

The Journey to Good Works

Even a halting pace over a lifetime constitutes progress

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ONE QUESTION SURVEY

What's the major reason that you don't volunteer more? (Choose one)

- No one asks me to
- I don't have the time
- I'm already doing my part
- One person can't make a difference
- I donate money instead of time
- I had a bad experience volunteering

REACT TO THIS STORY

Agree? Disagree? Stop sounding off to your computer screen! Instead, share your point of view on this subject with our readers.



JUGGLE THIS

TELL A FRIEND

You've been asking for an easy way to share these articles with friends since Day One. To which we reply, "Uncle!"

When I was 16 I volunteered for a program that gave developmentally disabled children the opportunity to ride horses. I liked horses. I also liked the idea of getting out of two hours of class every Wednesday.

I was unprepared, however, for the 10-year-old girl who wore Depends and for her drooling friend, whose garbled speech I couldn't understand. I didn't know how to relate to them and I felt awkward and incompetent. I quit after the second week.

I didn't volunteer again for a long time because I had generalized that experience and decided that I just wasn't good at organized volunteering. That wasn't the case, of course. I just hadn't done my homework.

When it comes to volunteering, even a little homework goes a long way. If you know something about the organization and many things about yourself, and if you know what to look for, anyone can be good at volunteering--and experience the satisfaction that comes from helping others in the process.

Buddy, can you spare a minute?

In this day and age, not many people would say they have the time to volunteer and yet 56% of adults volunteered in 1998. That's the highest rate of volunteerism in a decade. Apparently, people who volunteer have done what all those time management books and systems tell you to do: they've decided that volunteering is important to them and then they've *made* time for it.

It doesn't have to be a lot of time. CharityGuide.org has ideas on how to make a difference in one minute, 15 minutes, a couple of hours, and during vacation. It also has a plethora of

information on virtual volunteering and traditional volunteering. (VolunteerMatch.org is another good resource.)

Non-profit organizations are doing their part to meet busy volunteers halfway. They are opening their doors earlier and cutting volunteer jobs down into smaller, more manageable chunks to make it easier to volunteer. Even so, it's important to be honest with yourself and the organization about how much time you can give, otherwise you'll both end up frustrated.

Find the right fit

There are lots of worthy causes that covet your help, but take it from someone who has been there: Resist the urge to commit without thinking it through. The experts back me up on this. "Better a person waits for the right volunteer position than to jump into one they will hate and leave quickly," says Sue Vineyard, who has written a number of books on volunteerism and who trains volunteer administrators across the country. "Leaving can make a volunteer feel like a failure and cause problems for the people being served."

One way to increase your chances of a good fit is to take an organization for a test drive. Sign up for a small, short assignment in order to get an insider's look at the organization and the people who work there. Once you've completed that assignment, you can better decide if you want to make a commitment.

Feel connected to the cause

Wendy Gerber, whose grandfather founded Gerber Baby Foods and whose family has always been philanthropic, donates money to a variety of causes that reflect her values. When she finds a project she feels a special connection to, she donates her time, too, which adds another dimension to the satisfaction she feels.

The fairgrounds project in her hometown is a good example. When Gerber, who has fond memories of showing her horse at the fair and now breeds and shows performance horses, noticed that the grounds needed updating, she formed a group of representatives from the communities that use the fairgrounds. Eventually the group hopes to raise funds for an entirely new fairground.

"I give my time because I want to be more involved in determining the result," says Gerber. "I know how much a new fairgrounds could benefit the kids and I want to make sure that we do the best we can for them."

Define the payback

Beyond satisfying the vague desire to "give back," what is it that you want from the volunteer experience? It's a big question that's not all that easy to answer.

"Think about what you like to do and whether you'd like to use the skills you already have or learn some new ones," says Kimberli Meadows, director of Media Relations at the [Points of Light Foundation](#), a nonpartisan nonprofit organization

devoted to promoting volunteerism on the local level.

"Maybe you're good on the computer but you'd like to learn about accounting. Find someplace where you can combine the two."

Stay reasonably close to your comfort zone

If parking in an unfamiliar section of your town at night makes you nervous, don't fight it. Find a volunteer opportunity in the suburbs. "If you're not comfortable with a situation, you'll find reasons not to volunteer and that won't help anyone," says Meadows.

Get specific about the specifics

In many ways, finding the right volunteer position is similar to finding the right paying position. Says Vineyard, "Volunteers need to have a clear understanding of the work to be done, the expectations the agency has of them, the support and training they will have during their assignment, the duration of the assignment, who they will be serving, and how they will be evaluated."

On top of all those considerations, "take a hard look at how organized the leadership of the organization is," says Vineyard. When she's training volunteer administrators, she tells them that there is an 11th Commandment: "Thou shalt get thy act together!" Do what you can to make sure you're teaming up with an organization that won't squander your time.

Have realistic expectations

For many people, the biggest obstacle to volunteering is a psychological one: how much of a difference can one person make? It's an "if I can't do everything then I may as well do nothing" mentality that's understandable. "There's a feeling of insignificance that comes from knowing so much about how much need there is around the world," says Dirk Holkeboer, the executive director of Lakeshore [Habitat for Humanity](#) in Holland, Michigan.

The way to get past this is to think small. When his two sons were young, Holkeboer and his wife would take them out behind their Miami apartment building to pick up trash every week.

His sons once asked why, since no one picked up trash in the next block and there would be trash on their own block again the next week. Holkeboer told them, "You do it because it's the right thing and everyone needs to do their part."

Giving five percent of your time isn't going to change the world, but if a lot of people gave five percent, it would create societal change. What you can do is set an example and hope that others follow it.

Feeling guilty yet?

Don't. You may already be doing more than you think. If you're doing anything that benefits a person, group, or cause without the incentive of monetary gain, you're volunteering. That includes helping a neighbor move, taking a meal to a

family that's had a tragedy, and being president of your parent-teacher organization.

Until I started my research for this article, I felt that such activities didn't "count." Some are just so much a part of what a decent person does that it doesn't feel like volunteering. Others, like helping out in my child's classroom, felt too self-serving. I'm there primarily for my child and that doesn't seem selfless enough to count.

When I broached the subject of what counted with Vineyard, she told me (in the nicest way possible) to get over it. "There are no sub-categories or distant cousins here, no pure or impure volunteering," she said.

And then there was the e-mail from my friend Mary: "So, does Katie Couric's campaign for colon cancer awareness not count because her husband died from it? Does Christopher Reeves' battle for stem cell research not count because he'd benefit? How about Elton John and AIDs, since he's gay?"

All right, already. I get it.

Christine MacLean, editor of Jugglezine, is working on adding volunteering to her [portfolio life](#).

REACT TO THIS STORY

Your message

Name (required) E-mail (required)
Title Company

Reactions, which may be edited for length, will appear within a few days. Please be respectful of others. Please be brief. Bonus points for making your point *and* making us smile.

Forcing you to leave your e-mail address makes you nervous, right? It's the editor's fault. She wants to be able to contact you if she needs clarification on your reaction.

Send

Reactions to "The Journey to Good Works"

In our building we have a cancer unit, and several other volunteer agencies. I am very involved but am finding I do not have enough time to keep on due to bad health. Still do lots...

Barbara Samuels
Retired

I chair the school council at the school that my step-daughter attends. It is a grade 6,7 & 8. school. Many parents believe that at that age the school doesn't need volunteers or that the kids don't want them there because it's not cool. Believe me - administrators and staff need volunteers to help at this age. You don't have to be in the classroom with your child or even in a classroom for that matter. Just go and volunteer at the school. You will enjoy it and the job you do will be very

appreciated!

Volunteering is important! Make the time!

Debra Bullis
Communication & Training Liaison, TeamInteriors

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I loved the part about "does it count?" A question I've been asking myself. Always good to know that others struggle with the same head games.

I've always believed that if everyone volunteered for just one project at a time, whatever it is, think what an amazing difference that would make. I am acquainted with people who feel compelled to "do it all", and as a result, they do nothing well.

Lets ALL get out there and do one something.

Diane Brandli
Senior Interior Designer, Ashley McGraw Architects

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Good story, very touching and inspiring. I need to start doing some volunteer work. Thanks for the inspiration.

Baljit Dhaliwal
Rosemead High School, Rosemead, Ca 91770

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Thanks for all the work in bringing us this magazine. I have enjoyed it.

Rewards do come from making the most of the hours we volunteer. With the right balance in our day to day use of time we can be an asset to our employer and our family and friends.

I used to work through lunch and weekends on deadline projects. Sometimes feeling it was necessary to spend every ounce of time and energy beyond the point of burn out.

I now have found that with the "rest" in my life, I am able to provide a better quality to others at work, at home, and in the community around me. That it is the time of service to others that put energy in my life and quality in my time.

Debbie Lee
Project Designer, HMWR-DFW

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