

Exploring Contemporary Trends in Volunteerism

By Mary V. Merrill

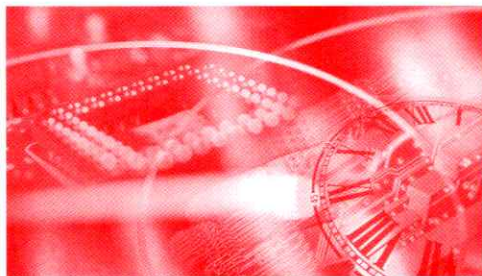
Contemporary trends in volunteerism give us interesting insights into changes that are occurring and suggest potential strategies for making volunteer organizations more efficient and competitive.

The Independent Sector reported the highest-ever recorded level of participation in volunteering in the 1998 Survey of Giving and Volunteering in the United States: 56% of the adult population over 18 reported volunteering a total of 19.9 billion hours. A comparison of the survey results over an 11-year period shows that while the total number of adults volunteering increased, the average number of hours per week decreased, as did the total number of hours given to volunteering. Deduct the number of hours reported for informal volunteering, and the total number of hours devoted to formal volunteering has remained relatively consistent since 1989.

The 1998 survey reported that 41.9% of respondents indicated they had volunteered sporadically and considered it a one-time activity. Thirty-nine percent volunteered at a regularly scheduled time, weekly, bi-weekly or monthly; 9% indicated they only volunteer at a specific time of years, such as during a religious holiday. These figures seem to support an increasing trend by volunteers to be reluctant to commit to regular or long-term volunteer assignments and suggests growing concern about volunteer burnout as organizations are stretched to do more with fewer volunteers.

A variety of studies in the past five years have identified work and family pressures as the main reasons

for taking people away from volunteer work. Lack of time has led to an increased emphasis on creating short-term, time-specific volunteer opportunities, and more and more people are taking advantage of these episodic options. The growth of workplace volunteering and family volunteering has increased opportunities for people to combine work and family time with volunteer work. Generational differences seem to indicate that the current generation of parents of young children continues to place a high value on quality family time and tend to respond favorably to family volunteering opportunities.



Time and Place

The Netherlands Organization on Volunteering, at the 2001 World Volunteerism Conference, identified time as one the 10 top worldwide trends: "Time becomes more fluid: clear separations between time to work, time to care, free time and volunteer time disappears."

Societal trends, such as workplace changes (functional teams, free agents, self-employed, etc.), corporate volunteering, early retirements and the graying of America are leading to a professionalization of the volunteer corps. Volunteers have higher expectations of how they wish be treated as volunteers. Limited time and

increased expectations means volunteers are drawn to organizations that efficiently and effectively engage their skills and talents.

Emphasis on our global society has created opportunities for international volunteering that attracts retired couples who are not satisfied with "routine" volunteer work. Aging baby boomers are creating new models of service that actually go against the trend of short-term volunteering and require significant time commitments from volunteers.

These "new" volunteers are seeking new solutions to community problems by designing and implementing services provided solely by volunteers. They report great satisfaction in creating opportunities to utilize their skills and talents fully while making significant contributions. This new professionalism in the volunteer corps is placing an increased demand for professionalism in volunteer programs.

Change Agents

Any discussion of trends must include our changing demographics and technology. As we continue to become a highly diverse nation, volunteer managers are encouraged to increase pluralism and promote organizational openness and readiness for diversity. Changing urban centers, migration patterns, and an aging population will lead to new consumers of services and volunteer programs will be challenged to expand volunteer roles to new groups and new generations.

Technology offers opportunities to revolutionize volunteer work. Knowledge is becoming available



"You can't predict with certainty what will happen but you get some sort of idea by looking at the trends already in play."

— Dan Johnson,
World Futurist Society

anytime, anywhere. Click on the National Aging Information Center and find an extensive listing of resources on volunteers and older adults. Do an online search of "mentoring" and discover a wealth of resources. Go to the United Nations International Year of Volunteers web site and discover how volunteerism is changing the world. The Internet offers the unique ability to share information and form horizontal connections among volunteer managers around the world (www.cybervpn.com, www.avaintl.org, www.iave.org).

Web Power

Using technology to promote and engage volunteers is one of the most rapidly growing contemporary trends. Volunteers are not waiting for organizations to reach out to them via the Internet. The Sword and Staff web site was started in 1996 by fans of "Xenia: Warrior Princess," as a "catalyst for volunteer groups from around the world to work on projects concerned with bettering the life of people in their own communities." The Artemis web site serves the San Francisco Bay Area lesbian community by organizing and promoting

community service projects ranging from environmental restoration to helping the homeless. The SETI@home Project, headquarter at the University of California, Berkeley, has signed up more than 250,000 home computers to an innovative screen saver program that "harnesses spare computing power to crunch data from a radioastronomy search for extraterrestrial intelligence." The Blood and Goth site was started by a group of teens to promote and organize blood drives for local Red Cross Chapters.

Technology offers exciting options for maximizing volunteer resources, considering limited time is the biggest barrier to volunteering.

Online applications, CD or Internet training modules, and email newsletters are only three small ways of using technology to free up time so volunteers can do what they really want to do—make a difference in a life and in the world. ♦

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