"I Don't Have Time"
Susan J. Ellis

Time deprivation – or, at least, the perception of having less and less time to do the things we want to do – is a growing malady around the world, affecting the work world, family life and, of course, volunteering. Yet the standard earth day remains 24 hours in length. Here's the paradox:

> *We all feel that we don't have enough time, yet we all have all the time there is.*

Many social observers have analysed why the speed of life seems to be accelerating. We are: working longer hours at paid jobs; over-scheduling activities for ourselves and our children; caring for older parents or raising our grandchildren; spending hours on e-mail and Web sites. Divorce, for example, is a time sucker. Even in a bad marriage one of you can go for milk and the other for the dry cleaning. When you divorce, you *both* have to go for milk *and* the dry cleaning.

Without a doubt, every recruiter of volunteers hears "I don't have time" as the most often expressed reason to refuse an invitation to participate in a project.

Similarly, those who coordinate volunteer services also express the frustration of "I don't have the time" to do all sorts of things from expanding a program to reading professional books or Web resources. What can we do about this except wring our hands?

Time and the volunteer
Naturally virtual volunteering and one-time days of service are responses to the lack of time expressed by volunteers. But it's still possible to engage people in more intensive service, if we pay attention to their needs.

- ***Revisit volunteer position descriptions from a time perspective***. Ask why volunteer work is structured the way it is now. Of course, if you're running a lunch program, volunteers have to be on site at lunchtime. But for most other work, question whether you truly need to require a set schedule. Is it more important to have volunteers on site at specific times or to have an amount of work completed by a determined due date? If the latter, allow more flexibility.

  Also, can a volunteer position description be broken into several smaller ones so that the work can be shared? Might a team of volunteers be assigned to the same project and promise to staff a shift or complete the tasks on a schedule they rotate among themselves as they wish?

- ***Identify time wasters and do something about them***. Every meeting requires commute time, so perhaps it would make sense to hold fewer but longer meetings, focusing time spent on what's important (group discussion) rather than on sitting in a car more often. Similarly, does the volunteer have to come on site? Can we audiotape some messages and make them available online, even to download onto a portable listening device like an iPod?

- ***Meet multiple needs***. Busy people make choices and gravitate to activities that accomplish more than one thing on their to-do list. For example, if there's a choice between two volunteer opportunities – both serving important causes and allowing the volunteer to exercise civic responsibility – any sane person would select the one that provides additional personal benefits. For example:
  - Meeting new friends (possibly *single* new friends!) – especially important for prospective volunteers new to a community or recently divorced or widowed.
  - Learning something new while volunteering that, in turn, will be helpful in the person's paying job or look good on a resume for future job hunting.
  - Being able to volunteer with one's children as a family activity, rather than having to make the choice of spending even less time parenting than now.
  - Simply having fun – time-deprived folks need a recreational outlet (by the way, it's possible to do hard work and still have fun!).

- ***Stop rewarding hours contributed and start honoring service provided***. One way we imply that we value loads of time is to give recognition for 100 hours, 2 years, or other intensive service

or longevity. By all means continue to thank such devotion. But understand the message this sends to new volunteers: give us more, more, more! Instead, focus appreciation on tasks completed (reorganized the center's library, ran 10 holiday parties, mentored 178 teenagers). Create awards such as "Did the Most in the Least Amount of Time Medal" or "Most Effect Short-term Project Award" to celebrate those who accomplished something on your behalf even if episodically.

How have you responded to the modern time crunch, whether to support volunteers or to help you in your own work?

Time and the Volunteer Program Manager

In 1999, Andy Fryar contributed a guest Hot Topic on "Volunteer Managers and the Time Management Trap." His points still hold true, especially our need to analyze if we're spending our time on the right priorities.   Here are some other ideas:

- *Consider your work schedule.* Should your office hours be Monday to Friday, 9 to 5 or some other standard business schedule? In general, I don't know why so many nonprofits keep "banking hours" when the people they serve have needs 24/7. The day of a volunteer program manager, of course, already spills over the standard day.

We give recruitment presentations to groups in the evening; we interview applicants early in the morning or on weeknights; we offer orientation and training on the weekends. No wonder we're stressed! Would life be easier if your work schedule was Tuesday to Saturday, noon to 8:00? Or even noon to 8:00 just two days a week? Not only would this accommodate the needs of volunteers, it would also provide you some quieter work time for a few hours a week.

- *Recruit volunteers specifically to assist you.* It remains common to find colleagues in volunteer management who do not work directly with volunteers in their own jobs. Not only is this poor role modeling for the rest of the agency, but it's downright silly! In 2002, I wrote a Hot Topic on "The Missing Link: Where Are Volunteers at the National Level?"

Some of the ideas I proposed then would also be relevant to a single, local program. One suggestion I often make is to recruit "cyber-deputies" – volunteers who do all sorts of online work for you: finding places to post recruitment messages (and then keeping them updated); researching any question you have; doing "industrial spying"; keeping up with list servers and discussion forums on your behalf; finding new information for volunteer newsletters and training programs; and more.

- *Schedule thinking and reflection time.* There's a parable about a monk who was renowned for meditating two hours every day. He was then appointed as abbot of his order. A follower commented that he would now have to change his meditation habits and the new abbot replied, "you're right, I'll have to meditate three hours a day."

If you are always running and doing, you can't be planning and evaluating. For the next year, schedule monthly "think tank" sessions and invite three to eight volunteers, and/or paid staff, and/or volunteerism colleagues to spend two to three hours with you to consider such things as:
   - Outside trends that are having an impact on your agency and volunteer corps.
   - Which volunteer assignments seem to be working the best and which have the most obstacles – and why.
   - How to "tell the story" of volunteer involvement in powerful ways.
   - Which assignments might be phased out and what new needs have arisen that should be met.

Vary the group each time or form a support team that grows more committed over the year of meetings. Even more personal is taking time each week for some professional development, whether reading a chapter in a book or spending 30 minutes online discovering new ideas. This will only happen if you actually *schedule this in writing in your appointment book*, and then allow yourself to do it.

- *Never do anything that has only one purpose*. Just as I commented on volunteer assignments being most attractive if they meet several needs, volunteer program managers ought to maximize all the tasks they do. Taking photographs is a great example. Digital photography is a remarkable thing, allowing you to record events instantaneously and then have photos to use in recruitment presentations, on the Web to illustrate the work volunteers do, during a recognition event, to print out for a celebratory bulletin board display after a project ends, etc., etc. Similarly, make sure any reports you write for top management can be transmuted into in-house newsletter articles, press releases, and even personal notes to thank volunteers.