016

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

You are very welcome, Arlette -- and bravo to you for advocating "up" with your senior management! Hope this helps in your efforts.

- Susan

Submitted on September 15th, 2016

Gerald (Jerry) ..., workshop presenter and consultant, N/A, New York, USA

Susan, you are good at making us examine terminology that comes into fashion and then might need to be looked at again. You make reference to unpaid staff/help/labor. I cannot remember when I was first heard the term "unpaid staff". While listening/reading* your Hot Topic, I realized I started using unpaid staff because to me it implied a higher status. I would use the term to reinforce that volunteer applicants had to meet standards, as did paid staff. Volunteers didn't just walk in off the street. Another goal was to upgrade paid staffs' perception of volunteers as well as the volunteers' sense of value. You have given me a lot to think about. I'm re-examining how these words are used and what message they send to both volunteers and paid staff. I especially like the following from the volunteer column, "...perhaps the greatest value of volunteers is to not to 'assist staff', but to expand and diversify the

expertise available to clientele.”

*Just when I was getting used to listening to your Hot Topics, (often while munching my lunch), you make reference to a two column grid and I redirected myself to the website. You are always keeping me on my toes!

Submitted on September 15th, 2016

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

Hi, Jerry -- Thanks for interrupting your lunch to view the grid! :-)

I don't mind the term "unpaid staff," of course, and agree with its positive connotations. It's just that volunteers are not always functioning as "staff." So don't drop terms that work in context -- just expand your vocabulary.

- Susan

Submitted on September 29th, 2016

Mac Benoy, Volunteer Project manager (Citizen Science - Meteorology, Adelaide, Australia)

At Red Cross, I worked as a Volunteer Consultant under the philosophy that volunteers are the same as staff, only they have a different pay rate. That was meant as a compliment, indicating their importance to the organisation. However, the vast majority of literature about volunteering assumes a model where volunteers work within someone else's organisation, reporting to paid staff. I'd like to see more debate about volunteer-led (not volunteer-involving) enterprise where revenue and expense are almost nonexistent. Examples include sporting associations, child development groups, citizen science, citizen education, citizen history (volunteers document vast amounts of history), education support, etc. It's not a sexy topic for the traditional volunteer sector where paid staff manage volunteer labour.

Economists broadly describe the all-encompassing for-profit and not-for-profit sectors as if they describe all worthwhile enterprise in the economy. But they do not adequately include the volunteer-led sector. Volunteers give their time at no cost, they take no salary and incur almost no expense. Enterprises run by volunteers operate in a 'freeconomy', a third sector that we lack the terminology to describe. This sector will grow as the increasing wealth of Western society enables some volunteers to take independent initiatives. This capacity is present in a broad social spectrum from confident school students starting social enterprises through to retiring Baby Boomers who are financially comfortable and looking forward to a professionally rewarding 3rd age.

I abandoned my interesting volunteer position at Red Cross for the lure of my other volunteering activity, running a citizen science initiative modeled on independent volunteer initiative.

Submitted on October 1st, 2016

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

Thanks for your important comment, Mac. I couldn't agree with you more about the need to acknowledge the huge all-volunteer world. In fact, my philosophy was shaped early on by the great Ivan Scheier, whose book, [When Everyone's a Volunteer](#), we published in the 90s. Read the excerpt in the library, "[The Need for Specialized Principles](#)." And there's even an in-the-middle category, too: all-volunteer groups associated with more formal institutions. See my 2002 Hot Topic on "[The Great Divide: Leaders Who Are Paid and Leaders Who Are Volunteers](#)."

However, it isn't true that all volunteer-run groups remain that way or do not seek outside funding. In fact, almost every institution and nonprofit organization in existence was started by a group of volunteers who saw a need before anyone else was willing to create a solution. Volunteers are always on the cutting edge of change -- mavericks and activists who lead the way to what later becomes more formalized service. That's one of the themes of our book [By The People: A History of Americans as Volunteers](#).

In this particular Hot Topic I was, of course, focusing on the paid/unpaid worker dynamic, in which (as you indicated with the Red Cross) the "see them as equal" approach is meant to be respectful but ends up just misunderstanding the role of both support groups.

Thanks again for posting. -- Susan

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