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## Volunteering Trend Watch: What Can We Learn from Looking Back?

By [Cara Thenot](#)

June  
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Up until 2002, Energize, Inc. released its annual *Volunteer Energy Resource Catalog* and each year included an introduction by our company's founder, Susan J. Ellis, entitled "Trend Watch: Are You Ready?" offering her perspectives on potentially important trends and their implications for the volunteer field. Of course, Susan had gained incredible insight as she traveled the world to consult or train all sorts of volunteer-involving organizations and saw first-hand what leaders of volunteer engagement were dealing with. She never claimed to have a crystal ball and always acknowledged she simply had the gumption to make predictions and put them in print.

Today, plenty of articles about volunteering trends are published on the Internet, many of them quite helpful when reflecting on how to improve or change ways to recruit, lead, supervise, and motivate volunteers. Here are just a few:

- [Change in volunteering trends you should know in 2018](#) (stuff, NZ)
- [Volunteering Trends You Should Know In 2018](#) (VolunteerMatch, US)
- [4 Top Trends in Volunteering](#) (The Management Centre, UK)
- [Fewer Americans are volunteering and giving than any time in the last two decades](#) (Phys.org)



You'll notice some trends in the above articles that have been discussed for several years, not to discount the reality of these issues. This made us wonder how many of Susan's predictions still hold true today. And, if they did, wouldn't it be worth reflecting on the same issues?

Take a look at Susan's predictions in 1999:

# 1. Globalization and the International Year of Volunteers 2001 (IYV2001)

**Susan said in 1999:**

"Last year [in 1998], I highlighted the globalization of our field and our wonderful international network of colleagues continues to expand. The International Year of Volunteers 2001 (IYV2001) is one opportunity in which we will be able to connect further... We still need some international connecting link to bring the global volunteer community together for one year-- getting past internal and international politics. The good news is that we don't have to wait for anyone. IYV2001 is a real thing and each of us can make as much of it as we choose...Every Volunteer Center, local DOVIA or state association, academic philanthropy program, and individual volunteer program manager can use IYV as leverage for visibility and recognition."

**Thoughts for today:**

Some indicators of global collaboration among volunteer engagement professionals include the continuation of the International Volunteer Managers' Day campaign each year, active social media and online discussion groups including Thoughtful Thursdays (#ttvolmgrs) on Twitter, Volunteer Management Best Practices network on LinkedIn (<https://www.linkedin.com/groups/3980663/>), and our own [e-volunteerism.com](http://e-volunteerism.com), an international journal that takes in-depth look on volunteering issues in many countries around the world. While technology has made it easy to share information, issues, and ideas beyond borders, do we really think globally in our day-to-day work? In the current political mood, can we envision global collaboration and if so, how would it change our work?

## 2. Short-term or Episodic Commitments

**Susan said in 1999:**

"I hereby officially proclaim that this is no longer a trend, but a fixed reality! Most new volunteers seek assignments with a clear beginning, middle and end. One-time-only volunteering opportunities, such as those coordinated by 'Hands On' or 'City Cares' organizations, continue to expand. The good news in all this is that, after people have gotten their feet wet in a successful volunteer effort, they often turn around and say: 'What can I do next?' So volunteer program managers might start thinking of retention in terms of an ongoing sequence of short-term assignments."

**Thoughts for today:**

Many articles on volunteering today *still* list short-term volunteering as a trend! Some sneakily re-label it as micro-volunteering (even shorter bursts of service). Including short term or one-time opportunities for people to volunteer, with some being designed as a "step" toward more commitment opportunities, should simply be considered a "best practice."

### 3. Singles as a Target Audience

**Susan said in 1999:**

"Connected to the popularity of one-day volunteer projects, there's a new awareness of an old fact: people who volunteer make friends with other volunteers who share their interests. In a world in which young people delay marriage and in which divorce hits half the couples in the U.S., it isn't surprising that volunteering is being adopted as part of the singles scene. In fact, the tongue-in-cheek recruitment pitch that 'volunteering is safer than a singles bar' really resonates today! An increasing number of programs are targeting single volunteers, either as their only participants or for specially designated work shifts."

**Thoughts for today:**

Volunteering continues to be seen as an opportunity for single people to meet other singles. Meetup.com, an online platform for finding and building local communities, hosts 62 "volunteering with other singles" groups with over 22,000 members signed up. And Single Volunteers, Inc. was established to "*provide singles with a productive way to meet other singles by organizing volunteer activities which groups of singles then perform.*" Have you considered designing and marketing certain roles specifically for community members wanting to meet other people?!!

### 4. Welfare Reform

**Susan said in 1999:**

"This is an issue with an inconsistent effect on volunteer programs because each state handles it differently--as do a number of other countries around the world. As public assistance rolls are decreased by requiring able-bodied people to get a job or go to school, the question of where volunteering fits into the picture is raised. In many states, volunteering is a legally approved alternative to a paying job or training, allowing someone to keep welfare benefits if s/he logs a certain number of community service hours (which are viewed as benefiting the public). But, in other areas, the opposite reasoning applies: if someone is volunteering, then they can't be seriously looking for a paying job, so community service is not allowed. The jury is not yet in on any of this."

**Thoughts for today:**

Volunteering as a legally approved alternative is still a regional issue. In the United States, it's decided state by state. For example, the Missouri Department of Labor writes: "Under Employment Security law, you must be able to work and available for full-time work. While volunteering you must continue to make an active and earnest search for work." According to the U.S. Corporation for National and Community Service, in April 2012, the Department of

Labor issued policy guidance in the form of an Unemployment Insurance Program Letter (UIPL) encouraging state workforce agencies to promote volunteering to individuals receiving unemployment compensation. If you market volunteer opportunities as stepping-stones to employment, be sure candidates are informed about how volunteering could affect their unemployment benefits.

## 5. Internet-based Distance Learning

**Susan said in 1999:**

I've mentioned some new development in cyberspace for the past several years in this trend watch, and technology continues to open new virtual doors. The number and quality of Web sites, listservs and newsgroups offering resources for volunteer program leaders continue to grow. Look for the addition of several exciting uses of this electronic medium, including complete books available at no charge online (look out for books online on the Website soon!), increasing use of audio, and the introduction of streaming video for distance learning options, such that being piloted by The Learning Institute for Nonprofit Organizations. We are also seeing complete online courses in volunteer management, some even giving academic credit. Now the challenge is to see how volunteer program managers can adapt the technology to train and update active volunteers.

**Thoughts for today:**

With the rise of online training sites such as Lynda.com (now LinkedIn Learning), Webinars and online seminars are now the norm for learning just about anything. Leaders of volunteer engagement can easily find professional development options online via [AL!VE](#), [VolunteerMatch](#), [VolunteerPro](#), and our own [Everyone Ready](#)® online volunteer management training program. Volunteer resources managers should certainly explore options for creating online training to provide orientation and train new volunteers. Look to Techsmith.com for how to [create a simple training video](#), or better yet, start designing a volunteer position to work with you on creating one!

**Please share with us your thoughts about these trends from 1999 in the comments below!**

*Do you see evidence of these trends in your organization?*

*Any new trends that have arisen in the last 5 years that we didn't expect?*

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## Comments from Readers

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*Submitted on June 11th, 2019*

*Jayne Cravens, Consultant, Portland, Oregon, United States*

What a great look back! My thoughts:

### 1. Globalization and the International Year of Volunteers 2001 (IYV2001)

It was my privilege to work at UN Volunteers Headquarters during IYV - UNV was the official lead agency for this UN-designated year, and they worked hard to promote the power of volunteers, avoiding monetary values as a way to show why volunteering mattered but, rather, to show why some roles are BEST done by volunteers. Many countries created NGOs or government agencies for the first time in their histories to promote volunteerism, and it was fascinating to see the different ways various countries and cultures think about volunteering. The countries that were energizing me most before 2016 regarding volunteerism was Poland and Spain, two countries that embraced virtual volunteering more than any other country other than the USA, in my opinion, and where young people were asking a lot of tough questions about ethics in volunteer engagement. But in 2016, so many countries took a hard step to the right, and so many of those people at the forefront of talking about volunteer engagement are now working as political activists on a variety of critical issues in their country - and volunteering is playing a huge role in those movements, but the issues they are addressing, rather than the volunteerism fueling them, is dominating the conversation.

### 2. Short-term or Episodic Commitments

You so nailed it! As usual, Susan was ahead of EVERYONE, declaring in 1999 that this was NOT a new trend! And, yet, there are still people announcing the "brand new" idea of micro volunteering...

### 3. Singles as a Target Audience

I think this is still a trend, but with a more dire definition: connecting people who are chronically, even dangerously, lonely. There are many people talking about volunteer engagement as a way to address the loneliness and feelings of isolation so many are facing. My only caution: a bad volunteering experience can make mental or emotional states even worse, causing deeper frustrations and disappointments. If there is a desire for volunteering to be used to cure some of societies ills, that's fine - but money will be needed for a LOT of training to help make that happen.

### 4. Welfare Reform

I have blogged about this more than once: the unrealistic expectation that nonprofits have the resources to create volunteering opportunities for people in danger of losing their government benefits, and provide the childcare so many will need to do the assignments.

### 5. Internet-based Distance Learning

There are quality resources online - and not so quality resources online - for just about every

aspect of nonprofit management, including nonprofit management. However, I've yet to find a volunteer manager who has made a serious commitment to using any full module - they glance around, but the deeper learning online just does not seem to be happening. I know I've signed up for three or four free online courses through two universities - not related to volunteer management - and not finished any of them. Perhaps if I'd actually paid to access them? As for managers using the Internet to train and support volunteers, all of the resources are there - and most still won't use them. I've used video a lot in the last few years to train volunteers or program participants, and I'm stunned at just how easy it is - and all the tools I've used have been free and I've been able to train myself to use them. When will managers of volunteers make the commitment to use these tools? Here we are, 20 years later, and it's still not happening

For me, what's happening now that I didn't expect:

- that the excitement created around IYV in other countries has continued and grown, particularly developing countries. I love reading about African-based, African-focused volunteerism efforts, for instance. Other countries still talk about IYV and use it to justify their plans now.

- the backlash against voluntourism. And I'm \*delighted\* in that backlash, into the growing voices out of developing countries asking why there is an emphasis on people from North America and Europe going to poor countries to help for a few weeks as volunteers, doing tasks that local people would really like to do themselves, rather than sustained training and support for home-grown, long-term volunteering efforts.

- how quickly historic transcription virtual volunteering projects would close, months or years before they planned to, because they are immediately staffed by passionate, dedicated online volunteers who want to spend HOURS transcribing scanned historical documents so that they become searchable and easier to use by historians around the world. I have given up on keeping up with them all, and often by the time I hear about one, it's already over because they got so much more volunteer support than they planned for.

- that the emphasis on volunteers saving money is even GREATER now, not less than it was in 1999. This over-emphasis is de-valuing volunteerism and creating even greater conflict with paid staff, including unions. To me, it's creating a crisis.

- the huge rise in volunteerism promotions that imply people giving some spare time will solve homelessness, address climate change, etc. I never heard episodic volunteering talked about in the grand terms it is now - and, of course, it will NOT solve homelessness, address climate change, etc. It's a wonderful way to educate people and entice them to undertake the support that will be necessary to address these issues - but it's disturbing to see the rise in messages that imply otherwise.

- the poor job so many nonprofits and other volunteer-engaging programs do at utilizing tech tools. The defense is always the same: "We don't have the time/money." But there's still time and money for a paper newsletter no one reads? I never thought, 20 years later, I'd still be trying to convince managers of volunteers to use the Internet.

- the dominance of Facebook for people 30 and over. It used to be America Online. There was

Friendster. There was My Space. I never dreamed Facebook would have this staying power - and use information in such a nefarious way.

-- the complaints of those that manage volunteers seems to be exactly the same as 20 years ago. The trainings for managers of volunteers seems to be the same as well - and just regarding basics (how to recruit, how to keep, software options, how to prove your worth within your organization, etc.). Sigh...

-- that the national body for managers of Volunteers, AVA, would go under because of mismanagement and there still wouldn't be a new, strong organization in its place.

-- and, of course, a world without Susan Ellis continuing to push us all... but I guess as long as we keep reading her blogs and books, she'll continue to push us. Maybe someday we'll catch up to what she thought possible in 1999...

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*Submitted on June 12th, 2019*

*Cara Thenot, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, United States*

Thank you, Jayne, for your fantastic response. As always, we appreciate your deep insight.

Attention Hot Topic Readers: Do NOT miss Jayne's blog at <http://coyotecomunications.com/coyoteblog/>.

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*Submitted on November 9th, 2019*

*Nick Levinson, New York, NY, U.S.A.*

Microvolunteering is often accepted as a compromise when paid people can't object to the boss that there are volunteers at all. Volunteering of any duration should not be treated as an entry-level position with an up-or-out requirement into a pay grade, as volunteering with any time commitment sometimes is (one leader called it sampling and likely viewed it as creeping socialism).

A singles orientation is fine as long as volunteering is open to the rest of us and it doesn't become a matchmaking venue. I'm there to to produce and someone's bright idea to pimp someone for me was highly unwelcome and I don't even want to have to say anything, because saying anything becomes toxic. Matchmakers tend to consider it required by nature and refuse to accept any objection, or interpret it as meaning only that I wanted a nicer girlfriend.

On government benefits contingent on work or school allowing volunteering, beware of fraud, at least in the U.S. Schools require that credits or outcomes be earned and jobs have time records, paychecks, and tax agency forms but volunteering has almost no accountability. Accountability listing tasks done may be hard to set up without running afoul of minimum-wage laws and an expectation of compensation forcing a wage.

Training of volunteer managers and of volunteers sounds good. If the manager's position is paid, the price of training is easier to justify. Unfortunately, paid media tend to be expensive and my observation is that nonprofits tend not to subscribe to organizational management media at any price. I don't know if they even look at free media with any kind of seriousness. One office had two subscriptions to such a journal but only because it listed grantmakers (the two people sat about 20 feet apart); I don't know if they bothered with the rest of the paper. I was a volunteer there and I didn't hear suggestions to read it. The organization's budget was six figures a year. Businesses often subscribe to organizational management media; few titles are even available in public libraries for nonprofits.

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