

# Whom *Don't* We Ask to Volunteer?

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Susan J. Ellis

We all know the common wisdom (backed up by research, actually) that the number one reason people volunteer or give money is because *they were asked*. In other words, there is a big difference between *knowing* there are ways to be philanthropic and *feeling invited* to participate. Never confuse publicity with recruitment.

Last month I shared [Ten Time-Tested Volunteer Recruitment Tips that Still Work](#). This month I want to examine the potential volunteers we rarely attract for three reasons:

- We do not recognize them as talent pools or as people who would be interested in helping us.
- We internally edit ourselves by feeling they are somehow out of our reach, and so we never ask them.
- We aren't sure how to approach them, so we don't. And perhaps we are not sure if we will be able to design work for them or support them as needed.

By not tapping the widest circle of people in the community to join us as volunteers, everyone loses. Our organizations never gain the wealth of skills out there and the uninvited potential volunteers are denied all the benefits of donating their time and talent.

## Who is Overlooked

Naturally, there are many volunteer resources managers who are fantastic at casting a wide, inclusive net when they seek volunteers. And, many people who are under-recruited do find ways to contribute their time. My point here is to encourage you to reflect on your own attitudes and beliefs. Do you truly see the populations below as prospects for your volunteer corps? Have you intentionally attempted to recruit them? What is blocking you from trying – or perhaps what is blocking them from saying yes?

### ***The Rich***

Like bank robbers, fundraising professionals go where the money is. Of course this makes a lot of sense. But too often we buy into the mistaken belief that rich people don't want to get involved beyond writing a check.

When was the last time you partnered with your development staff to invite financial donors – especially the big ones – to get more personally involved with your cause? If they support you with money, they must care about your mission. Wouldn't they like to see your organization in action on the front line? Don't they have other potential skills to offer beyond check-writing? What about other people in their family?

I acknowledge that it is a hard sell to get fundraising staff to like this idea, since they almost always guard the names of donors like state secrets. The point is to develop an outreach strategy together, at least *mentioning* volunteer opportunities along with the next pitch for a donation. We are talking

about baby steps, such as asking donors if they'd like to help at a special event, usher one performance, paint one room.

### ***The Poor***

Then there is the opposite side of the economic spectrum. Most research reports that lower income people and those without higher education are less likely to volunteer. But correlation is not *causation*. I submit that we tend to avoid recruiting from low-income areas, so it's another case of "they were not asked."

First, there is an enormous amount of self-help, collaboration, and barter going on in disadvantaged communities. These may not be activities that anyone consciously recognizes or labels as "volunteering," but that does not matter. Shared child care, community gardens, exchange of services, and more occur naturally out of need. Serving others is a form of self-esteem. Never assume that a low income means an unwillingness to help or that the person has no useful skills to offer.

I have covered this theme in two past Hot Topics: [Both Receiving and Giving](#) and [Lessening Social Exclusion through Volunteering](#). I still feel strongly about the points I outline in these essays and hope you will revisit them to consider your point of view on the subject.

### ***Our Clients/Consumers***

Only some organizations provide services to the poor, but all have been created to address some social or community need. That means that every citizen is potentially a client of some organization somewhere, sometime. Your paid staff and volunteers are undoubtedly getting some sort of assistance or service right now from another provider for needs unconnected to your services to others. So why can't your clients also be volunteers with you?

In the two Hot Topics linked above, I also discuss ways to engage clients in self-help activities, especially facilitating mutual support among the families and friends traveling on the same path as the primary client.

Depending on the type of service you offer, it might make more sense to wait until your clients finish their program, treatment, whatever and approach them to return as *alumni* volunteers. It's a way to pass it forward and even celebrate their success.

### ***Blue-Collar Workers***

Why is it so acceptable to ask an accountant or lawyer to serve on a board or a trainer to conduct a workshop at no fee, but we simply pay the bills we get from plumbers, carpenters, electricians and the like in cash? Why do we assume that a person who earns a living with his or her hands would not consider donating those services just as someone in a white-collar profession might? There has to be a personal connection to the cause, of course, but...if you don't ask, you cannot get.

A variation on this is recruiting blue-collar workers for service other than the physical labor they are employed to do. Youth mentoring programs might better serve their youngsters by matching them with successful repair people or cashiers than with lawyers or homemakers. People who work outside of the professions may be more realistic role models, as well as relate better to their match.

### ***High-ranking Corporate Officers***

Business executives are frequently considered prospects for serving on a nonprofit board of directors, but if their company sponsors an employee volunteer program, the activities there tend to focus on lower-level workers. Why?

### ***University Faculty***

In the same vein, we all troll university campuses to recruit student volunteers, but what about their teachers and administrative personnel? (This also holds for public and private school teachers and principals.) The faculty has a long-term interest in the community because they are permanent residents, not semester transients. And while their academic expertise might offer potential for your organization, they are ordinary people with all sorts of outside interests, too.

### ***Children and Young Teens***

The first edition of our book, *Children as Volunteers*, came out in 1983. It still amazes me how many people will stand at a book table with their hands behind their backs, see this title, and say "oh, we can't involve children." Well, if you *serve* children, you ought to consider engaging other children as advisors and sounding boards. Even if they cannot provide direct service, children may be able to educate others, such as speaking in a video about how they felt during a medical procedure or when a parent died. They may be able to give support to peers who are facing the same thing. They might undoubtedly be able to teach the staff how to make the most of a smartphone or other technology!

I'm not recommending hosting 42 six-year-olds at one time. Even one or two capable kids might make a real contribution. And there's always family volunteering to try, urging parents to bring along their children when visiting clients/patients, helping at fundraising events, and other work the kids can do. [It should be noted that, despite a lot of talk about family volunteering, I keep hearing from parents that it is almost impossible to find such opportunities in reality. That's our fault, not theirs.]

### ***Men...or Women***

Of course both women and men volunteer, even if the men refer to themselves as coaches, trustees, and firemen! For the purpose of this essay, I am questioning why so many organizations have, over time, evolved a single-gender volunteer corps...and then assume this is the way it has to be.

If you have far too many women, ask yourself why. Do you tend to name things to appeal to women, fundraise only with jewelry, and show only female faces in every photograph on the Web or in the newspaper? You may need to actually say: "Men welcome."

All-male organizations have famously resisted the involvement of women, sometimes even going to court to remain segregated. But if your group is more than willing to welcome females, ask some to join!

This may be a good place to note that I never recommend token recruitment. The point is not to add a few men or a few women to your roster. It's to find the *right* volunteers with the skills and commitment you most need, looking for those people in a way that diversifies your talent pool.

## **But, But, But...**

I am certain that readers will come up with all sorts of concerns about many of these populations. Some will be valid. An organization is not required to enroll representatives of every single demographic, and there may truly not be a good fit based on what the organization does or whom it serves. It may take some effort or adaptation to welcome new types of volunteers, or even preparing the volunteers who are with you now.

The question is: Do you see talent everywhere and invite potentially great volunteers into your organization? Consider where you recruit and what your expectations are of what applicants will look like. Don't limit your outreach and you'll be rewarded.

- Have you done outreach to a new population and been happy with the results? Or been unsuccessful? Please share.
- What other under-tapped populations should we be considering (there are definitely more I didn't have space to include)?

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