

“So Volunteerism is Declining: Now What?”

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Abstract

This white paper explores the current trends regarding decreasing volunteerism in the United States and offers practical suggestions and insights on reversing the trend by being more efficient at recruiting, training and successfully retaining volunteers who represent a range of generations and cultures.

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1. The Facts about Diminishing Volunteerism

Unfortunately, a flood of newspaper and periodical headlines have recently reported an unexpected drop in volunteerism in the United States. And it comes as no surprise. After all, there are no promotions, no raises, no employee benefits, no vacations and no sick days. There are usually no performance reviews or exit interviews either. The work may be routine or boring or simply not challenging enough. This, in a nutshell, is a typical view of the world of volunteers.

So it is not totally unexpected that for the year ended September 30, 2012, the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported a dip in volunteerism of .3 percentage points to 26.5% of the population. But even worse, one year later BLS reports show this disturbing trend continues on. In 2013, the number of volunteers was recorded as the lowest ever since data has been collected in this area beginning a decade ago in 2002. Results of the current survey indicate that only 25.4% of Americans over 16 years old said they volunteered with an organization at least once during the year.

The decline represents millions of people who are no longer contributing their time and effort to organizations where it is so essential for success. Volunteers are essential. This is because they typically save the organization money; they bring diverse skills and experiences; they are enthusiastic, energetic and passionate; and they are effective at communicating the organization's story and mission to the community.

Since volunteerism is so critical, it is important for us to seek a reasonable explanation for the continuing deterioration. Perhaps a clear understanding of why it is happening can lead to solutions that reverse the trend.

To try to answer this complex question, it may be helpful to list the common characteristics of today's volunteers based on the most current reports. In other words, if we understand who comprises the 25.4% of the population that volunteer in America, then we can begin to consider what drives their commitment and how to reinforce it.

- Women volunteer more than men (by 28.4% to 22.2%)
- 35-44 year olds are the most likely to volunteer (at 30.6%) while 20-24 year olds were the least likely to volunteer (at 18.5%)
- Whites volunteer the most frequently (27.1%) followed by Asians (19%), blacks (18.5%) and Hispanics (15.5%)
- Married persons volunteer at a much higher rate (30.7%) than those with another marital status (20.5%); parents with children under the age of 18 volunteer at a higher rate (32.9%) than parents without children (22.7%)

- Individuals with higher levels of education engage as volunteers more than those with less education (39.8% for those with a bachelor's degree or higher versus 16.7% for high school grads with no college degree)

Who Volunteers?

The picture painted by the numbers above, extrapolated from the 2013 U.S. Labor Report describing the 62+ million people who volunteered in the year 2012 to 2013, is that of a white woman about 40 years old, who is a full time employee but who is also raising a family with children under 18 years of age at home. Intuitively, this might seem to be the very person with the least amount of spare time! Yet, the study highlights that it is most often these women who support the nonprofit sector spending much of the time concentrating their efforts on religious organizations; on collecting, preparing, distributing or serving food; on fundraising; and on tutoring or teaching.

There are other interesting trends to observe:

- The average volunteer spends 50 hours per year helping an organization
- Most volunteers are engaged with one or two organizations
- The organizations with the most volunteer interest are religious followed by educational or youth services related with social or community services occupying third place
- Older volunteers tend to assist religious organizations more than their younger counterparts
- Gender discrepancies indicate that men tend to volunteer for general labor or coaching, refereeing or supervising sports teams - while women, as noted, are most likely to be involved in causes that focus on feeding the hungry, as well as on tutoring and general fundraising initiatives
- About 40.8% of the volunteers said they became involved because someone asked them to volunteer
- The percentage of college students who volunteer is declining from a peak of 31.2% in 2004 to 26.1% in 2010 according to the Corporation for National and Community Service.

Recognizing and tracking trends can help nonprofit leaders continue to identify volunteers and get them engaged to keep them committed.

2. Why is Volunteerism Trending Down?

While there may not be any one reason why volunteerism is slowing, it appears that a lack of time is one of the greatest challenges everyone faces today. Combined with shifting priorities and changing demographics, these three obstacles can be negatively influencing the volunteers that most nonprofits rely on to achieve their mission.

Lack of time

Given that the average full-time (civilian) employee in the United States works about 39.5 hours a week, which comes out to a little more than 2,000 hours a year, Americans work longer hours than civilians in all but seven countries who are in the Organization for Economic Development (OECD). These include France, which has an average workweek of 38 hours; the United Kingdom, which has an average workweek of 36.4 hours; Germany, which has an average workweek of 35.7 hours; and the Netherlands, which has an average workweek of 30 hours.

In recent years, the phrases “doing more with less” and “the new normal” have become embedded in our language and in our work culture, emphasizing the reality that employers have not, in many cases, rehired employees who had been laid off in response to the 2008 economic crisis. Instead, employees who remained on the job assumed additional responsibilities, demonstrating that the companies could survive and even profit by working with fewer employees while maintaining the same production levels.

The price to be paid for this philosophy is that most everyone is pressed to work harder, longer and more efficiently, limiting the amount of hours available for volunteer efforts.

But along with a much greater and more compressed work load, technology has had a critical impact on how we spend what leisure hours we do have. With 190 million tweets per day, 15 hours 33 minutes spent monthly on Facebook (on average), 3000 pictures uploaded to Flickr every minute, and 2.9 billion hours spent on YouTube per month, it is obvious that our ‘spare’ time is being flooded – and drowned - with social media activity. And it is growing more intense every day.

Shifting priorities

In addition to having less time to volunteer, the next generation of leaders also has a very different perspective, as well as a different set of priorities from the current Baby Boomer generation. As Gen-Xers and Millennials assume their place of influence in their communities, the shift in attitude will have an even greater impact on volunteerism. Baby Boomers have been known for their commitment to religious, educational and social service organizations, but the next generation is less interested in supporting formal, structured organizations (as seen in

the corresponding decline in membership in religious groups of all denominations across the country) and is more interested in volunteering individually or funding a cause rather than a group, such as education or fighting child slavery. This places different parameters around their philanthropic efforts of choice and their investment in volunteer time.

The demand for immediate results is also a trait common to the next generation of future volunteers who want to make a difference in a personal way, and who want to see the immediate effect of their philanthropy on an individual (hence the extraordinary interest in Kiva www.kiva.org and other groups that personalize the experience and quickly demonstrate measurable value).

Changing demographics

The country is bigger, older, more Hispanic and Asian and less wedded to marriage and traditional families than it was in 1990 according to a survey conducted by *USA Today*. Also, it is less enamored of children, more embracing of several generations living under one roof, more inclusive of same-sex couples, more cognizant of multiracial identities, more suburban, less rural and leaning more to the South and West. These results from their 2010 Census show that the end of the first decade of the 21st century marks a turning point in the nation's social, cultural, geographic, racial and ethnic fabric. It's a shift that will influence the nation for years to come, most especially in the nonprofit sector. If future volunteers do not eagerly embrace the same values as their predecessors (i.e., religious organizations, youth services, etc.), there could be more challenges for nonprofits ahead.

But there is some potential for good news relating to volunteerism as well. In the latest poll by the United States Department of Labor, Hispanics and Latinos were the only group to see higher volunteer rates. This may be a positive sign because as the Hispanic community expands, its members will have to fill in the space previously dominated by the white, black and Asian volunteers.

There are no right answers here - just suppositions and educated guesses based on the evolution taking place on the U.S. landscape. As technology changes the way we interact, as the business community demands more, and as more diversity is seen in the faces of the U.S. population, volunteerism will have to redefine itself too.

3. What is the Anticipated Impact of Fewer Available Volunteers?

The reality is that the nonprofit sector depends on volunteers to be the engine that drives the organizations. However, this age old reliance on volunteer power is now being challenged by harsh numbers that indicate a steady decline in almost every category, from college students through senior citizens, from educated adults and those with high school diplomas, and from whites and blacks, with a resulting over-all reduction of volunteers that can impact the ability of nonprofits to achieve their goals going forward.

The worst of it is that with volunteer rates lowest among people ages 20-24 who are in the up and coming generation of leaders (showing a drop from previous years), there is real concern for the future of meaningful volunteerism.

Yet we know that volunteering has always been a core American value. It is one of the ways we have defined our nation – one of the areas we have proudly pointed to as we describe ourselves as a country of people who help one another. “Service is the way we pay for being. It is the very purpose of life, and not something you do in your spare time” is a well- recognized quote. It reflects the fact that in 1995, 93 million Americans – or almost one-half of the adult population – volunteered their time on different projects.

The millions who volunteer help to fill the gap by accomplishing important tasks that would otherwise be done by millions of full time employees at a steep cost to organizations that are already financially strapped. Volunteerism and philanthropy particularly rely on those with the most resources (finances and education) to help those who are the most vulnerable, the most disadvantaged. In fact, in 2010, each volunteer hour was estimated to be worth \$21.36, which adds up considering that 63 million Americans contributed collectively eight billion hours of volunteer service, worth about \$169 billion.

A trend toward fewer volunteers could signal an approaching dilemma, but this may also be an excellent opportunity to restructure and rethink volunteerism.

Virtual volunteering which enables a volunteer to complete tasks, in whole or in part, off-site from the organization using the Internet, individual interactions and personal connections, and hands-on community organizing on a local level might not fit the traditional description of a group of today’s volunteers but most likely depicts volunteerism in the next decade. Given the seemingly limitless capacity of technology and the desires of the next generation to do something meaningful, relevant and essential with their time, nonprofit leaders can begin now to position their organization to utilize volunteers with new expectations.

4. How Can a Nonprofit Attract and Retain Quality Volunteers?

Taking into consideration the seriousness of the downward trend in volunteerism, even the most cutting edge nonprofits (those who are looking ahead to a variety of new circumstances, including virtual volunteers), must plug the leak to survive and to thrive in today's current climate.

Some nonprofits have appointed or hired a 'volunteer coordinator' whose sole task is to make sure the volunteer program is effective and efficient, from recruitment and screening through education, supervision and engagement to scheduling and evaluations.

Having a professional focused on the volunteers is one excellent approach, but there are other answers to the challenges facing the nonprofit leadership. In reality, there is a range of activities and initiatives that reflect a changing attitude towards volunteers. Here are a few.

Ask volunteers what they value. One of the first steps in recruiting and retaining the best volunteers is to find out why they are volunteering. Understanding their personal motives can help you align them with the tasks or projects that will help them reach their own goals and utilize their unique skills, competencies and life experiences. Find a way to match their passion with your purpose.

Along with understanding how volunteers want to help, it is also important to understand what they value about your mission. Time is scarce, and most volunteers have goals in mind when they offer to assist a nonprofit, whether it is a limited project such as a one-time opportunity (serving on the Spring fundraiser committee), a broadly defined role (serving on the membership committee) or general in nature (offering to answer the phones every Monday afternoon).

Tell volunteers what you expect. After you have gained some insight about what the volunteers expect, the second thing you need to accomplish is to be completely transparent while explaining what your expectations are. Many nonprofits take a "hat in hand" approach and apologize for setting parameters, establishing criteria or following a structured approach to the volunteer experience. This doesn't help anyone at all. The volunteers, while unpaid, are committed to accomplishing the mission – as if they were on staff. They cannot have a meaningful experience, and you cannot regularly rely on them, if their interaction is haphazard and inconsistent. There are those volunteers who frequently say, "I didn't do as I promised – I have a real world job too" when asked about their ability to fulfill a commitment. The real world job is, of course, essential. But if volunteers don't have the necessary available time, they should be encouraged to be more realistic before offering to help the next time they are asked.

Most nonprofits rely heavily on a volunteer workforce. As such they should approach the situation in a professional manner, setting forth guidelines, offering training, tracking hours and developing measurable objectives, or tapping into other benchmarks that are appropriate.

Make it easy for them to help you. Organizations can become too reliant on volunteers – and can forget that they do have time limits to their availability. Making it convenient can help to encourage participation.

For example, many (in fact most) organizations now either have all committee meetings held via conference call or include phone, along with in-person meeting options. Even though face time is more effective, eliminating travel time can have a significant impact on the volunteers. Organizations can ask volunteers and committee members what time of day works well for them – perhaps using evening hours as an alternative. In addition, the frequency of committee meetings needs to be reduced as does the length of time of the meetings. Most everyone is working extended hours and a 7:30 pm Board meeting that lasts past 10:30 pm is quickly becoming unacceptable except under unusual circumstances. Assigning a time keeper, asking for reports in advance for distribution prior to the meeting, and using a timed agenda can all contribute to more effective, and shorter, meetings. There should always be a purpose for the meeting and if there is not, the nonprofit leaders should be comfortable canceling the meeting until there is a reason to convene.

You can also make the experience more convenient by being more prepared for the volunteer and using their time wisely. Too many nonprofits still take their volunteers' time for granted and have them sitting around while preparations are being made or don't have projects for them to work on when they arrive. There is little that is as frustrating as volunteering your time, and after arriving prepared to pitch in, find that you are not really needed. Never waste a volunteer's time.

Another way to make it easy is to be sure that the role is well defined. Having written job descriptions, or written descriptions regarding committee responsibilities, is a help as is a written estimation of anticipated hours, the skills that are needed, and the way that the role impacts the organization as a whole. Seeing the outcome of their efforts and having clarity regarding what needs to be done can make it easier on the volunteer to be more effective and make them feel they are an integral part of the organization.

Make it fun and rewarding. Although the work of the organization may be serious, it is important to remember that the leaders and staff can turn any task into a positive or negative experience. Focusing on building camaraderie and generating energy can build great loyalty and increase the volunteers' willingness to do even more. Presenting new volunteers with a

welcome packet and perhaps a small networking event to introduce them to each other can go a long way towards building a climate that encourages having some fun together.

Volunteers can gain from the experience just as much as they can give to the organization. For instance, they may learn how to be better delegators, leaders or negotiators while serving the organization. They may also meet other volunteers or board members who can become important networking connections for them.

Nonprofits also need to recognize that some of the volunteers tasks are not very interesting or fulfilling. Those tasks still need to be done. Stuffing envelopes, uploading gala photos to Facebook, or making phone calls may not stimulate the mind but these jobs are essential. If the volunteers prefer change, switch the tasks around so that they are not always performing the same ones. Be sure that the volunteers have advanced notice of what they will be asked to do, and lastly, ask their opinion on how to improve the task. Create an environment where input is genuinely sought out and valued. Through their outside perspective and honest feedback the organization may discover more innovative, flexible ways to get the job done. Asking for their ideas will benefit both parties. The volunteers have the opportunity to be more creative and the organization has the chance to gain new efficiencies and effectiveness.

Say thank you. Volunteers may be at the core of many nonprofit activities, but they do not want their efforts to become so commonplace as to be overlooked. Saying thank you, putting a message on Facebook or the website, sending a note, having a volunteer of the month or year program, hosting a volunteer only get-together, making announcements at board meetings or listing names in the events' programs can all help build morale and empower volunteers to do more.

And don't forget that the estimated dollar value for one hour of volunteer time as measured in the for-profit sector is \$21.36! That deserves a significant show of appreciation! The organization that has a welcoming and inclusive attitude that recognizes the \$21.36 per hour value is a premium, and that is responsive to volunteer needs and asks what they are looking for in a volunteer role, is an organization that shows volunteer appreciation in everything it does.

5. Conclusion

Typically when volunteers are actively engaged with an organization they tend to be more generous with their time and financial donations. There have been studies conducted that support this premise, so it is important than ever for nonprofits to attract and retain high-quality volunteers. But volunteerism is declining, forcing organizations and associations to be more imaginative in their approach.

To accomplish this, the focus is on the individual more than ever before. Organizations are asking their volunteers what motivates them and are trying to match up the volunteer's needs with the organization's needs. The passion and commitment of the individual is having a strong influence on how the organization leverages their efforts. As volunteers shift away from performing tasks for an organization to performing tasks they choose – mentoring a student, shopping for the home-bound, walking a neighbor's dog, helping at a daycare center – the world of volunteering will be completely redefined and restructured.

Those organizations that rely on people power will have to create a unique experience for each volunteer, aligning their skills and interests with the group's goals. From a warm welcome, to adequate training and tools, to listening to their ideas and showing appreciation for their hard work, nonprofit leaders are embracing new ways to recruit and retain volunteers.

6. About the Authors

Bridget Hartnett, CPA, PSA

Bridget Hartnett, CPA and PSA, is a Member of the firm Sobel & Co. that has a depth of experience in nonprofit accounting which she draws on to provide high-level services for clients.

Experience in the Nonprofit Niche

Bridget spends most of her time working closely with clients in the social services and nonprofit areas, including educational institutions. She supervises the audit engagements conducted by Sobel & Co. for the Cerebral Palsy Association of Middlesex County, the Youth Development Clinic of Newark and Catholic Charities of the Trenton, Metuchen and Newark dioceses, Freedom House, and C.J. Foundation. In addition, she handles all of the firm's education audits and holds a New Jersey Public School Accountant's (PSA) license. Bridget is also responsible for reviewing and overseeing the preparation of nonprofit tax returns.

Philanthropic and Social Service Commitment

Bridget carries her commitment to social services beyond the work place to include her personal involvement in several areas, such as St. Benedict's school in Holmdel where she volunteers for projects and special events as needed. She also gives her resources and time to various children's charities, such as the New Jersey Chapter of Make-A-Wish. She also volunteers with professional business groups in the New Jersey community, including Monmouth Ocean County Nonprofit Committee and the Western Monmouth Chamber of Commerce where she is Treasurer. She helped found the successful Young Professionals' Group and currently serves as Co-Chair and founder of their newly formed Nonprofit Committee.

Professional Credentials

As a licensed Certified Public Accountant in New Jersey, Bridget is a member of both the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) and the New Jersey Society of Certified Public Accountants (NJSCPA). She is also an active member of the New Jersey CPA Society's Nonprofit Interest Group.

Educational Background

Bridget graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree from Montclair State University.

Ron Matan, CPA, CGMA, PSA

Ron Matan is the Member in Charge of Sobel & Co.'s Nonprofit and Social Services Group. In this role he brings a unique blend of public accounting and business acumen to every client engagement. A key member of Sobel & Co.'s Leadership Team since joining the firm in 1997, Ron works primarily with nonprofit organizations, including United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) projects, A-133 engagements, and low-income housing tax credit programs (LIHTC).

Experience in the Nonprofit Niche

Ron is responsible for the firm-wide quality of this practice area and is the firm liaison for the AICPA's Government (Nonprofit) Audit Quality Center. With over 35 years of experience in public and private industry and accounting experience with all types of nonprofit and social service organizations, Ron offers a unique blend of knowledge and insight to these specialized engagements. He is a Certified Tax Credit Compliance Professional and is listed in the guide that is circulated to all state agencies allocating tax credits, as well as the Internal Revenue Service. He has taken courses in advanced training for peer reviews and performs peer reviews of other accounting firms. Ron also holds a New Jersey Public School Accountant's (PSA) license.

Philanthropic and Social Service Commitment

Ron is a member of the Board of Directors of the Neighborhood Health Services Corporation, headquartered in Plainfield, New Jersey, where he serves as Treasurer and Chairman of both the Finance and Audit Committees. He also serves on the Board of the Union County Educational Services Foundation. He is a former Treasurer and Board Member of Kids Peace Treatment Centers for emotionally disturbed children, located in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Professional Credentials

Ron is a Certified Public Accountant licensed to practice in New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania. He is a member of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) and the New Jersey Society of Certified Public Accountants (NJSCPA). Ron has been elected to PKF North America's Nonprofit Committee, and in June 2004, he was appointed to the New Jersey Society of Certified Public Accountants' Peer Review Executive Committee. Ron is also a member of the NJSCPA's Nonprofit Interest Group.

Educational Background

Ron is a graduate of Kings College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, where he received a Bachelor of Science Degree in Accounting.

7. About Sobel & Co.

Sobel & Co. is a regional accounting and consulting firm located in Livingston, New Jersey, that has been providing nonprofit and social service organizations in the New Jersey/New York metropolitan area with audit, accounting, tax and advisory services since its inception in 1956.

The firm is distinctive in its approach to the nonprofit community because of its sincere passion for serving this sector. As it says on the Sobel & Co. website, “We work with the nonprofit sector because we feel good helping those who do good; we have a passion for helping nonprofit organizations achieve their mission of helping the world's most vulnerable.”

The firm currently works with more than 190 nonprofit organizations with revenues ranging from \$100,000 to over \$75,000,000. Based on this depth of experience, the professionals in the nonprofit group are keenly familiar with the issues facing nonprofits and they apply this knowledge to bring added value to every engagement.

As a further demonstration of the firm’s commitment to the nonprofit community, several complimentary programs are offered throughout the year. These include quarterly webinars, roundtable discussions and an annual symposium on timely and relevant topics.

We also encourage you to visit our website at www.sobel-cpa.com and click on the nonprofit niche page. Once there, please browse our resource library where you will find published white papers along with a variety of articles. We provide a Desk Reference Manual for Nonprofits, a Survey of Nonprofit Organizations that contains interesting insights on nonprofits, a wide range of tools and benchmarking data, a monthly e-mail newsletter that offers relevant information to organizations and links to other key sites that are valuable for the nonprofit community.



8. Citations and Footnotes

Some of the information shared here was researched at the following sites:

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