

Volunteer to Accelerate Your Career

By John West Hadley



I believe we owe it to society to give back to the communities in which we live and work. This helps to keep our communities vital, allows us to have influence on how those communities develop and the ethical framework within which they operate, and keeps us connected to others.

Volunteer efforts also help infuse your life with things you are passionate about. They give you a chance to really explore what is important to you, and to feel like you are making a significant contribution.

This is a particularly effective remedy to job apathy. By including a passion in your weekly routine, you re-establish balance in your life, which often spills over into renewed passion about your job as well. It often also leads to new insights into how to better align your career with your life goals. (It may even open you to completely new career options you never considered possible.)

Here are 10 ways in which volunteering can help accelerate either your career or your career search:

1. **Recharging** - It provides a place where you are able to get involved in something satisfying, and puts your focus on something bigger than yourself.

2. Feeling you are contributing counterbalances hits you've taken to your self-esteem from losing out on a promotion, getting a bad performance review, being laid off, sending out tons of résumés with few responses, or going on interviews and never getting the offer you want.
3. It builds confidence so critical to your search, and to how people perceive you on the job.
4. It gives you a chance to develop a new set of allies for your search and your career.
5. Volunteering is a great leveler - you get to connect with people at very high levels in various organizations, and who know a wide spectrum of potentially helpful contacts.
6. Attending volunteer initiatives can be a very casual, non-threatening way to 'network,' one that's not just 'about you'.
7. It sets you up in others' eyes in a whole new (positive) light.
8. It gives you a chance to build skills and adds to your portfolio of accomplishments that will help you sell yourself for any new opportunity.
9. It fills gaps in your work history.
10. It shows people what you can do, which can often lead to offers to do similar things for pay.

It's interesting that despite all the benefits, particularly in these economic times when job seekers need every edge they can get, so many miss the boat. I can only conclude that they are so worried about their own situations, and so focused on everything they need to do to get their next job, that they forget about all the ways volunteering can actually help them achieve their goals.

Some time back, an article in the Sunday *New York Times* ("Doing Well in Your Career By Doing Good Outside It"), cited the case of an operations manager who spent four weeks doing volunteer work in an impoverished community as part of UPS's community internship program. He reported that it improved his team-building and problem-solving skills and made him a more sensitive manager. He later was one of only eight UPS executives nationwide chosen to train 3,000 supervisors in communication skills.

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In my own career, I have been drawn to educational initiatives. Initially it was to support my children's schools in the usual way, through PTO membership, but quickly led to a variety of committees and community activities, and ultimately to several leadership roles that gave me a great deal of personal satisfaction and forged many deep friendships. Somerville, N.J. was transformed from the place we happen to reside into our true home!

Similarly, raising my hand at an SOA meeting resulted in a series of leadership roles in the predecessor committee to the Management and Personal Development Section. I believe this was the initial snowball rolling down the hill that led to my current successful career coaching business.

Many people starting out try to build their résumés through paid or unpaid internship programs, and often face stiff competition in seeking those positions. One client reported a case where he had applied for an internship at CISCO, and found out he was one of 3,000 applicants!

In such cases, volunteer work can also be effective. Steven Rothberg, president of CollegeRecruiter, was quoted as saying *"Employers don't care how much you were paid to work; they want evidence you can perform the job."*

And another example from the article I cited above: The VP for HR at a medical marketing firm hired a college graduate without any experience, saying, *"She volunteered as a student for an organization that did drug and alcohol prevention for teens and became their youngest board member. She also ran fund-raising programs for a cancer research organization. It showed me she was a very dedicated person and she had developed skills in planning she wouldn't have had otherwise. Absent that, we wouldn't have considered her."*

Now, there are good and bad ways to go about your volunteer activities. Make sure you avoid these six common traps:

1. Don't volunteer just because someone asked you to. Look for an opportunity that aligns well with your passions and your goals.
2. Don't over-commit. (This is especially easy to do if you've done a good job with #1!) Watch for the time commitment that you can manage around your search or job. If you are in a job search, especially guard your 9-5 time, since that is the key networking meeting and interviewing time.
3. Seek out volunteer activities that will help you in concrete ways, such as:
 - a. Developing skills that will make you more marketable.
 - b. Giving you strong 'accomplishment stories' that you can use to strengthen critical areas in your background or areas of expertise.
 - c. Putting you in regular contact with influential people who can help you in your search or career.
4. Don't push too hard or too soon on the networking opportunities that arise. Let people first see that you are very committed and adding value before you try to enlist them as powerful allies.
5. Don't complain about the rest of your life, your job, your career search or even how the organization is going about its charge. You want people to see you as upbeat and confident, someone they would want on their team or would want to refer to someone else's team.
6. Don't let someone's position intimidate you. You are likely to find yourself elbow to elbow with CEOs and other senior officers, political figures and people who have a wide range of influential contacts. The fact that they see you volunteering for a cause to which they are also committed will incline them to want to help you, making it fairly easy to connect.

I urge everyone to look for ways you can get involved in outside initiatives that will help you feel like you are making a real contribution, while also building your résumé and skills. If not, you may find yourself fulfilling this quote by the novelist Catherine Aird:

"If you can't be a good example, then you'll just have to be a horrible warning." ●



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