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The Changing Face of Volunteerism

By Andy Steggles

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WHITE PAPER



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Working with ASAE volunteers was a fascinating experience. We found that associations are trying to evolve by becoming more nimble with how they identify and recognize volunteers. The goal is simply to bring advocacy into the traditional volunteer structure, allowing more people to participate—and thus build a deeper engagement in our associations.

~ Andy Steggles,
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ASAE Executive Management Section Council has spent much of the past two years researching what volunteerism and engagement means to the association community and its governance. The premise behind this is related to the different interpretations of volunteerism and whether emerging types of engagement should be recognized as volunteerism and incorporated into the models. The council conducted a survey on volunteer management, as well as more than 50 interviews from different types and sized organizations, to begin to tackle the question of who is a volunteer and how to manage that involvement.

Through the research, we reached out to the following groups:

- Professional societies
- Trade groups
- Individual versus corporate memberships
- Small, medium and large associations and societies
- Associations with and without components
- Top down and bottom up driven orgs

The conversations highlighted a trend in the association community to seek a better understanding about engaging members, and to recognize new ways in which members can provide value beyond the more traditional, Term-based volunteer opportunities. For the sake of this paper, “Term-based” volunteer opportunities are defined as the more traditional groups such as committees, boards, chapter officers and other volunteer opportunities requiring a relatively longterm commitment (usually a year or more). This paper details some of the challenges with Term-based volunteerism, and how some associations are embracing a hybrid approach to incorporate alternative engagement opportunities for their membership, thus allowing a much broader audience and greater level of engagement, satisfaction and ultimately, an improved retention rate.

Why Are Associations Trying to Adapt?

There have been numerous studies which have demonstrated a strong correlation between member engagement and retention (i.e. “Decision to Join” by ASAE), yet members have even more limited time to engage. This challenge is compounded by the continuous challenge of disruptive innovation, which allows relatively new companies to compete and potentially displace a more traditional association. There are many organizations encroaching on different core elements of what an association does, such as events, online networks or publishing companies.



A simple example many may be familiar with is LinkedIn. It has expanded from being a job-centric company into more robust communities, directories and publishing. How long until LinkedIn adds journals or other educational offerings to its platform? Or conversely, removes a feature users may be dependent on, such as the event calendar that was dropped a couple years ago.

Some organizations have embraced LinkedIn and are trying to leverage it as a strategic advantage. A common way to do this is to leverage LinkedIn as a recruiting tool for members, while at the same time positioning their LinkedIn presence as a billboard to push people towards the association website. Simultaneously, some organizations are trying to become more member-centric by engaging their members in new ways, hence the new attention being given to alternative types of volunteerism.

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Why Now?

Technology has disrupted the member engagement continuum and has evolved to become an enabler. For-profit companies are adopting a “lean” approach, enabling them to test their market and quickly implement new ideas and solutions at a relatively low cost. Conversely, many associations continue to struggle with bureaucracy and tend to be much less nimble, due to their lack of inclusivity and often inefficient governance structure.

Many organizations are witnessing declining retention rates, which could be attributed to many things but usually comes down to providing a dwindling, less relevant value proposition. This assumption is enforced by MGI’s recent [Membership and Marketing Benchmarking Report](#), where lack of engagement has been identified as a key driver for non-renewal.

In an effort to become more member-centric while differentiating themselves from their competition, associations are looking for alternative solutions to provide relevance. Primary ways to do this are embracing different types of volunteerism, becoming more inclusive, improving member satisfaction and ultimately building a greater sense of community.

If you need additional reasons, ASAE’s latest research report, 10 Lessons for Cultivating Member Commitment, shares an astonishing fact: one simple volunteer role shifted a member’s value perception 6 points (from 38 to 44 percent in the Net Promoter Score). A deeper commitment such as task force/committee or longterm volunteer roles, sets the value perception at 60 percent. Authors James Dalton and Monica Dignam made this statement: “The visceral experience of involvement is what solidifies their appreciation for what an association is: peers helping peers.”

TYPES OF VOLUNTEERISM

To recognize the volunteer and engagement opportunities available to your members, it’s important to understand the different types of volunteerism. The following lists three broad areas: Term, Task and Micro.

“Term” Volunteers

Term-based volunteerism is what most associations currently embrace. These are typically standing committees with 1+ year terms, which require a high level of commitment by their respective members. Other examples include the Board of Directors or House of Delegates. Term-based volunteerism may also flow through to the component level, such as a Chapter with chapter officers, typically also serving for 1+ year appointments.

“Task” Volunteers

Task-based volunteerism is the opportunity for members to volunteer for a project that is typically a short term role, focused on a specific outcome. These opportunities are often more closely aligned with a member’s skill set, thus reducing orientation and training required to make the task even more accessible and convenient.

What happens when an association needs members to collaborate on a white paper, select judges for an award or perhaps just write an article for their newsletter? In the past, all of these opportunity types would typically be fulfilled by staff or handed over to a committee. These and other tasks could be a perfect fit for members to fulfill.

Task-based opportunities allow members to pick and choose where they think they can provide the most value. In the past, it may have been just the minority of members who were in a personal or professional position to commit to a more traditional, Term-based role. Using that Term-based volunteer model, organizations would be excluding a huge pool of talent who arguably may be more qualified to fulfill a specific task over a shorter period of time.

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This approach to volunteerism has proven to be a win-win in terms of reducing the occasionally overwhelming time demands of its volunteers, as well as embracing a much wider audience of new volunteers to perform much more defined tasks. Staff are now able to utilize members for tasks that a more traditional volunteer group may not have had the bandwidth to undertake within the time frame required.

When creating Task-based volunteer opportunities, it's important to set realistic expectations about the opportunity, such as the estimated time commitment, travel requirements, deadlines and other relevant information.

"Micro" Volunteers

What about the more dynamic and unstructured volunteer opportunities that occur all the time and are rarely counted as volunteering? The nonprofit sector first identified Micro-volunteering and pushed to embrace it, because like the small financial gifts which add up, the small gift of time spent has the same impact if pooled. The explosion of micro-jobs created an expectation for our members to seek out the same. These also become examples for associations to model.



When discussing Micro-volunteer opportunities, a good starting point is to inventory all areas where members have contributed. For example, many organizations have an online community platform or a more traditional listserv. What about everyone who has ever posted a message? Or perhaps the members who are not part of the Government Affairs committee, but they did respond to your "call for action" by writing a letter to their senator in support of your organization's position. Maybe include members who have completed an industry focused benchmarking survey. Do we add members who submitted session suggestions for an annual conference? All of these people could arguably be considered volunteers, since they are collectively creating value for the membership and the organization as a whole.

No matter which department is examined, there are usually Micro-volunteers supporting the activities that collectively help advance the organization's mission. Using an online community or listserv as an example, dissecting what members are doing will help find where someone posts a question and other members post their responses. In this example, the person who posts the original question is essentially broadcasting a Micro-volunteer opportunity, and other members are embracing the opportunity by responding with a solution. When looking at what constitutes value, it's rarely the question by itself, but the question with the responses that is a conversation creating value. In this instance, the Micro-volunteers are both the thread creators (the member who posted the question) and responders.

A simple example of this is the creation of this article. By creating a Micro-volunteer opportunity on ASAE's collaborate website, to "Review a white paper on member engagement and volunteerism", I was able to very quickly identify expert volunteers to review and comment on the paper – thank you again to all of you who volunteered. Note, while "reviewing and commenting" may be perceived as "Micro", if members were collaborating to collectively write the white paper, this would have fallen into the "Task" bucket of volunteer opportunities.

Another common example with an association is a "models and samples" resource library, where members have shared a variety of files like RFP templates and policy documents. Typically, these are files they have created as part of their day-to-day job. They did not necessarily create them for the community, but instead shared what they had created to help others in their jobs. In this instance, members who do "share" would be considered Micro-volunteers. On the other hand, if the member had crafted a file specifically for the rest of the members to use, then this would have been a much more substantial commitment and would be classified as a "Task" volunteer opportunity.

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Clearly there are some gray areas with how to classify various volunteer opportunities. This will become much clearer once the audit process starts and all opportunities identified.

The common characteristics found in Micro-volunteer opportunities are:

- Mission-related
- Discrete and/or small
- Non-hierarchical
- Of the moment—typically doesn't require application, screening or training period
- Synchronized mass mobilization
- Typically does not require an application process, screening or training period
- Takes only minutes or a few hours to complete
- Does not require an ongoing commitment by the volunteer—generally a one-time event

Issues Relating to the “Term” Volunteer Model

For most organizations, it's not an option to simply disband all standing committees due to politics, bylaws or other types of considerations. As a result, for most organizations Term-based volunteer opportunities are not disappearing, but many are expanding their volunteer roles to become more inclusive. Problems with the traditional Term-based model include but are not limited to:

- Too many volunteers for too few committee openings
- Members can no longer commit for long terms, so it limits the opportunities for large cadres of members
- Members may no longer be able to fulfill all the requisites to serve, i.e. attend in-person meetings or commit to a standing committee call
- Committee members may not be the best members to fulfill a specific task
- Decision-making is slowed down as the traditional committee encourages deliberation and may limit decisions to the annual planning meeting

CASE STUDIES:

American Society of Association Executives (ASAE)

ASAE is an organization that has embraced Task and Micro volunteerism. To address the Task-based volunteerism, it has created a hybrid governance structure, where they keep many of their more traditional governance groups, such as section councils, as well as provide a [platform for members to sign-up](#) to be notified of new Micro-volunteer opportunities. Staff are then encouraged to utilize this platform to post new and unconventional volunteer opportunities as they arise.

Here is a sample of opportunities ASAE posted to their pool of Micro-volunteers:

- CAEs attending Annual: Hosts needed in CAE lounge
- ASAE Political Action Committee (APAC) members

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- CAEs needed to participate in online CAE Cram Chat (for CAE candidates)
- Judges for the Power of "A" Awards Committee
- Associations Now readers/writers needed to provide monthly feedback (Writer's Pool)

To address the Micro-volunteers, ASAE utilized a points methodology, allowing them to assign point values to various types of micro-engagement. ASAE currently measures about 84 types of Micro engagement. They categorize each type of engagement as either passive (consumption) or active (contributor) engagement. A passive example is someone who simply looks at a page. While this is arguably a lower level of engagement, it's a necessary one because if members did not consume content, then the content would not be created. Contributory engagement is when members actually create content, such as posting a message to their forums or commenting on a blog.


National Council of University Research Administrators (NCURA)

NCURA embraced both Task and Micro volunteerism three years ago, and continuously increase the breadth of opportunities available for members to volunteer. Here are some conference-specific volunteer opportunities they recently posted in their online portal:

- Fitness Track: yoga, zumba and fun-run instructors
- Host city welcome committee member
- Tech team member
- New member breakfast round table host
- Meeting mentor

When creating Task-based volunteer opportunities, it's important to set realistic expectations regarding the opportunity, such as the estimated time commitment, travel requirements, deadlines and other relevant information. In the following example, NACURA recruited volunteers to teach a yoga class before sessions at their annual conference. Notice how much detail is being provided up-front and how expectations are clearly set.

Seeking: 55th Annual Meeting - Fitness Track Yoga Instructor



Type of Opportunity: Open Call for Volunteers
Application Deadline: 7/5/2013
Interest Area: Membership Engagement
Contact: Alissa Brower
Time Commitment: Quick Task (less than a day)
Travel Required: No travel required
Volunteer Category: Onsite Conference Volunteer
Level of Effort: Simple task
No. Of Applications Accepted: 2
Description:
This experienced, certified yoga instructor will meet participants at 7:00 pm on Monday during the Annual Meeting for an evening yoga exercise session that will release participants' stress and rejuvenate their spirits after a busy day of sessions. The yoga session will last 60-90 minutes, depending upon the leader and the participants, and begins at 7:00 pm after participants return from their evening dinner plans.

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Nonprofit Sector

As previously mentioned, the small gift of time makes a strong impact. The nonprofit sector first identified Micro-volunteering and pushed to embrace it right away. The examples below all create opportunities for time-stressed individuals to make a meaningful contribution to the cause, without major time commitments. Associations can learn from some of these organizations:

- NASA Citizen Scientists
- Audubon Society - Christmas Bird Count
- Public Insight Network – Citizen Journalists
- Help from Home
- ALS Ice Bucket Challenge

The nonprofit sector not only provides us a look at how to fashion Micro-opportunities, but it has also spawned a variety of tools to help coordinate and direct the process:

- <http://www.sparked.com> (Instant talent pool, virtual, skills-based volunteering and tracking)
- <http://www.conecomm.com/microadvocacy> (Charity Miles, Donate Your Desktop)
- <http://ivolunteer.com> (Sign up and manage volunteers for functions and events)
- The Extraordinaries (An app that lets you do good in your spare time)

MEASURING ENGAGEMENT: REPORTING, MOTIVATING AND RECOGNITION

Most organizations have some form of reporting that can be tied to their members. For example, it's generally easy to pull a report for a specific member to see which committees they've served on and in what capacity. If the organization has embraced Task-volunteerism, then the report would potentially be longer. If the report included Micro-volunteer activities, then it would result in too much information, despite being holistic, and would not be practical to report on groups of members in a meaningful way.

To get around this problem, many organizations are using a points system, where they assign points to any and all types of volunteer opportunities.

From a reporting perspective, an organization might just look at the type and quantity of engagement points generated this month, as compared to previous months. It allows an organization to detect trends and measure performances of individuals, groups, events, advocacy campaigns and the overall organization.

Points can be used to motivate volunteers by leveraging "gamification," or in some cases "Shamification" techniques. Points can also play an important part in being able to provide recognition, even if it's something as simple as a digital "pat on the back" (i.e. thank you email for their service and value to the community). Many organizations use points to continuously showcase members who have provided value to the organization in varying capacities.

Show Your Volunteers Love

Higher Logic created a Pinterest Board with over 100 pins of creative ideas to reward volunteers leaders.

www.pinterest.com/higherlogic/volunteer-appreciation

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The following is a brief look at the practice of point assignments:

Assigning Points

Start with organizational value. How will the point values you assign tie into supporting the overall strategic objectives of the organization? For example, if the organization has a primary objective focused around advocacy, perhaps they would assign more points to members who attended the in-person event on the "Hill" than they would for serving on a committee?

Try to start arbitrarily. Decide to assign 100 points to anyone who serves on the Membership committee for a year. Remember that this point value needs to make sense when compared with other types of Task and Micro-volunteer opportunities, such as writing an article for a newsletter, speaking at a conference, responding to an online discussion posting or completing a survey. Would it make sense to assign 50 points to someone who completes a survey and 100 points for serving on a committee for a year? To look at it another way, does a member who completes two surveys provide as much value to the organization as someone who has served on a committee for a year? Decide which ranking system makes sense for both your members' volunteering activity and your organizational goals.



4 Steps to Measuring Engagement

Armed with an understanding on how to categorize and measure engagement, what's the best approach to implementing this at an association? Keeping in mind that this is an iterative process that should be frequently revisited, here are four relatively simple steps to build a points system:

1. Identify every possible element of volunteerism a member might participate in, and consider asking staff members from each department to brainstorm the list.
2. Review technical capabilities and what can actually be measured (keeping in mind to measure more in the future).
3. Based on what the association wants and can measure, identify which elements are important and will help move the organization's mission and vision.
4. Create a "Matrix of Engagement," incorporating all of the activities identified in #3 above and ranking them in order of importance. Keep in mind how tied they are to the mission and vision of the organization, together with the amount of time involved and skills that the job requires.

After completing the above, the final step is to actively track points using the previously created matrix of engagement. After completing over several months, it's important to test the matrix by looking at the engagement results, to ensure the members with the most and least points reflect the members who have generated the most or least value for the organization.

Incorporating Quality

Measuring quality and factoring it into point weightings can be hard. To help offset the risk of taking on too much, too soon, don't try to incorporate the "quality" element until the "Matrix of Engagement" has been thoroughly tested out, tracked and reported on points over a period of several months.

Once comfortable that member (point based) rankings demonstrate a true reflection over what is important to the organization, try to refine those points by incorporating quality.

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Why Quality?

An organization may have many volunteer opportunities filled by members, but not all members perform well, and so the level of value they generated may differ. Some organizations don't measure this at all, and those that do typically use it as a latter part of their "measurement" initiative. Here are some examples of how quality may be incorporated into the various types of volunteerism:

- **Term:** A common way of measuring the quality of Term-based volunteerism is to use performance evaluations. These might be self-evaluations or perhaps evaluations completed by staff or the chair of the committee.
- **Task:** Task-based volunteerism really depends on the volunteer opportunity itself. For example, a member who speak at an event can be measured by the session evaluations (another type of peer evaluation) or perhaps by a group of members who have volunteered to help welcome new members. Consider using a transactional "Net Promoter Score" survey to have the new member grade how well they were welcomed.
- **Micro:** From a Micro-volunteerism perspective, when looking at the early example of a member who responds to a discussion group, those messages can have quality measured via peer endorsements. Example: the number of people who "Recommended" a discussion posting or who marked it as the "Best Answer".

While none of these elements are foolproof, association engagement typically contains much greater accountability than the more traditional public facing networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) and as a result, direct member feedback and peer endorsements can usually be trusted much more. It's also much easier for the organization to measure.

Depending on how point weightings are set up, if quality is measured then peer endorsements or positive evaluations can result in more points being assigned to various members (because the member generated more value for the organization).

Recognizing Volunteerism

Regardless of the type of volunteerism, if a member is generating value for the organization, they should be recognized. Rather than rely on the "once per year" conference where members might get ribbons added to their badges, consider leveraging digital ribbons or badging to recognize them all year round on your website, in your member directory or wherever else they might be listed (i.e. committee rosters).

In the same way that volunteerism should be more inclusive and involve every member who generates value for the organization, so should recognition. It's important to thank members as this not only increases satisfaction but will also help encourage the member to become even more engaged with the organization.

Digital Badge and Ribbon Examples:



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SUMMARY

Based on the research of the ASAE Executive Management Section Council (EMSC), as well as other independent studies such as MGI's recent [Membership and Marketing Benchmarking Report](#), associations are trying to evolve by becoming more nimble with how they identify, recognize and embrace member volunteers.

When the EMSC embarked on its journey to look at the changing volunteer, they promised this would be a continuing exploration. They have set up a Collaborate group, Rebuilding the Volunteer Spirit, to continue the conversations and gather resources. As noted in the [Mission Driven Volunteer](#) white paper, authored by Peggy Hoffman CAE and Elizabeth Engel CAE, the shift associations have to make to move from the traditional model of volunteering to one that responds to today's volunteer, is about implementing a true mission-driven volunteer program. It should explore the strategy and provide insight into how associations are making the shift. The goal is simply to democratize volunteering, allowing for more people to participate and to create their own opportunities—and thus build a deep engagement in our associations.

By looking outside of the “volunteer box”, associations are able to engage more volunteers with more flexible and targeted volunteer opportunities. Many associations already have volunteers giving their time and expertise in a micro-capacity, but until now they have received little to no recognition for their efforts.

To address these opportunities, organizations are taking a more holistic approach to the definition of volunteerism. By becoming more inclusive with how volunteers are defined and identified, associations are now able to recognize and showcase their volunteer leaders using innovative recognition techniques.

Associations are encouraged to start the process by performing an inventory of all areas where members contribute value to the organization, including things such as abstract submissions, authors of magazine articles and reviewers of journals, and then start the process of measuring while at the same time ensuring volunteers remain mission and vision-focused. Finally, recognize and thank members for all they do. That holistic approach to embracing volunteerism will likely result in greater member satisfaction and improved member retention.

SPECIAL THANKS

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Higher Logic's Connected Community™ enables organizations to build dynamic, engaged and happy communities with a purpose-built collaboration platform. To see Connected Community in action, visit www.higherlogic.com and schedule a demo.

Save-The-Date for National Volunteer Appreciation Week!

National Volunteer Appreciation week (April 6-12, 2014) is all about taking action and encouraging individuals and their respective communities to be at the center of social change—discovering and actively demonstrating their collective power to make a difference. This week is the perfect opportunity to celebrate! That's right, plan to inspire, recognize and reward those volunteer leaders, ad hoc project groups and committee members.