

Chapter 8

Volunteering and Professional Development



People volunteer for various reasons. In general, they do so to give and receive or to fulfill a need, or they may believe in a particular cause. Most significantly, they volunteer because they gain some personal and professional return. People usually get involved in their professional organizations, chapter activities, and committees to

- network with colleagues
- increase visibility to market themselves
- gain experience in using a specific skill or knowledge set
- demonstrate leadership abilities
- strengthen the validity of their résumés
- try out new materials and tools in front of an audience
- share knowledge and experience with colleagues
- help a professional group conduct business.

Typically, volunteers select a specific position or activity based on available assignments, the time they can commit, and the requisite qualifications. They seldom think about how a volunteer experience may enhance their professional development, although more thought should be given to what will be learned and how that learning will occur. To give the matter adequate consideration, you can develop a job description, set objectives and activities, and define outcomes for a volunteer position just as you would for a work position.

Although this chapter focuses on volunteerism through jobs and projects within a professional organization, you may want to consider other avenues. One is in the communications arena: writing articles, making presentations, and facilitating workshops. Your workplace is another possibility for volunteer opportunities. Your organi-

zation may sponsor community service projects or need people to plan staff or client social events. A local community service agency may welcome your professional background by having you serve on its board, conduct work skills workshops for clients, and so forth. Volunteering for these types of activities can also be learning experiences and provide some of the benefits described below.

Benefit From Volunteering for Association Leadership

You can integrate volunteering into your plans for achieving professional goals. People generally think about the enjoyment and satisfaction they get from working with others toward a common goal and the sense of belonging that this kind of participation brings.

By volunteering for leadership in professional organizations you not only reap those standard benefits but also expand your WLP career and continue your professional growth.

Don't overlook the possibility that you can gain tangible benefits from service—beyond the vagaries of visibility, contacts, or credentials. Benefits accrue in terms of your professional learning. Given the hectic work and personal lives that most of us live, it's a more effective and efficient use of time to gain more than one benefit from an activity, particularly one that you've elected to do. Why not view volunteerism as an experience-based approach whereby working on a real project or an actual problem can lead to accomplishing some specific learning objectives of your own? Consider, as an example, serving on a membership committee to increase your marketing skills. Establishing tangible learning objectives will further your commitment to volunteering.

“Volunteering in ASTD can benefit both you and your employer.

On an individual level, you will

- develop and practice important business and leadership skills
- broaden your professional network
- gain visibility in your field
- gain access to new developments and cutting-edge information in your field.

Your organization will also enjoy benefits from your volunteer work, such as

- the application of your new management and leadership abilities on the job
- access to what works in other organizations
- the opportunity to test new ideas with other professionals before implementation.”

—ASTD (2006)

Before exploring volunteer options or accepting when asked to serve, ask yourself some questions:

- How can accepting a leadership or committee position help my career and move me a step closer to my professional goal?
- What is my true goal for volunteering?
- What expectations do I have for this volunteer assignment?
- What expectations do people have of me?
- What benchmarks do I want to establish for success?
- How much time and energy can I realistically give to volunteering?

A professional organization's environment is just as much a learning arena as is a workplace, thus you should view volunteering for a professional organization as a development experience. There's no reason you can't adapt some of your WLP principles and applications to a specific volunteer position—for example, adult learning, needs assessment, or performance evaluation. Perhaps you can volunteer to design a membership survey form. Refocus your view of high-performance work and learning toward yourself and your volunteer experiences.

Referring back to the examples provided in Chapter 4, we will now see how volunteering can be a development opportunity. To gain some experience, Amelia, the coach consultant, volunteered as a coach for her ASTD chapter and for her professional women's network group. Benito, who was transitioning into WLP, was in the previous year a member of his chapter's program committee and then chaired the committee. By helping to choose topics and speakers, he became more knowledgeable about the field. Gudron, who was seeking a new position, decided to join the board of her local chapter as special interest group coordinator to expand her networking contacts. Sam, who was making a professional shift to e-learning delivery and had limited free time, became a greeter for his chapter program and professional development events. Thus, he made himself known to chapter leaders, making it easier for him to submit an e-learning workshop proposal for the chapter's website. If accepted, he could receive some needed professional experience.

These are some of the characteristics of workplace learning that are equally relevant to volunteerism:

- A need exists to create, extend, and apply knowledge for high performance.
- The focus of learning models is on the learner rather than on the trainer.
- Learning is an active process that involves the individual taking responsibility for what he or she learns and how the learning occurs.
- Experience-based learning—acquiring skills and knowledge by doing—is for some people one of the best methods of learning.
- Learning activities stress performance improvement and expansion of a person's knowledge base.

Let Volunteer Activities Support Career Goals and Needs

By shifting to the concept that you and the professional organization are in a partnership that can both profit from your volunteer participation, the experience becomes more valuable for all. Think of volunteering as a part of your career management activities, a part of your PDP. Approaching volunteerism in this way can be beneficial if you are in the midst of transitioning into the field. Staffing the registration table at an association meeting, for example, is a good way to network and possibly arrange for information interviews. Volunteering enables you quickly to learn more about where you might fit into the profession and about what facets of your professional background are transferable. It's also a way to add some related professional activities to your résumé to illustrate your growing commitment to the WLP field.

Remember when you did an internship or field service project as part of your graduate or undergraduate studies? Those experiences were usually linked to your major or professional specialty, with education and training objectives developed and integrated into the experience. Before beginning a fieldwork experience, you did extensive preparation and research relating to the outcomes you wanted from the effort. You can take a similar outcomes-focused approach to volunteering by considering these questions:

- Professional goals: Where do you want to be one year or three years from now? Even five years?
- Career mobility: What kind of career moves or professional shifts do you need to make to achieve your goals?
- Professional needs: What competencies, experience, or knowledge do you need to gain or update to be ready and competitive for your planned career change or professional shift?
- Self-directed learning: Which of your professional development needs can be met through non-classroom activities?
- Volunteer assignment: How can you meet some of your career development needs by involvement with a professional organization?

It's important to know how to leverage volunteering to create a learning situation for yourself. A good match should exist between your professional skills and interests and the organization's goals and needs. Consider whether the benefits you receive will be equal to the time and effort expended. Set reasonable expectations for yourself so that when a volunteer assignment ends you feel you've accomplished something concrete and made a contribution.

Take control of your volunteer work either by offering to undertake an available assignment that meets your specific professional requirements or by proposing an

innovative activity or project that can benefit you and the organization. Decide what you want to learn or experience, how you intend to accomplish it, and how benchmarking will take place.

Identify Your Goals and Needs Before You Volunteer

Whether you are just starting your volunteering at the local level or are already a chapter leader exploring options within the national organization, the same decision-making process is used to set the desired learning outcomes. You gain the most from your volunteer efforts if you give careful thought to the why, what, and how of your involvement. Manage your volunteerism by taking time prior to selecting an activity, accepting a leadership or committee position, or proposing a project to determine the specific learning activities you want to participate in. Only when you are clear about your present professional status and future direction is it practical to review existing volunteer options and determine which ones interest you.

“Don't over-commit your schedule. Make sure the volunteer hours you want to give fit into your hectic life, so that you don't frustrate your family, exhaust yourself, shortchange the organization you're trying to help or neglect your job. Do you want a long-term assignment or something temporary? ... Better to start out slowly than to commit yourself to a schedule you can't—or don't want to fulfill.”

Verizon Foundation (2006)

Be as clear as possible about the career moves or professional shifts you want to make. Refer to Chapters 2, 3, and 4 to review AOE, roles, competencies, and activities in the field. How did you fit that information into the career plans that are set out in your PDP? What AOE, competencies, skills, or knowledge bases are you lacking? What do you need to update or expand? What are your professional gaps and can you identify ones you can fill through volunteerism? Outcomes of this self-assessment are learning goals for a volunteer assignment that are specific, manageable, realistic, attainable, and benchmarked.

Turn now to Exercises 8-1 and 8-2. These exercises focus on the personal rewards and professional development goals of volunteerism. Complete the exercises before you explore volunteer options.

But what happens if you have either been unexpectedly asked to serve in a specific role or already accepted a volunteer position before defining your personal and professional objectives? In both instances, begin with goal setting and then undertake some review and assessment to see if and how the position can fulfill your purposes.

In the first situation, you may decide not to accept the assignment, because you will not gain the desired professional growth opportunities, you can't give the required

time, or you don't feel the work has intrinsic value for you. In the second case, particularly if you haven't begun the assignment, you still have some time to establish learning objectives and build in tasks (if needed) enabling the accomplishment of your goals.

If your professional organization offers an orientation or retreat for volunteer workers and leaders, it's a good idea to take time for reflection before you take part in any of those activities. With a clear picture of your personal and professional volunteer goals, you can select the most beneficial sessions to attend and complete workshop exercises in the most meaningful way.

As part of your volunteering decision-making process, ask for a position description. Many organizations have written information about their major volunteer positions, for example, board members and committee chairs. If no written description exists, then talk with one or more of the following people: the person who presently holds the position, the chapter president, or the board member whose portfolio the position comes under. Find out what the expectations are for tasks, time commitment, and requisite or preferred skills and experience. Having gathered that information, draft a position description and submit it to the appropriate person(s) for review. This prevents miscommunications about responsibilities and expectations. Also discuss how much leeway you have to set learning objectives and carry out your responsibilities in a way that permits you to obtain the knowledge and skills and gain the experience you desire.

Write a Learning Contract

Putting your goals and objectives down in writing as a tangible document helps you commit to your learning needs. A volunteer work learning contract outlines what you intend to learn and accomplish while carrying out your volunteer role. This effective tool allows you to make a better match between your learning and performance objectives and the tasks and activities of your volunteer position. You can create a document that is explicit and concrete—a self-directed agreement in which you spell out the expectations you have for the experience. These are the elements of a volunteer work learning contract:

- summary statement of the general project or activity—mission, purpose
- job description—boundaries, conditions, time commitment, and outcomes
- objectives of the volunteer position or role—learning goals reflected in AOE, competencies, skills, and knowledge to be acquired
- activities of the volunteer position—tasks and responsibilities and identification of where and how learning will occur

- evaluation and performance methods—benchmarks and procedures for self-review
- your signature—affirmation of your commitment
- a witness's signature (optional)—can be a professional colleague, mentor, or coach.

Writing out a work contract for a volunteer experience has the following advantages:

- It helps to spotlight exactly what you will accomplish and how you will do it.
- It provides tangible evidence of your intent.
- It enables you to keep on target.
- It prevents board members and others from misunderstanding your responsibilities.
- It allows for scheduling intermediate progress checks.
- It acts as a tool for clear communication, support, and understanding if you are working with a mentor or coach.

Turn now to Exercise 8-3 and develop your own volunteer work learning contract. You can tuck it into your day planner or briefcase for easy reference.

Evaluate Your Volunteer Experience

If your organization doesn't have any official structure for volunteers to review how they're doing, establish your own review. After about two months and again during the second half of the assignment period, informally review your progress toward accomplishing your learning objective and meeting your expectations by answering these questions:

- How well do you feel you are doing in this assignment?
- Do you still want to acquire this learning?
- Is there a new learning objective you'd like to add?
- Does the volunteer work learning contract need to be amended to reflect changes in your thinking?
- If changes are desired, can the contract be revised? Do you need to involve a board member in this decision?

As with any work situation, evaluating your performance and looking at benchmark successes are important. An evaluation of whether a volunteer accomplished the identified needs and objectives is done from two perspectives—the organization's and the volunteer's. Most likely, your association conducts a final evaluation to get feed-

back from the participants and to assess the extent to which volunteer performance met the group's objectives and success criteria. These procedures probably focus more on the project or team's benchmarks than on the volunteer's own goals.

You need to know how well you did in reaching your benchmarks, and you need to bring closure to your experience. Therefore, conducting an assessment that stresses how fully you accomplished your learning objectives and the level of your personal satisfaction with the volunteer experience is important. This assessment should target three areas:

1. level of satisfaction and overall rewards received
2. the extent to which the experience met your personal and professional needs
3. documentation or evidence that indicates learning has taken place.

This review provides an avenue for deciding if you had unrealistic expectations about the assignment and the role that volunteerism can play in your professional development. The evaluation outcomes can be the basis for seeking and accepting future volunteer experiences and for structuring the position to accommodate specific personal and professional interests and desires.

Exercise 8-4 is an evaluation to complete when a volunteer experience has ended. Before beginning this final evaluation, take out your volunteer work learning contract and any informal review information you may have to be as accurate and complete as possible when completing the form. If you're working with a coach or mentor or have a colleague who has served as a sounding board for your feelings and concerns, discuss the assessment outcomes with that person. It's a good way to gain closure and to celebrate the end of this learning opportunity with someone who has provided support throughout the experience.

Remember to save copies of all relevant materials—reports, brochures, photos, proposals, videotapes, finished products, any original work, and evaluations of presentations—to document your learning and accomplishments from the volunteer assignment. You can review these materials when putting together a portfolio of your strengths and expertise. They are the basis for the inclusion of skills and knowledge gained when updating your résumé, developing your marketing materials, or applying for further academic study. Information regarding your nontraditional way of acquiring WLP knowledge and experience is key to establishing the credibility needed for promotions, job changes, or moves from an inside position to your own business or practice.

We're about to tackle the final aspect of making career moves and professional shifts—marketing yourself. In the next chapter you'll learn to develop a marketing strategy and guidelines for promoting your professional strengths for job search and business development purposes.

Exercise 8-1: Identifying Your Personal Needs

Directions: Answer the following questions as thoughtfully and fully as you can. Think about your answers as you explore volunteer opportunities. If you've already accepted a volunteer assignment, complete the exercise as soon as possible so you gain the greatest benefit from the experience.

- A. Why am I interested in a volunteer leadership or committee experience?

- B. What are my expectations for this experience?

- C. What would give me the most personal satisfaction from this experience?

- D. What are my personal objectives for this experience?

- E. What are the drawbacks of this experience for me?

- F. How much time can I realistically give, or do I want to give, to volunteering?

Exercise 8-2: Matching Your Professional Development Needs With Volunteer Opportunities

Directions: Answer the following questions as thoroughly and thoughtfully as you can. Although it is best to complete this exercise before pursuing volunteer assignments, you still can benefit from identifying your needs and how they may be served after you've accepted a position. If you have already accepted or are considering a specific volunteer assignment, complete item A and answer questions B-G in terms of that assignment. If you don't have a particular assignment, begin with item B. For items B-G, complete only those that are relevant to your professional situation. If not relevant, write N/A.

- A. Describe your volunteer assignment, including title, duties, and projected outcomes.

- B. Describe the current and adequate AOE, competencies, skills, and knowledge that you will need to demonstrate:
 - 1.

 - 2.

 - 3.

- C. Describe the AOE, competencies, skills, and knowledge you will need to improve or update:
 - 1.

 - 2.

 - 3.

- D. Describe the AOE, competencies, skills, and knowledge you will need to acquire:
 - 1.

 - 2.

 - 3.

- E. Describe the AOE, competencies, skills, and knowledge you already have that can contribute to your success in a leadership or committee experience:
 - 1.

 - 2.

 - 3.

- F. Describe how a leadership or committee experience can contribute to the progress of your WLP career:

- G. Describe how you plan to achieve your learning objectives through a volunteer position:

Note: Compare your answers in Exercises 8-1 and 8-2 to see how compatible your personal and professional needs are and to identify any conflicts.

Exercise 8-3: Developing a Volunteer Work Learning Contract

Directions: Before starting a volunteer assignment, review your answers in Exercises 8-1 and 8-2 and complete the items listed below. Be as explicit as possible. Where appropriate, use concrete and measurable terms, such as learning objectives and timelines. Keep a copy of the completed learning contract in your day planner or briefcase for easy reference. Conduct interim reviews of your activities to track your learning progress.

- A. Volunteer position title:
 - 1. Overall activity or project—mission, purpose:
 - 2. Position's responsibilities and tasks:
 - 3. Dates of required service:
 - 4. Approximate number of volunteer hours required weekly or monthly:
 - 5. Anticipated outcomes:
 - 6. Performance objectives (if used by the professional organization):
- B. List as many career or professional goals as are relevant. Explain how this experience will advance your career or help you accomplish your professional goals.
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- C. List all your learning objectives. Describe what you intend to learn.
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- D. List all your intended learning activities. Be specific about how each activity will be a learning opportunity.
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- E. List and describe all interim evaluation benchmarks. Explain how and when you plan to assess the level of learning that took place during the volunteer experience.
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.

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Exercise 8-3: Developing a Volunteer Work Learning Contract (continued)

F. Explain how you will document your learning and achievements for future career use.

1.

2.

3.

G. Your signature and the date:

H. Witness signature and the date (optional):

Exercise 8-4: Evaluating Your Leadership or Committee Experience

Directions: Fill out this evaluation form within two weeks of completing your volunteer assignment, while the experience is still fresh in your mind. Refer to your volunteer work learning contract and any interim review information gathered while carrying out the assignment to help you respond as accurately and completely as possible. If you are working with a coach or mentor, or have a colleague who can act as a sounding board, bring closure to the entire experience by discussing the results and celebrating with that person.

A. How successful was the leadership or committee experience?

- 100% 75% 50% 25% 0%

Why?

B. How much of your anticipated satisfaction did you receive from the experience?

- 100% 75% 50% 25% 0%

C. How many of your expectations were met by the experience?

- All Some None

If you indicated that some expectations were met, list them here:

If you indicated that all or some were met, briefly describe at least one illustrative activity for each item listed:

If you indicated that none were met, explain why that happened:

D. In what ways did the leadership or committee experience meet your professional learning needs? (Refer to Exercise 8-2.)

E. How many of the competencies, skills, and knowledge bases that you identified as important to demonstrate were you able to use during your volunteer experience?

- All Some None

If you indicated that only some were demonstrated, list those that were:

If you indicated that all or some were demonstrated, briefly describe at least one illustrative activity for each item listed:

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Exercise 8-4: Evaluating Your Leadership or Committee Experience (continued)

If you indicated that none were demonstrated, explain why that happened:

F. How many competencies, skills, and knowledge bases were improved or updated?

- All Some None

If you indicated that only some were improved or updated, list those that were:

If you indicated that all or some were improved or updated, briefly describe at least one illustrative activity for each item listed:

If you indicated that none were improved or updated, explain why that happened:

G. How many competencies, skills, and knowledge bases were acquired?

- All Some None

If you indicated that only some were acquired, list those that were:

If you indicated that all or some were acquired, briefly describe at least one illustrative activity for each item listed:

If you indicated that none were acquired, explain why that happened:

H. How many competencies, skills, or knowledge bases contributed to the success of the experience?

- All Some None

If you indicated that only some contributed, list those that did:

If you indicated that all or some contributed, briefly describe at least one illustrative activity for each item listed:

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If you indicated that none contributed, explain why that happened:

I. This volunteer leadership or committee experience has (check all appropriate responses)

- provided qualifications for a career move or professional shift
- enhanced opportunities for advancement or promotion
- broadened professional background for future professional repositioning
- deepened depth and mastery of a specific professional expertise
- tested abilities to start a business or consulting practice
- other:

J. Overall, how would you rate this volunteer leadership or committee experience?

- Excellent Good Fair Poor

K. What, if anything, will you change in your own career development plans, based on this leadership or committee experience?

L. Would you consider accepting a future volunteer role in the same or in another professional organization?

- Yes No

If yes, what type of experience would you seek next?

If no, why not?

