

# A VOICE FOR VOLUNTEERS

## HOW FIVE BIG SHIFTS WILL CHANGE VOLUNTEERING

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### The Context

Since 1983 there have been five big shifts which will have a profound impact on the nature and importance of volunteering. There are already clear signals that volunteering is adapting and changing in response to these shifts. The move to set up a "volunteers' union" and a body representing smaller Not For Profit organizations (NFP's) is just one of these signals. Another signal is a growing awareness within State bodies representing the volunteer sector that they need to become more attuned to volunteers and not just to the organizations which use them. At a recent South Australian volunteer conference, Planet Ark's John Dee told the CEO of Volunteering SA&NT that her organization was doing a poor job of communicating with volunteers. Volunteering SA&NT is currently undertaking a research exercise amongst its member organizations to throw light on volunteer complaints and issues, but the research isn't consulting volunteers themselves.

The line between volunteers and paid workers is becoming more blurred. Workers are asked to get involved in corporate volunteering projects and may feel pressured if their career prospects are affected by refusing. The line is further blurred by governments passing community service delivery to NFP organizations which use volunteers rather than paid workers to deliver these services. Centrelink requirements to do community work for the dole further blur the distinction between paid and voluntary work. There is no public volunteer voice drawing attention to these issues.

At volunteer conferences one rarely sees a volunteer on the platform. The conferences are dominated by paid staff in the NFP sector who have the backing of their organizations to take the time required to attend and to fly interstate if needed.

Newsletters of peak bodies such as Volunteering SA&NT almost exclusively feature news and information relevant to organizations and not to individual volunteers. The face of volunteers and the issues that concern them are hardly seen.

At a recent Melbourne meeting organized by the Centre for Civil Society to establish a volunteer's union, the unpaid sat at one end of the room and paid at the other end. The paid staff argued against the idea and made it difficult to discuss the concerns of the unpaid. The paid all left after lunch.

A stirring is afoot that will eventually see the voice of the ordinary volunteer properly reflected in public conversation. Current peak bodies may seek to fill the role, but a volunteers' union is better fitted to speak for volunteers than are paid staff. A spirit of cooperation, partnership and unity between paid and unpaid is the best way to forward the common vision of the NFP sector, which is to work for the wellbeing of humanity and to generate "community profit" rather than "shareholder profit". It is unlikely that this spirit will emerge unless volunteers create a strong common voice.

The five big shifts which will transform volunteering are as follows:

## **The Information Age**

The Information Age began with the availability of desktop computers in the early 1980's. This ultimately brought about a massive power shift, transferring power and influence both downwards and upwards. People nearer the bottom of the economic ladder obtained greater power through being able to freely source information and to quickly and cheaply connect with others. As middle management was "downsized", the top end grabbed more and the gap between rich and poor widened.

A widespread power struggle between the paid and the unpaid is already in motion. Wikipedia is the most prominent volunteer driven website where thousands of ordinary unpaid people contribute knowledge for free and millions access the knowledge every day without fee. Encyclopaedia Britannica has consequently ceased printing. Newspapers are collapsing as the internet provides free news. "Wiki leaks" works for greater freedom of information. Patent wars over who owns genetic coding and how long a patent will run are active in the courts. There is a burgeoning plethora of websites that provide all kinds of information and software for free. Some websites link to open laboratories where anyone can experiment on projects of their own choice. Volunteers are invading the internet, and these are often in the younger age group.

The internet is now an established tool and has/is changing everything. Ordinary people now have a greater voice than ever before, governments and power holders are being challenged as never before. Volunteers have not yet joined up and created a strong public voice but it is inevitable that they will.

## **Demographic changes**

Demographer Bernard Salt told a South Australian volunteering conference recently that people are living longer, healthier and more engaged lives resulting in increasing "grey power". Salt says the emerging volunteer wants to be respected as a unique individual, not just managed for the convenience of whichever organization uses her. He says that what he calls the "Boom-boom" volunteer will be more motivated if a mutual plan is individually designed to suit both the volunteer and the organization in which she is placed. Along with the demand for greater engagement, the increase in numbers of retirees will also create a bigger volunteer pool. This growing volunteer group will demand a stronger voice.

## **Climate Change**

Climate change is increasing weather related disasters and the associated costs of mitigation and cleanup. Increases in personal, national and international stress levels that go with more extreme climatic conditions and resulting economic pressure will change human dynamics at all levels of society. As the impact of material consumption on climate change becomes better understood, there will be a movement to consume less and to fill the consumerism gap with human connection and wellbeing. In times of stress the spirit of volunteering and cooperation strengthens.

## **Dwindling oil supplies**

Declining oil reserves and increasing costs to extract what remains, will make oil ever more expensive. A fast expanding vehicle fleet in Asia and more mouths to feed everywhere will drive oil costs even higher. With rising oil prices economic growth must

decline. Growth will also decline as the earth becomes exhausted from too many mouths to feed and too few resources to meet demand.

## **The Wellbeing Revolution**

As economic growth hits its limit and we move into contraction, we will increasingly value social connection and interpersonal relationships. At times of stress and danger, we focus less on material and more on social wealth. Current research shows that once income is sufficient to meet a reasonable living standard, extra income is less valued than extra free time and free time is the foundation for higher levels of wellbeing. Economic contraction will move society's focus from earning more to social and personal wellbeing. Concurrently we will move from personal consumption to serving others as a primary source of satisfaction. Adelaide's thinker in Residence (Marty Seligman) is rolling out his world famous, scientifically proven wellbeing model to all South Australian school children. His methods have also been used recently on the TV programs "Making Australia Happy" and "Making Couples Happy". He teaches that giving to others is the single most potent activity to raise wellbeing. Philanthropy is on the rise. There is ever more public discussion about well-being, depression, mental health, community and localism.

My own belief is that the "Wellbeing Revolution" has already begun.

Volunteering will increase as the revolution unfolds and a strong voice for volunteers will inevitably emerge.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

- The five big shifts described above, change the ground for volunteering.
- There will be an increase in numbers, capacities and attitudes of volunteers and a consequent rise in the importance and influence of volunteering.
- Organizations (both "for profit" and "not for profit"), which use volunteers, will increasingly seek to blur the distinction between the paid and the unpaid and this will have negative consequences for volunteering.
- The unpaid will seek their own voice, rather than being represented by the paid.
- A strong independent voice for volunteers is missing and is essential to the future of volunteering.
- It is vital that harmonious interaction occurs between the paid and unpaid voices of volunteering for the sector to be healthy.

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A national formation meeting for a volunteers' voice in Australia will be held in Adelaide on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2013. Expressions of interest: [network@civilsociety.org.au](mailto:network@civilsociety.org.au)