PART ONE

Changing Times
Chapter 1

Big Shifts That Will Change Volunteerism for the Better

Tobi Johnson, MA, CVA
President, Tobi Johnson & Associates

“The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.”

Fifteen years ago, I was given the opportunity to build my first nonprofit program from scratch. At the time, I was short on experience but had enthusiasm and ideas to spare. Fortunately, the leadership team at Larkin Street Youth Center decided to take a chance. Founded in 1984, Larkin Street had already grown an impressive continuum of services and a solid reputation with San Francisco’s street youth. The link between housing, support services, and lasting employment, however, was yet to be made. So, I set about developing a workforce-development program for homeless youth.

Larkin Street’s team of dedicated social workers created a culture of youth empowerment through acceptance, encouragement, and a little bit of tough love. The youth responded in kind, some so committed they returned to job readiness class every morning even when they slept in Golden Gate Park the night before. It was truly inspiring, but we also needed to reach outside our walls for support. Our clients needed additional champions to believe in their potential.
When we asked, people helped. A team of volunteer attorneys from the San Francisco Bar Association became our first group of mentors. Employee volunteers from Bain & Company organized a job readiness fair. Employers like Macy’s hosted informational interviews and hired youth for internships. Community volunteers helped as tutors in our GED and college-prep classrooms. Because of the first year of success—impossible without this level of volunteer and community involvement—our primary funder committed to multiyear support.

Fifteen years later, Hire Up continues to help homeless youth find a way off the streets. A lot has changed since then, but in some respects, much remains the same. The help that communities can offer remains critical to nonprofit success, and volunteers still willingly contribute their skills and talents to good causes. At the same time, the world has changed dramatically. Some might view the complexity of today’s era as a liability. I see new advances as opportunities to forge even deeper connections with supporters who can offer so much value, helping lift programs, such as Hire Up, off the ground and keep them running.

Today, I help my consulting clients strengthen their own volunteer programs. Over the years, the social sector has experienced an evolution in the needs of volunteers, and our responses to those needs are transforming our practice.

**Today’s Consumer Is Tomorrow’s Volunteer**

We live in a complex era. Paradoxical themes of anxiety, self-help, rebellion, and collaboration are crosscurrents that embody today’s experience. Futurists highlight many trends that may seem contradictory, such as:

- Superpersonalization versus “clanning” and tribes
- Indulgence and luxury versus environmentalism
- Focus on self- versus social awareness
- Escapism versus wellness and health consciousness
- Hyperconnectivity and multitasking versus simplification and mindfulness

In spite of these tensions, or perhaps because of them, a “socially conscious consumer” has emerged. Ideas like fair trade, sustainable consumption, farm-to-table, and ethical fashion are gaining popularity, as the public strives to express their values and perhaps reconcile conflicting emotions. In turn, this trend has
stimulated increased interest in corporate social responsibility and cause marketing, which offer even more choices to act on one’s ideals.

We are in the midst of other big shifts in business, technology, psychology, and communities as well. Although consumers present a range of reactions to the speed and breadth of change—from joyous early adopters to anxious resisters—all have increasingly sophisticated expectations from the world around them. This extends to the nonprofits they choose to support. In this environment, volunteer programs are particularly vulnerable.

This chapter is intended to inspire deeper thinking about the current and future contexts of volunteer engagement and community involvement. By examining and capitalizing on new trends and recent discoveries across a wide range of disciplines, we can collectively revamp and refresh the field of volunteerism for the better. Each big trend that follows is accompanied by several ideas for action. Is your organization ready to harness the power of tomorrow’s social citizens?

**What Can Volunteerism Lose to Win?**

Although there has been substantial growth in new nonprofits in the United States, expanding from 1.32 million to 1.44 million from 2002 to 2012 (an increase of 8.6 percent), volunteer involvement in organizations has decreased slightly and is at its lowest since 2002 (at 25.4 percent), and annual volunteer hours have been declining slightly.3

Altruism, on the other hand, appears to be on the rise. In 2011, over 65 percent of citizens said they helped their friends and neighbors (an increase of 9.5 percent over the previous year).4 Although it is not entirely clear what is driving this trend, it may indicate that community participation is alive and well, but that current offers to volunteers by nonprofits lack appeal. It also suggests that informal, self-directed volunteering (“freelance philanthropy”) and the flexibility and autonomy it allows may be preferred.

As society evolves, so, too, must volunteerism. Old habits die hard, but letting go helps make way for new ideas and unforeseen discoveries. Legacy mindsets may be obstacles to progress and bear examining, such as:

- Focus on individual volunteers versus team approaches
- Over-reliance on long-term volunteer placements over project-based work
Increasing rigidity versus flexible, nimble management

Reluctance to accept risks inherent in innovation

Unequal power dynamics between organizations and citizens in planning and implementation of community solutions

Assumption that answers to challenges must (or will) come from within our sector

The world will continue to revolutionize and renew itself, and we must heed the call for transformation. To break new ground, cross-disciplinary thinking is useful, along with a willingness to experiment and learn from failure.

**Big Trend: New Insights from Brain Science**

With the advent of imaging technology, scientists have made monumental leaps in what we understand about how our brains work. In the growing field of neuroscience, researchers have only scratched the surface, but several recent discoveries hold promise for volunteer organizations.

All human brains, not affected by trauma or illness, operate in the same way, regardless of culture, language, geography, or any other trait. Over 95 percent of our emotions, learning, and decision making occurs on the subconscious, rather than on the rational, level. Organizations are using these discoveries to their advantage, paying close attention to the “ecology of experience” that workers and customers encounter. Some have been deliberately designed for behavior change, working to create brain-friendly workplaces and using brain science to help guide marketing decisions and generate more persuasive ad copy.

**The Compassionate Instinct**

Despite being characterized as selfish in nature, new findings show that humans actually have a “compassionate instinct.” Compassion is an emotional response to suffering and involves an authentic desire to help. When we alleviate another’s pain, or even watch someone else assist, the brain’s reward center lights up.

The adage “giving is better than receiving” applies anywhere the world, regardless of country or socioeconomic status. Scientists argue that compassion is deeply imbedded in human nature and has helped us survive as a species. Compassion is also contagious. When we perform compassionate acts, our heart
rate slows and hormones are released that promote bonding and a feeling of “elevation.” The more one experiences or witnesses compassion, the more likely they are to act compassionately.

With the rise of the socially conscious consumer, our compassionate instinct now manifests itself in society. Volunteer programs can also inspire and channel our natural inclinations to help by making examples of their benefits to the community even more public.

**Neuroleadership Models**

Neuroleadership is an emerging field that uses brain science to better understand how to motivate, influence, and lead others. Researchers argue that minimizing danger and maximizing reward is a key organizing principle of the brain. The urge to approach possible rewards and avoid potential threats is deeply ingrained.

The SCARF Model, developed by neuroleadership theorists, is based on addressing the threats and rewards that are most important. The model includes five domains that activate the brain’s circuitry:

1. Status—our relative importance to others
2. Certainty—our ability to predict the future
3. Autonomy—our sense of control over events
4. Relatedness—our sense of safety with others
5. Fairness—our perception of fair exchanges between people

Neuroleadership has particular value in leading volunteers, and its remedy is simple. The more we perceive reward, the more we are able to collaborate and influence others. The more we feel threatened, the less likely we will be able to successfully team. Some volunteer management and training methods may unwittingly stymie the perception of reward for volunteers.

**The Power of Peers**

Peers as well as leaders influence behavior. Researchers now assert that group dynamics are even more powerful than we realized. No matter what our age, we are heavily influenced by what others think, and we have a fundamental need to maintain in good standing within our groups. Scientists argue that this desire to belong has evolved from a basic need for survival.
Although most of the time we maintain our standing, there is often a conflict between what we find enjoyable and what the group expects. Threat detection, as with the SCARF Model, becomes an important social skill. We scan our environment to determine whether there are signs of social acceptance and use these clues to monitor and adjust our actions accordingly.

The broadcast power of social media can magnify the effects of peer influence, both positively and negatively. Within volunteer programs, we can mitigate peer influence and reduce the stress of peer pressure by making organizational norms clear for new volunteers and fostering a culture of acceptance.

**Ideas for Action**

- Foster altruism by sharing stories (in videos and photographs) that exemplify compassion in action.
- Invite prospective volunteers to participate in a group volunteer project before they join to inspire compassion and commitment.
- Design volunteer onboarding so that it reduces threat and increases certainty and relatedness.
- Involve volunteers directly in strategic planning so they have increased certainty about the future.
- Review volunteer program policies to ensure that each is perceived as fair and equitable.
- Expand levels of autonomy to match a volunteer’s knowledge and life experience.
- Use volunteer mentors to decode “unwritten rules” for newcomers.
- Train volunteer-led recruitment teams and speakers’ bureaus.

**Big Trend: Demographic and Generational Changes**

Demographic shifts will undoubtedly affect society and volunteerism. By 2060, the United States will, for the first time, be comprised of more people of color than whites. Recent immigrants will make up more than a third of the
population. Our population is also aging. By 2060, there will be as many age 85 as age 5, transforming the traditional age pyramid to an almost perfect square.\(^7\)

### The Myth of Generational Differences in the Workplace\(^8\)

Although much has been made of the differences between generations in the workplace (Greatest Generation, baby boomers, Generation X, and millennials), research has been unable to support any fundamental and systemic differences between them and their attitudes toward work. This includes meaningful differences between job satisfaction, organizational commitment, or intent to leave based on generational membership. (See Chapters 5 and 6 for more on engaging millennial and boomer volunteers.)

Workers of all generations, moreover, were found to hold similar work values. The most critical drivers of organizational commitment, regardless of age, were personal characteristics (confidence), job characteristics (occupation and amount of challenge offered), and leadership qualities (communication and shared power). Likewise, job satisfaction was affected by employee expectations about continuing job stability, autonomy, and recognition for each age.

Scientists argue that a person’s maturity, life stage, experience, education, socioeconomic background, and other factors are more likely to play a part in forging our unique personalities and preferences than a generational label. For this reason, they argue, interventions designed to support a specific generational group of employees won’t be effective. This may prove true for volunteer workers, as well, suggesting that an analysis of generational traits may not be the best basis for management decisions or program design.

### Differences as We Age

Demographics and economics do affect us as we age. Our youngest workers are the most racially diverse generation in America and have higher levels of student loan debt, poverty, and unemployment than their parents or grandparents. As digital natives, they are the most avid users of technology and, at the same time, are detached from institutions such as religious or political affiliations.

Younger workers have higher expectations of career advancement and work-family balance, and they are less likely to marry than their predecessors. There is generally higher job turnover in younger people than their elders. Many seniors
have delayed retirement because of the depressed economy and are less likely than younger people to leave their jobs. Not surprisingly, they also lag in the adoption of new technology.

Other differences between the ages are evident. According to the experts, as people age, they prefer established relationships to forging new ones and are more drawn to positivity than younger people. Seniors, as opposed to younger counterparts, will volunteer more often based on belonging—a sense of being needed, helpful, and valued—versus a desire to build something new.9 Perhaps because of this need to belong, psychological contracts (unspoken expectations about the relationship between the volunteer and organization) are vitally important to older volunteers. Conversely, the freedom to create and learn new skills is important to those younger.

**Why Demographic Shifts Matter**

Social, religious, and human capital—the networks, relationships skills, knowledge, experience, and belief that allow society to work together for the common good—are also important prerequisites for volunteerism to flourish. Some have decried the decline in social capital and civic engagement in recent years, and age and income may play their parts in that decline. There is new evidence of growing gaps in the social connectedness of youth, based on socioeconomic status, which may lead to decreasing civic participation and volunteerism.

Other realities, such as the economic burdens on the young to care for an aging society and a rise in community-generated civic engagement outside traditional institutions, may also present competition for attention and volunteer support, particularly for the young.

**Ideas for Action**

- Identify groups you need to engage and minimize their specific barriers to involvement.
- Resist the urge to prejudge the effects of a generational label; instead, take time to get to know each individual.
- Accommodate a variety of volunteer work styles, schedules, supervision preferences, leadership approaches, etc.
• Encourage intergenerational volunteer projects and use self-reflection to discourage generational stereotyping.
• List both the commitments the volunteer will make to the organization and those the organization will make to the volunteer in orientation materials.
• Develop an integrated recognition and retention plan that addresses work values and true drivers of satisfaction.
• Engage the emerging generation now by collaborating with schools and promoting family volunteering.
• Locate and partner with organizations that can help bridge cultural divides and design for greater inclusivity.

**Big Trend: Technological Advances**

As the digital revolution progresses, it touches virtually every part of our lives. The speed of innovation is notable, but perhaps more interesting is how easily new inventions are accepted and integrated. Consider the rapid adoption of smartphones. In 2013, 56 percent of Americans reported owning a smartphone. Remarkable, given modern smartphones were mass marketed only seven years ago. What’s more, nearly three-quarters keep their phones within five feet nearly all of the time, making them a virtual appendage.

New digital functionality also boosts consumer expectations. Hyperpersonalization is now widely available, promoting an illusion of greater control and choice. Consequently, the volunteer of today has evolved into a “consumer” of opportunities to serve. Social change organizations risk becoming obsolete if they cannot meet emerging expectations. Nonprofits, often with limited resources and expertise, will be challenged to find a way, and new technology may provide answers.

**Content Creation for All**

Today, virtually everyone can be both content consumer and creator. Videos, blogs, infographics, and the ubiquitous “selfie” (Oxford Dictionaries’ Word of the Year in 2013) are all created and shared. In 2013, more than 800 million Facebook status updates were published each day and over 100 million people
took a social action on YouTube every week.\textsuperscript{12} Online innovations and creativity are now admired and expected.

As social media gains popularity, fans now trump audiences as the most important people to cultivate. Although audiences simply watch a movie and head home, fans rate it, write reviews, and share their opinions online. These acts of content creation expand the film’s initial reach to new audiences, as each fan influences their personal network. Companies and nonprofits have taken notice. The opportunity for authentic, compelling information about social causes, generated and disseminated by volunteers throughout their networks, has the potential to change public awareness and perception and build the case for increasing support.

Content that is created and curated collaboratively is particularly powerful. Digital “memes” (popular photos and videos with common characteristics that are imitated, transformed, and shared by users) are some of the most viral content. From time to time, they have been successfully leveraged for fundraising as we saw with the hunt for an African warlord in 2012 (KONY2012) and awareness of ALS research in 2014 (The Ice Bucket Challenge). Collaborative content and memes that champion volunteerism, however, have yet to be fully tapped, but could be effective recruitment tactics. (See Chapter 11 for more on volunteer engagement and social media.)

\textbf{Integrated Ecosystems}

Integrated approaches are boosting the potential of shared content. The combination of social, mobile, analytics, and the cloud (what’s known as SMAC in tech circles) improve on what social media can do on its own. Imagine the fan-generated movie review—it might be written on a smartphone, shared on social media, and stored in the cloud. SMAC technologies take it a step further, adding the ability to track the discussion.

This ecosystem allows organizations to interpret, design, manage, predict, and personalize real-time consumer actions. This laser-like focus on “consumer experiences” represents a significant shift from the notion of audiences as passive consumers to fans as active creators and curators. In this context, SMAC becomes the interface and crystal ball, linking organizations and citizens in ways never thought possible. Imagine how SMAC could help us improve the volunteer experience through a deeper understanding of volunteers’ digital behavior.
Data: Big and Smaller

Predictive data analysis has big potential. An estimated 2.8 zettabytes (that’s 2.8 plus 21 zeros) of data were “saved” to hard drives by 2012. That number will double by 2015. These “digital breadcrumbs” we leave through our online behavior such as website registrations and log ins, social media posts, site visits, content downloads, keyword searches, and e-mail responses can be aggregated and analyzed to flag significant consumer trends. An analysis of data generated by volunteer behavior could result in a treasure trove of new information to improve volunteer program administration practices.

Aside from a handful of web services and software that specialize in analysis of big data (VolunteerMatch.org, Kiva.org, Change.org, etc.), its potential is yet to be fully marshaled. In the future, however, we can look forward to this level of inquiry as a required feature of volunteer management systems. Imagine if data across these systems were amassed and used to drive evidence-based decision making for future volunteer program design and management.

Small, individual data might also stimulate altruistic acts. With new technology, the status of consumers can now be tracked through geo-location and physiological responses (through EEG, MRI, and galvanic skin responses), and newer smartphones now include this functionality. Trend watchers have dubbed personal data collection and digital feedback the “Quantiﬁed Self.” This capability makes possible greater self-awareness and perhaps greater well-being. The positive effects of volunteerism on health are well documented and early pioneers (like “The H(app)athon Project”) have begun to integrate community involvement data into quantified self-initiatives.

Increased Screen Time

Americans spend over seven hours a day in front of screens (TV, computer, smartphone, and tablet). Will this trend be a boon or a bust for volunteer programs? There is evidence that a distracted public can still focus, when a cause’s offer or invitation is compelling enough. Virtual, mobile, and microvolunteering may hold promise if volunteers can be persuaded to devote screen time to social good.

With less face-to-face interaction, “digital body language” becomes even more important for communication. Nonprofits may not have the resources or the inclination to track every click of their supporters; but the analysis of digital behavior can reveal valuable insights into what drives participation. Our ability
to “read” volunteers’ behavior and make our own explicit will be critical to increasing the quality and depth of communication.

### Ideas for Action

- Find partners (like TechSoup and NTEN) who can help increase your capacity to nimbly navigate tech evolutions.
- Form a volunteer-led digital editorial board to create and share content about your program.
- Use smart technology, embedded into businesses processes, to seamlessly track volunteer activity and report it in real time.
- Track volunteers’ “digital body language” to understand satisfaction and engagement levels.
- Collaborate with new social ventures (like those funded by the Points of Light Civic Accelerator) to co-pilot tech innovations that support your mission.
- Deliberately plan learning objectives and volunteer training to increase Web 2.0 competencies.
- Develop “reverse mentoring programs” in which digital natives help others learn to use technology.
- Try recruitment web services (like VolunteerMatch.org) that use data analysis to match needs and volunteers.

### Big Trend: Workplace Shifts

We have a greater understanding of human motivation in organizational settings than ever before. Application of this knowledge can help us effectively engage and cultivate volunteer-based human resources. The challenge is to design volunteer training, team-building, and leadership models that are inspiring, personally fulfilling, and make the most of volunteer talents. New approaches to talent management, evidence-based training strategies, and research into workplace motivation offer fresh ideas.
Focus on Employee Engagement

Fifty-two percent of U.S. employees are disengaged, meaning they fail to work at their full potential. Another 18 percent actively undermine their organization’s work. Collectively, this means that 70 percent of employees lack passion or energy for their work, triggering a staggering $450 to $550 billion in lost productivity each year.13

At the same time, today’s employees are assuming a variety of new and entrepreneurial roles—contingency worker, contractor, teleworker—that require additional autonomy, challenge, and recognition. Likewise, companies have seen a rise in purpose-driven professionals who seek meaning beyond the paycheck. Efficiency is no longer more important than meaning in the changing workplace.

To regain employee attention and inspiration, some firms are looking to volunteerism as an employee engagement and team-building strategy. New expectations are emerging concerning corporate community involvement. Beyond traditional corporate social responsibility, thought leaders now argue for the development of “shared value” across corporate, government, and nonprofit sectors. Recognizing that what is good for society is good for business, the model focuses on local community needs, aligns business activities, and works to create more value so everyone benefits. Shared value requires the active participation of nonprofits and government to succeed. Each of these community engagement activities offers more opportunities for volunteer programs to engage new partners.14 (See Chapters 15 through 19 for more on corporate volunteer engagement.)

Integrated Talent Management

New developments in human resources may also benefit volunteer programs. In the private sector, there is growing awareness that the HR function is critical to business success. Today’s cutting-edge HR departments handle much more than compliance and administrative tasks. Integrated talent management is evolving as a new strategy to better manage human capital.

Talent management involves deliberate and integrated processes for recruiting, developing, and retaining people with the best skills to increase business performance. It is, above all, strategic in nature. Although older HR models focus on finding, hiring, and training capable employees, talent management uses outcome metrics, strategic alignment of HR activities, and targeted training and development to not only match the right people with the right jobs but to also
meet organizational goals. Nonprofits that are concerned with how to realize the best return on their investment in volunteer talent may find talent management a helpful strategy to explore.

**The Virtual Workforce**

New technology has begun to support communications and team building across distances, but only when used effectively. Telecommuting increased 80 percent from 2005 to 2012. As more people become skilled at offsite work, virtual, micro-, and mobile volunteerism will have even more opportunity to flourish. (See Chapter 12 and Chapter 13 for more on virtual volunteering and microvolunteering.)

Despite the available technology, virtual teams still experience a so-called “connectivity paradox”—the more connected people are, the more isolated they feel. “Virtual distance” is a new framework that describes and measures these psychological effects, and researchers suggest specific steps to reduce virtual distance, such as:

- Proactively cultivating community and trust
- Clarifying team and individual goals
- Highlighting the skills of each team member
- Allowing time for interpersonal sharing
- Pointing out similarities in values and goals
- Relaying success stories
- Establishing standard communications paths

**Ideas for Action**

- Use team building and challenge as volunteer recognition strategies.
- Design a reengagement plan to reconnect with volunteers who have decreased involvement.
- Consider new “entrepreneurial” roles for volunteers that use their creativity to solve organizational problems.
• Develop relationships with corporate social responsibility programs that share your mission and will provide mutual benefit.

• Develop a business case for shared value that you can present to a variety of possible corporate partners in your community.

• Replace individual management methods with team-based volunteer models.

• Develop an integrated volunteer talent management model that strategically addresses your organization’s goals.

• Increase effectiveness of virtual teams by integrating practices that reduce virtual distance.

**Change for the Better**

New trends in brain science, demographics, technology, and the workplace are disrupting business as usual and creating new opportunities to connect, collaborate, and mobilize for the greater good. Brain science helps us understand what inspires people to action and motivates continued participation. Emerging technologies enable us to automate and personalize experiences to better meet the needs of our supporters. New management and partnership models allow us to better develop and support volunteer talent, allowing their contributions to truly shine.

The more we rely on digital communication and technology to manage a fast-paced world, the more we will crave meaningful interactions, personal significance, and simple trust. Volunteerism is not just a way to collectively tackle community problems. It may also be what’s needed to sustain cooperation in an increasingly dehumanized environment.

At its core, volunteerism is about connecting people. By embracing innovation, not hiding from it, organizations and individuals will be better equipped to build trust, form authentic human bonds, focus attention, and build the clarity of purpose needed to navigate the future and change volunteerism for the better. The future looks bright ahead.
**Tobi Johnson** is President of Tobi Johnson & Associates, a consulting firm whose mission is to help nonprofit organizations mobilize remarkable volunteers who share a common vision for a better world. Tobi has over 25 years direct experience in nonprofit management, volunteer administration, training delivery, and learning design, which she puts to use helping organizations transform their volunteer enterprise. She also shares strategies to attract, inspire, and activate top volunteer talent through *Tobi’s Volunteer Management Blog*. Tobi is a native of the Pacific Northwest and now lives in East Tennessee with her husband and feline office assistant, Bailey.

**Notes**

1. Often attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt; however, this quote is not found in her writings.
4. Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), “Volunteering and Civic Life in America 2012: Key Findings on the Volunteer Participation and Civic Health of the Nation,” December 2012. Report is the most recent from CNCS.
5. For research and discussion on compassion, see The Greater Good Science Center website at http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/.