



Personal and Professional Growth

Volunteering can be beneficial to both the recipient and the volunteer. Given that I also have to make a living, I only have so much time to dedicate to volunteer activities, making prioritization necessary. While my particular motivations may not apply to you, volunteers should consciously consider for what they are volunteering and use some method to manage their set of volunteer opportunities.

As new opportunities to volunteer come to me (or I seek them out), I have to decide whether this particular opportunity is something to which I can effectively contribute and whether it is something to which I would like to contribute. I certainly don't feel obligated to help with a volunteer opportunity just because I've been asked. Occasionally, these opportunities have a hidden agenda, such as trying to get you to contribute money or provide information about your organization that should not be shared. So, it's wise to be suspicious of an unknown organization. On the other hand, if it's a real and valuable opportunity, there's little risk in investing some time to see if it may be a valuable use of your time and effort.

One risk is volunteering for activities that you either don't have the time or ability to effectively contribute. If you do try to contribute nonetheless, you will significantly reduce your relationship with the organization and probably not be asked to volunteer for more rewarding activities. It's often easy to volunteer for a specific activity without overcommitting your time in the future. This way you can sample the activity. One example is that I will often volunteer to give a presentation or lecture to a student group, without committing to long-term support or effort, and in the process get to understand the scope and intent of that group, in the event that I would like to volunteer further.

Managing your volunteer portfolio

My current portfolio of volunteering revolves around activities that support my professional development and career. I currently volunteer for various professional societies (including

Digital Object Identifier 10.1109/MPOT.2009.933510



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the IEEE), academic program accreditation, various local support activities (like judging at science fairs), and activities related to my alma maters. Surprisingly, I've been involved in many of these activities for 20 years or more. I've found it useful to create strong relationships with those organizations I respect, which gives me more opportunities to help them out by volunteering.

I prefer to look at this set of volunteer activities as a portfolio of activities that I manage over time. I'm constantly looking for new opportunities where my time can be better invested and occasionally remove myself from activities that are a less valuable use of my time. As part of this strategy, I'll occasionally volunteer for an activity, just to see if I'll like it.

A recent example is when I volunteered to help review books for the Stanford University's (one of my alma maters) William Saroyan International Prize for Writing. It was not clear to me if it would be a rewarding use of my time, but it turned out to be somewhat fun. It's not directly connected to my professional career, but it's still fun to be involved in the selection of the prize and I've volunteered to help next year.

What do I get out of it?

For me, the primary motivation is being able to influence and help with the activity itself. Secondarily, it's important

A voluntary
decision **Kim Tracy**



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Engineers Without Borders volunteers help erect a solar energy project for a hospital in Rwanda.

that my activities have some relationship to my primary career rather than having no relation at all. I much prefer some consistency of activity as that tends to allow my level of contribution to be higher. I'm also able to know and interact with a lot of folks that form a useful professional network to potentially further enhance my professional career. This network can result in paid opportunities as well as other volunteer opportunities.

One example is my work as a program evaluator on behalf of ABET, where I help accredit computer science, software engineering, and information technology academic programs. In this activity, I can directly influence the academic program being evaluated by assessing it against ABET's criteria. I'm able to add my perspective to their program. Given that I work in information technology at my university (as well as teach), I also get a lot of useful ideas from the program and university being accredited. Additionally, I often form relationships with the faculty and administrators at the university being accredited that last for years beyond the visit itself. This is a great activity for me and does not require a lot of effort, given all the benefits I receive.

Student value

Volunteering as a student has additional benefits that can have long-lasting value. In particular, it can have

Volunteering can have direct career-related benefits and can open up a professional network that you may not otherwise be able to access.

direct career-related benefits and can open up a professional network that you may not otherwise be able to access. When you are early in your career, you can volunteer for organizations where others in your field can see and appreciate your work ethic as well as your abilities. Since these other volunteers already know you and your work, they are more likely to consider you for other positions. You're also likely to have a bit more time (though you may not believe that now) to dedicate where you can try many alternate volunteering opportunities and see how they work for you.

Volunteering with professional societies (such as the IEEE) gives you direct interactions with those in your chosen career. For the IEEE, the Graduate Student Member grade gives you the ability to

serve as officers in the section or in a technical society.

When to quit

Occasionally, I find it necessary to back out of a volunteer activity. As noted above, my primary motivation is to be able to contribute and influence the activity. When that dissipates, I find the activity less valuable and difficult for me to justify my time expenditure on the activity (even if it still has the other benefits). I really don't like to participate in activities that are frustrating or do not accomplish their stated goals.

One example of this kind of activity is a group with which I've been involved that had in the past been very active and had been able to do some amazing things in support of the receiving organization.

Recently, this group has become completely ineffective and has had no influence. My efforts have not been sufficient to get them back on the right track. Rather than waste my time with this group, I've postponed any involvement with the group until they get back on track. It still pains me, as the goal of the group is still a useful one, but the current structure of the group needs to be changed before I can add value again.

Value your time

Your time and effort is valuable, and as you progress in your career, it will become even more so. You'll get lots of opportunities to volunteer, and it's important to make those choices as wisely as other personal and career choices. The above discussion was highly personalized and focuses on my particulars, yet managing your opportunities as a portfolio and being aware of why these opportunities are rewarding to you is universal to anyone who volunteers. Volunteering is not a one-way street but needs to reward (in some way) the volunteer as well as the organization.

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