Susan J. Ellis Hot Topics

A Thematic Reference Guide for Volunteer Engagement Professionals

1997 – 2020 | energizeinc.com

About This Guide

Susan J. Ellis (1946–2019) was one of the most influential thinkers in the field of volunteer engagement. As founder of Energize, Inc. and a prolific author and speaker, she wrote a monthly Hot Topics essay from 1997 until shortly before her death in 2019, building an archive of nearly 270 articles that remain essential reading for anyone serious about the profession.

This guide organises those articles into 20 themes to help volunteer engagement professionals — wherever they are in the world — quickly find the essays most relevant to their current priorities, challenges, and questions. Each article title is a clickable hyperlink that will take you directly to the original text on the Energize website.

Note: Some articles appear under more than one theme where their content crosses boundaries. A small number of articles from guest contributors are also included where they fit the theme.

Themes in This Guide

1. Strategic Leadership & Organisational Culture *(20 articles)*
2. Volunteer Recruitment & Diversity *(20 articles)*
3. Volunteer Roles, Job Design & Innovation *(20 articles)*
4. Volunteer-Staff Relationships & Organisational Dynamics *(16 articles)*
5. Recognition, Motivation & Volunteer Experience *(18 articles)*
6. The Volunteer Management Profession *(20 articles)*
7. The Value & Visibility of Volunteering *(18 articles)*
8. Volunteering, Money & Resources *(14 articles)*
9. Technology, Digital & Online Volunteering *(13 articles)*
10. Volunteering, Policy & Government *(16 articles)*
11. Corporate & Workplace Volunteering *(7 articles)*
12. Volunteering in Emergencies & Disasters *(7 articles)*
13. International Volunteering & Global Perspectives *(9 articles)*
14. Defining & Understanding Volunteering *(14 articles)*
15. Governance, Boards & Accountability *(6 articles)*
16. Risk, Safeguarding & Legal Issues *(6 articles)*
17. Sector Trends, Futures & Change *(12 articles)*
18. Education, Service-Learning & Youth Volunteering *(6 articles)*
19. Reflection, Ethics & Critical Thinking *(11 articles)*
20. Sector Infrastructure, Collaboration & Networking *(12 articles)*

1. Strategic Leadership & Organisational Culture

Articles exploring how senior leaders, executive directors and boards think about volunteers — including getting executive buy-in, overcoming indifference, positioning volunteer engagement strategically, and what a truly volunteer-friendly organisation looks like.

Date	Article Title (click to open)
Aug 2011	I'll Never Understand Why Executives Still Don't Understand
Oct 2011	What Leaders of Volunteers Can DO to Gain Executive Attention
Aug 1999	The Wall of Executive Indifference
Jan 2012	What Would the Perfect Volunteer-Involving Organisation Look Like?
Aug 2018	Leader or Liability: Are Leaders Sabotaging Volunteer Engagement?
Jan 2018	New Year's Resolution for Executive Directors of Volunteer-Involving Organisations
Feb 2017	Don't Forget Volunteers as Part of the Solution to 2017 Nonprofit Challenges
Jan 2016	The Domino Effect of Setting Goals for Volunteer Involvement
May 2013	Strategic Volunteer Management: Expanding Your Organisation's Brain
Oct 2003	Universal Standards vs. Your Own Situation
Sep 2003	Beyond Common Sense: Volunteer Management as a Specialty
Apr 2012	Common Sense and Volunteer Involvement
Aug 2003	One Step Further: Volunteer Services and Agency-wide Education
Sep 2017	Are You in a Volunteer Management Silo?
Jun 2020	How Leaders Can Find Strength In Vulnerability
Oct 2018	Leaders of Volunteers: Stop Being So Bloody Nice!
Nov 2011	Part-time Volunteer Management Means Equally Limited Volunteer Involvement
Oct 2006	The Middle Management Barrier
Apr 2016	Sending Volunteer Talent Down the Drain
Nov 2014	Pulling the Rug Out from Under Volunteer Involvement: Sudden Staff Changes

2. Volunteer Recruitment & Diversity

Finding and attracting volunteers, broadening your talent pool, reaching under-represented groups, and rethinking who you ask to volunteer.

Date	Article Title (click to open)
Sep 2014	Ten Time-Tested Volunteer Recruitment Tips that Still Work
Mar 2005	Recruitment Maxims
Oct 2013	Prospective Volunteers Are Closer than You Think
Oct 2014	Whom Don't We Ask to Volunteer?
Feb 2015	Replace Current Volunteers or Redirect New Ones?
Oct 2016	Get the Most Support: Blending Money, Things, and People
Apr 1997	Is the Challenge Recruiting Citizens to Volunteer or Making Sure Agencies Are Ready?

Nov 2000	Unskilled vs. Differently Skilled: Maximise Volunteer Differences
Jul 2000	The Volunteer Generation Gap
May 2000	Mixed Messages: What Do We Really Think about Young Volunteers?
Apr 1999	Lessening Social Exclusion through Volunteering
Aug 2016	Clients Are a Talent Pool, Too
Jul 2013	Breaking through the Glass Ceiling for Volunteers
Feb 2001	'Youth Involvement' in Our Field
Apr 2002	Don't Call Me a 'Senior'!
Sep 1997	What's Gender Got to Do with It?
Oct 2007	The Moral Obligation of Volunteer Recruitment Promises
Nov 2016	What Volunteer Recruiters Can Learn from #GivingTuesday
Nov 2012	The Perfect Volunteer Storm
Jun 2019	Volunteering Trend Watch: What Can We Learn from Looking Back?

3. Volunteer Roles, Job Design & Innovation

Designing meaningful roles, expanding what volunteers can do, tapping specialist skills, and giving volunteers real responsibility and influence.

Date	Article Title (click to open)
Jul 2009	The Drive towards 'Highly-skilled' and 'Pro Bono' Volunteering
May 1999	Staff Resistance and Highly-Skilled Volunteers
Nov 2001	Tackling Causes Not Symptoms: New/Old Roles for Volunteers
Jun 2014	Volunteers and the Quest for Innovation
Nov 2015	Volunteers as Beta Testers
Nov 2005	Strength in Numbers: Engaging Volunteers as Partners in Programme Development
Oct 2009	Taking the Client's Perspective in Designing Volunteer Roles
Apr 2007	I'll help with that, but don't ask me to lead it!
May 2010	The Self-Directed Volunteer
Jun 2016	The Division of Labour between Volunteer Centres and Volunteer-Involving Organisations
Aug 1997	Volunteers as the 'Third Branch' of an Organisation
Jun 2004	Does It Matter if Volunteers Work in a Nonprofit or a Government Setting?
Jul 2015	Letting Volunteers into the Team's Locker Room
Nov 2006	Encouraging Entrepreneurial Volunteering
Jun 2013	Stop Volunteers from Being Their Own Worst Enemies
Sep 2004	Workplace Volunteerism: Have We Thought this Through?
Jan 2014	Virtual Volunteering Revisited
May 2011	Short Attention Spans versus Long-term Causes

Jan 2013	Should We Cap the Number of Hours a Volunteer May Serve Each Week?
Jun 2005	Mobile Volunteers - 'Tis the Season'

4. Volunteer-Staff Relationships & Organisational Dynamics

Managing the relationship between paid staff and volunteers, addressing resistance, navigating power dynamics, and building genuine team harmony.

Date	Article Title (click to open)
May 2018	Grow Volunteer-Staff Harmony: Plant New Seeds this Spring
May 1999	Staff Resistance and Highly-Skilled Volunteers
Sep 2008	Replacing Volunteers with Paid Staff
May 2019	Could Volunteers Replace Paid Staff? Have No Fear!
Jun 2001	When a Volunteer Transforms into an Employee
Sep 2016	The Limitations of Seeing Volunteers Only as Unpaid Staff
Oct 2002	The Great Divide: Leaders Who Are Paid and Leaders Who Are Volunteers
Jun 2010	Reimagining Service: Is Corporate HR Management What We See?
Sep 2013	What Volunteer Resources Managers Can Teach Human Resources Managers
Jun 2015	Mixed Messages to Volunteers Whom We've Asked to Be Friendly
Aug 2015	In the Middle: The Leader of Volunteers as Intermediary
Apr 2012	Common Sense and Volunteer Involvement
Jun 1997	Why Is It Labour Unions vs. Volunteers?
Feb 2006	The Fair Labour Standards Act and Other Obstacles to Progress
Nov 2010	When Volunteers Resist Change
Oct 2012	Practicing What We Preach: Volunteers Helping Us, Too

5. Recognition, Motivation & Volunteer Experience

How to genuinely recognise volunteers, understand what motivates them, celebrate their achievements meaningfully, and improve their overall experience.

Date	Article Title (click to open)
Apr 2018	Don't Just Recognise Volunteers, Invest in Them…and Yourself
Apr 2011	Celebrate Collective Accomplishments, Not Volunteered Time
Jun 2000	Enough Formal Banquets! Let's Transform Recognition Events
May 2005	Why Be Boring When You Can Celebrate in So Many Ways?
Apr 2014	Working Together to Recognise Volunteers…and More
May 2014	Branding National Volunteer Week: Whose Week Is It Anyway?
Apr 2001	National Volunteer Week: Does Anyone Care?

Dec 1998	What's the Mystery about Motivation?
Oct 2005	Volunteers Just Want to Have Fun
Jun 2012	Why Do We Love Volunteer Satisfaction Surveys?
Nov 2013	Education through Celebration on International Volunteer Managers Day
Oct 2015	Keeping Former Volunteers in Our Circle of Good Friends
Jul 2005	Save a Life, Win a Car! When Do Incentives to Volunteer Cross the Line?
Jun 2018	Bribing Volunteers: Should We Be Incentivising People for Their Time?
Nov 1998	The Giving of Thanks
Dec 2015	See Superheroes for What They Really Are!
Oct 2019	Fueling Volunteer Passion: Empowering Volunteers to Self-Motivate
Apr 2019	Lessons Learned about Leading Volunteers from a Volunteering Working Mum

6. The Volunteer Management Profession

The professional identity, credentialing, associations, advocacy, and status of volunteer managers — including the perennial debate about whether it constitutes a 'real' profession.

Date	Article Title (click to open)
Jul 1997	Is Volunteer Management Really a Profession?
Feb 2018	Is Volunteer Management Really a Profession?
Jan 2017	Pride in the Volunteer Management Profession
Nov 2017	Leaders of Volunteers: Will You 'Be the Voice' for Our Profession?
Feb 2011	Real Professions Have Strong Associations
Jul 2011	Needed: A Multi-level Approach to Credentialing Volunteer Management
Sep 2019	Revisiting Credentials and Certifications in Volunteer Engagement
Apr 2006	Why a New Association Should Serve the USA
Mar 2006	A Call to Action on Behalf of Our Profession
Dec 2004	Chicken or Egg: Why Are Our Professional Associations Weak?
Nov 2002	A Utopian View of Volunteerism Professional Organisations
Jun 2009	Days, Hours and Minutes of Service – Enough Is Enough
Sep 2006	What's in a Name or a Title?
Jul 2019	S#%&! Words We Need to Stop Saying
May 2017	That Pesky Word 'Volunteer'
Apr 2017	Continuous Learning Is Not Optional
Apr 2015	If Google Can't Find the People Who Lead Volunteers, No One Can
Jun 2017	Find the Money for Priceless Conferencing
Nov 2003	Educating Other Professions about Volunteers: Starting at the Source
Mar 2013	Why Social Media Is Not the Cure-All for Building Volunteer Engagement

7. The Value & Visibility of Volunteering

Making the case for volunteering, measuring its impact, communicating its value to funders and the public, and tackling poor perceptions.

Date	Article Title (click to open)
Sep 2009	Making Ongoing Volunteering Valued and Visible
Jul 2016	Inform, and Wow, Everyone about Volunteers
Dec 2012	End-of-Year Reports Can Illuminate Volunteer Achievements
Feb 2005	Why Can't We Make Progress on Public Perceptions about Volunteering?
Dec 2001	It's Time to Start Counting Volunteers Seriously
Aug 2001	Evaluating by Comparisons: Watch out for the Traps!
Sep 2002	A Medal for Volunteer Service – How to Measure Success?
Sep 2000	Be Careful What We Wish For! The Cost-Benefit Analysis of Volunteering
Dec 2018	Seeking Funder Support for Volunteer Engagement? Assess Your Approach!
May 2001	Money is No Object
Nov 2009	Media Blitz vs. Media Noise: What Are We Trying to Accomplish?
May 2004	Shaping Public Opinion: Volunteering, Government, and News Reports
May 2003	What We See, or Don't: Volunteers in Television, Films, and Novels
Aug 2020	Value of Volunteering
Mar 2003	Marketing Savvy – Our Field's Blind Spot
Sep 2015	Pictures, Pictures, Pictures
Dec 2013	Don't Let the History Made by Volunteers Fall through the Cracks of Time
Nov 1999	Statistics, Bikinis and Volunteers: The New Independent Sector Study

8. Volunteering, Money & Resources

The relationship between volunteering and financial resources — from funding volunteer programmes to time-money trade-offs, volunteer expenses, and financial sustainability.

Date	Article Title (click to open)
Feb 2014	It's Time to Discuss the Complex Relationship of Volunteering and Money
Mar 1999	The Money Factor in Volunteer Management
Apr 2010	'You Get What You Pay For'
Jul 2004	Should We Ask Volunteers to Give Money on Top of Time?
Jul 2010	The Correlation between Time Donors and Money Donors
May 2008	It's Volunteers and Money
Nov 2018	Volunteers? Donors? Let's Call Them All Supporters!
Jun 2003	Raising Money through Volunteer Labour

Feb 2003	Making an Impact When You Spend Money
May 2015	Fighting against Ignorance: Picking up My Sword Yet Again
Jul 2008	Volunteers Should Not Be Second-Class Taxpayers
Jun 2008	Is the Rising Cost of Gas a Crisis or an Opportunity for Volunteering?
Dec 2009	When the Ax Falls: Budget Cutting and Volunteers
Aug 2010	Limiting Volunteers through Insurance Requirements

9. Technology, Digital & Online Volunteering

Using technology effectively in volunteer management — from early internet use to social media, online volunteering, digital communications, and managing information overload.

Date	Article Title (click to open)
Jan 2014	Virtual Volunteering Revisited
Jul 2003	Turning a Gift into a Powerful Tool: The Internet's Impact on the Volunteer Field
Jan 2004	Economic Development, Internet Technology, and Volunteers
Aug 2000	If Not Your Home Page, Then Where?
Jun 2007	Technology Acceleration: Grab Hold and Hang On
May 2006	Online Spying Can Improve Your Volunteer Management Skills
May 2012	Three Things Volunteer Managers Can Learn from the Social Media Revolution
Mar 2013	Why Social Media Is Not the Cure-All for Building Volunteer Engagement
Sep 2010	Online Information Overload – and How to Cope
Sep 2011	Addressing Volunteerism Issues in the Blogosphere
Mar 2016	Incorporate the Power of Live Web Calls into Volunteer Management
Jan 2015	What I Learned about Online Resources for Volunteer Management
Mar 2015	Do Volunteers Want to 'Talk Amongst Themselves'?

10. Volunteering, Policy & Government

The relationship between volunteering and public policy, government initiatives, legislation, national service programmes, and political advocacy.

Date	Article Title (click to open)
Jul 2017	The 'Social Compact' and Voluntary Action Are the Foundation of Democracy
Feb 2012	Volunteering Is Inherently Political
May 2016	Political Campaigns: Epicentre of Volunteering
Feb 2009	'A New Era of Responsibility': An Open Letter to President Obama
Jan 2011	The Choice of the Citizen: Pay Taxes, Do Without, or Volunteer
May 2009	The Role of Volunteer Resources Managers in the Serve America Act

Mar 2010	AmeriCorps and Senior Corps Targeting Volunteer Management
Jul 2001	Faith-Based Initiatives: What Might This Mean?
Feb 2002	Mixed Messages from Government: Lessons from Minnesota
Feb 2004	Government, Politicians, and the Use of the Word 'Volunteer'
Mar 2008	California Governor 'Pumps Up' Volunteering
Jun 2011	Is the Corporation for National and Community Service on the Right Track?
Sep 2001	Advocacy for Volunteer Involvement: The Role of Funders
Jun 1998	Turbulence at the State Level
Apr 2004	Making Volunteer Management Happen: A Proposal for AmeriCorps
Jan 2006	The Implications of History

11. Corporate & Workplace Volunteering

Employer-supported volunteering, corporate partnerships, pro bono engagement, and the opportunities and pitfalls of working with corporate volunteers.

Date	Article Title (click to open)
Oct 1997	Redirecting Corporate Volunteering
Sep 2004	Workplace Volunteerism: Have We Thought this Through?
Nov 2004	Interns: The 'Acceptable' Volunteers?
Jul 2009	The Drive towards 'Highly-skilled' and 'Pro Bono' Volunteering
Apr 2008	Volunteering Is Bigger than the Nonprofit Sector
Feb 2000	Volunteering in For-Profit Settings: Exploitation or Value Added?
Aug 2013	Volunteering and Employability: Cause or Effect?

12. Volunteering in Emergencies & Disasters

Managing spontaneous and organised volunteers in crisis situations, disaster response, and the surge of public goodwill that follows major events.

Date	Article Title (click to open)
Dec 2007	Helper Triage: Volunteer Management in Emergencies
Sep 2005	The Silver Lining of Disaster
Dec 2005	Charity Burnout? How to Cope with the Impact of Mother Nature in 2005
Oct 2001	A Volunteerism Perspective on the Days after the 11th of September
Apr 2003	War and Volunteers: History Repeats Itself
Jun 2020	Re-Opening and Recovery: Volunteer Engagement Resources in a Coronavirus World
May 2020	Supporting Volunteer Efforts During Coronavirus

13. International Volunteering & Global Perspectives

International voluntourism, cross-border exchange, global volunteering trends, and what the volunteer sector looks like beyond English-speaking Western contexts.

Date	Article Title (click to open)
Nov 1997	Global Connections – International Volunteerism
Jul 1998	Let's Commit to International Exchange
May 1998	Reaching Out to International Visitors
Feb 2007	Voluntourism – Pros, Cons, and Possibilities
Jul 2007	The More We're Different, the More We're the Same
Oct 2004	Watching, Helping and Learning from China
Aug 2008	The Yin and Yang of China's Olympic Volunteers
Dec 2011	My Personal 'State of the World's Volunteering' Report
Jan 1999	If the Whole World is Changing, Can Volunteerism Stay the Same?

14. Defining & Understanding Volunteering

What volunteering actually is, who counts as a volunteer, the boundaries between volunteering and paid work, service-learning, and how we define the sector itself.

Date	Article Title (click to open)
Aug 2014	Identifying Who Is and Is Not a 'Volunteer'
Jan 2010	Differentiating between Volunteering and Working for Pay
Jul 2012	Is Volunteering the Emperor's New Clothes?
Oct 2008	The Confusing Talk about 'Service'
Dec 2010	The Word 'Volunteer' Can Reveal, Conceal, or Confuse
Oct 1998	The Limits of the 'V' Word
Aug 2009	The Separation of Service-learning from Volunteering...and Does It Matter?
Feb 1999	The Just-a-Volunteer Syndrome
Aug 2019	When 'Just' a Volunteer Is Better than a Paid Employee
Dec 2008	From Organising Charity to Building Community
Sep 2007	Volunteering We See but Don't Recognise
Oct 1999	Philanthropy, Civic Engagement, and the Lessons of Volunteering
Feb 2010	Both Receiving and Giving
Mar 2014	Let's Help People Help Each Other

15. Governance, Boards & Accountability

Volunteer governance, boards of directors, organisational accountability, and the role of citizen oversight — including critical scrutiny of how boards actually function.

Date	Article Title (click to open)
Nov 2007	Boards of Directors: Governing at a Distance?
Aug 2012	Let's Be Honest about Nonprofit Boards of Directors (Lessons from Penn State)
Dec 2006	Together We Stand: Volunteers and Volunteer Resource Managers Connected
Jul 2007	The More We're Different, the More We're the Same
Feb 1998	Give Volunteers a Voice
Aug 2007	The Big Merger: Many Unanswered Questions

16. Risk, Safeguarding & Legal Issues

Managing risk, criminal record checks, insurance, confidentiality, safeguarding, legal frameworks, and the challenge of not letting fear prevent effective volunteer involvement.

Date	Article Title (click to open)
Dec 2017	Letting Fear Prevent Volunteer Involvement is Too Risky
Apr 2009	Confidentiality and Other Objections to Volunteers
Aug 2010	Limiting Volunteers through Insurance Requirements
Mar 2009	The Difference Between Needing and Wanting Volunteers
Oct 2010	Good Intentions Going Nowhere – Again
Feb 2006	The Fair Labour Standards Act and Other Obstacles to Progress

17. Sector Trends, Futures & Change

Big-picture thinking about where volunteering is headed — trends, forecasts, the changing nature of civil society, and preparing for the future.

Date	Article Title (click to open)
Sep 1999	Trend Watch: Are You Ready?
Aug 2004	Applied Futurism: Putting Trends to Work Today
Jan 1999	If the Whole World is Changing, Can Volunteerism Stay the Same?
Feb 2019	The Times They Are a Changin'—Even for Volunteers
Jun 2019	Volunteering Trend Watch: What Can We Learn from Looking Back?
Nov 2008	How Will the Economic Crisis Affect Volunteering?
Jan 2009	What's Ahead for 2009?
Dec 2019	The Volunteer Engagement Cha-Cha
Dec 2016	When Things Look Dark, Volunteers Can Spark Lightning

Jan 2019	How Volunteer Action in 2018 Can Focus Us for 2019
Jan 2005	Keeping an Eye on Things in the Year Ahead
Mar 2012	How Serving the Volunteer Field Has Changed after 35 Years -- Or Not?

18. Education, Service-Learning & Youth Volunteering

Volunteers in educational settings, service-learning programmes, youth engagement, student volunteering, and teaching young people what volunteering really means.

Date	Article Title (click to open)
Aug 2006	Start Early: Teaching Students about Volunteering, Not Simply Doing It
Aug 2009	The Separation of Service-learning from Volunteering...and Does It Matter?
May 2000	Mixed Messages: What Do We Really Think about Young Volunteers?
Feb 2001	'Youth Involvement' in Our Field
Nov 2004	Interns: The 'Acceptable' Volunteers?
Jul 2000	The Volunteer Generation Gap

19. Reflection, Ethics & Critical Thinking

Susan's more reflective and provocative essays questioning assumptions, challenging conventional wisdom in the field, and exploring the ethics of how we work with volunteers.

Date	Article Title (click to open)
Apr 2013	Revisiting the Seven Deadly Sins of Directing Volunteers
Sep 2012	'Why?' Is More Powerful than #@#%!
Aug 2005	Still Tilting at Windmills
Mar 2002	The World According to Volunteer Experience
Jun 2002	Reacting to the Critics
Mar 2011	Exercise Your Volunteering Funny Bone
Apr 2000	Some Truths Revealed about Nametags
Feb 2013	The Treasure Trove of Knowledge Philanthropists
Dec 2003	The Need for Institutional Memory
Jul 2014	I Really Want to Know: What's Going on Out There?
Jul 2002	What's Hot, What's Not

20. Sector Infrastructure, Collaboration & Networking

Building sector infrastructure — collaboration between organisations, volunteer centres, professional networks, conferences, and connecting across the field.

Date	Article Title (click to open)
Jul 2018	What Is the New National Alliance for Volunteer Engagement and What Will It Mean for Us?
Oct 2020	Engage: The Global Voice of Leaders of Volunteer Engagement Has Launched
Jun 2016	The Division of Labour between Volunteer Centres and Volunteer-Involving Organisations
Dec 2002	United Way is Not the Way for Volunteer Centres
Aug 2007	The Big Merger: Many Unanswered Questions
May 2007	Make New Friends But Keep the Old...
Apr 2005	We Can Model True Collaboration
Sep 1998	Reinventing Conferences
Aug 1998	The Missing Link: Where Are Volunteers at the National Level?
Jan 2001	Who is Celebrating IYV? Connecting the 'Streams of Service'
Mar 2007	Marking a Special Birthday
Jul 2006	'I Don't Have Time'

About Susan J. Ellis

Susan J. Ellis was the founder and, until her passing in April 2019, President of Energize, Inc., a Philadelphia-based training, consulting, and publishing firm specialising in volunteerism. She authored or co-authored numerous books including From the Top Down: The Executive Role in Successful Volunteer Involvement, and The Last Virtual Volunteering Guidebook. She was a beloved and tireless advocate for taking volunteer engagement seriously at every level of organisations and government.

The complete Hot Topics archive is available at: www.energizeinc.com/hot-topics-and-news

This reference guide was compiled to help the global volunteer engagement community access Susan's wisdom more easily. All articles remain the intellectual property of Energize, Inc.