

## **Ethics Q&A: The Ethical Volunteer**

**Jane Garthson**

**Q.** I have skills and expertise that I think nonprofits could use, and would like to help my community. However, I have many family and business commitments to juggle. What's the ethical approach for someone like me?

### **Answer**

So many of us lead complicated lives, and time is a very precious commodity. Thank you for wanting to give some of it away.

First, please do understand that while our community benefit organizations could not possibly run without volunteers, not every nonprofit is able to accept your volunteer offer at the time you offer it. There is a cost for organizations to accept volunteers - to screen, orient, train, manage, supervise, retain, recognize and provide supplies. The organizations have to define what they are looking for, and put their volunteer management resources towards recruiting and retaining the volunteers that fit their current priorities and will get the best results for the community. They may not have your skills on their list. Do not get discouraged if you have to contact several.

Your local Volunteer Centre (check local listings; they usually include the name of the city, region, county or district) can help you find a good match; start there if you don't already have an organization in mind. If you are contacting individual organizations, the Volunteer Manager may not be kept fully in the loop (unfortunately) about what high level skills the senior management team or board has identified as needed in the coming year. If your skills involve working with leaders, you may want to get referred to the Executive Director.

Second, your interest in using your skills will likely only be maintained if you are passionate about the cause. Be open to learning about new causes and organizations, but find one that touches your heart. Otherwise, your other priorities will likely overwhelm your volunteer commitments.

Speaking of being overwhelmed, take care to only promise what you can deliver. If you cannot make a long term commitment or set aside specific times for regular volunteering, then stick to short-term volunteering, at least at first. Many people find it easier to commit to task-oriented volunteering, such as special events planning. However, some find this less satisfying. You have neither the client contact that comes from direct service volunteering nor the bigger picture of how the event fits into the organization's plans and programs; you can gain that through volunteering on boards and ongoing committees.

Third, think about whether your skills are right for the nonprofit sector. If you have only done corporate or government work, have you done your research about how the nonprofit sector differs? You probably need to learn how to adapt and expand your skills and knowledge. Don't assume that because the organizations and budgets are smaller that their needs are less complex

or their issues easier to solve - in fact, it is usually the opposite. And be prepared to learn at least as much from the organizations you help as they learn from you. I don't want to discourage you from offering - believe me, I don't! - but I have seen business and government people try to impose quite inappropriate processes in nonprofits. You don't want to be one of those! Luckily, such learning can be done at your own pace, and you may find ideas to use in and enhance your paid work.

Alternatively, start with direct service volunteering, for which the organization likely has an organized orientation program. Get to know the organization, and see where your skills could be helpful.

If you belong to a professional organization, consider joining the nonprofit special interest group, or seek advice from colleagues who specialize in nonprofits. Look also for *recent* books in your area of expertise written specifically for the voluntary sector, as well as online resources of course. Linked In, for example, has groups for nonprofit professionals.

Also, be prepared to use your skills differently from how you use them at work. If you are an accountant, and the organization has financial staff, you aren't needed for day to day financial management. But you can be wonderfully valuable on a committee or board asking good questions about the audit scope and findings, the investment policy and the financial controls.

If you plan to function as a pro bono consultant rather than join a task force, board or committee, then consider how you will consult. If you already have a practice, remember that this is a professional assignment. Once you take it on, you owe the organization the same effort, professionalism and commitment to deadlines that you would give to any paid assignment. If you are not accustomed to functioning as a consultant, ask the organization or a colleague for a sample contract you can adapt to your project. Or work through an organization that specializes in consultant volunteers, like the Canadian Executive Service Organization, where someone else does the administration and helps find you assignments that are a good fit for your skills and interests. I think you'll find that a better way to start.

Finally, we are usually happiest when all parts of our lives fit together and make a whole life. Can you find volunteering in an organization where your family could get involved too? Can you help the business where you work become a better corporate citizen, perhaps by arranging corporate volunteering teams? Instead of juggling, fit the pieces together!

And again, thank you so much for being willing to share your skills to make your community better.