



# The Future of Volunteering:

## Is change coming faster than you think?

As I travel and work with volunteer groups of all shapes and sizes, there's one mistake I see made, more than any other; the attempt of trying to engage 21st century volunteers using outdated volunteer management practices.

I'd go so far as to say this is the cardinal sin of volunteer engagement.

Thirty years ago, you'd have been given some wriggle room in this regard. Things moved at a much slower pace, change was more gradual and those doing the changing (our volunteers) were much more forgiving. However, the pace of change in 2018 now dictates that a constant evolution is required.

I sat down to write this article in a hotel lobby where a farm machinery convention happened to be taking place. As I did, I was intrigued to hear four tractor salesmen sitting nearby talking about how to engage 21st century tractor customers. And yes, it all revolved around engaging with technology better, conversing via social media and offering flexibility in the way that sales were conducted. Their conclusion? We can't keep selling tractors in the same way we always have.

So, if tractor salesmen get it, why do I constantly witness so much resistance in the non-profit sector?

So engrained is this reluctance to change, that even when many non-profits agree to start implementing general change, embracing new technologies or updated work strategies, there is often an underlying belief that they'll be able to forge change, while at the same time continuing to operate in exactly the same way they have for the last 30 years.

Well I'm sorry folks, you can't have it both ways!

While many volunteer involving agencies are familiar with the need to embrace electronic databases, engage via social media and to ensure that their roles are more geared to episodic and short term volunteer involvement, I wonder how many of us ever take time to focus on some of those bigger picture changes that might be coming?

So, just what might the future of volunteering involve?

Well, to understand the future of unpaid work, we need look no further than what is happening in the world of paid employment and business.

Something I find fascinating is the rapid growth of technology, and more particularly, how modern technologies are replacing traditional work roles and careers. It is frightening to see how rapidly these new technologies keep evolving.

I live in the state of South Australia, a part of Australia that was founded on the manufacturing industry. The production of automobiles and the associated industries of building engines and other parts formed a large part of this.

As of 2017, Australia no longer has an automotive manufacturing industry, and pretty much all the other white good and other manufacturing producers have also all but disappeared.

While some of this is due to the cheaper cost of production in Asia, the emergence and refinement of robotics has also played a big role in this cost cutting evolution. In short, why pay 100 individual people to do a job, when you can make a one-time investment in a robot to do the same work? Using a robot can simplify everything, limit risks of injury and negate the stress of recruitment and workforce continuity.

To put this in some perspective, a recent Price Waterhouse report predicts that 50% of all current jobs will be replaced by robots by the mid 2030's. ([www.pwc.pl/clarityfromabove](http://www.pwc.pl/clarityfromabove))

Is the volunteer sector immune from this?

It is becoming increasingly harder to recruit volunteers to undertake repetitive, menial tasks, but at the same time, the reduction of costs in new technologies offers a solution. Should they be considered a common-sense approach for the charity sector? After all, while volunteers do work for free, they still incur costs to organisations via training, uniforms, equipment and even the cost of staff to support their work. There's also our responsibility of ensuring we don't waste the time of those giving us time, when other solutions are available to be explored.

The evolution of one new technology in particular, provides an interesting case in point. Driverless car technology is emerging faster than we might like to think and it offers an interesting insight into what the future might look like. Driverless cars are already in heavy testing phases and already being trialled in some public locations.

So, here's a question. Imagine for a moment that you are a voluntary sector CEO. Do you buy a driverless vehicle or continue to engage a team of 10 - 20 volunteers to drive your agency's vehicle? Accidents in driverless vehicles will be just about non-existent, and as a result, the costs associated with insurance and registration will be much lower. Also, you'd never have to keep tabs on your volunteers' changing health needs or their driver's licence expiry dates. You'd also probably save some money by not having to employ someone to look after the transport team.

It's a frightening and somewhat sobering thought, isn't it? While in the short term, cost may be a prohibitive factor in this scenario, let me assure you this is coming. In fact, some predict that driverless cars will start to become commonplace within the next decade.

Consider also the development of drone technology. Drones are a great example of how the cost of new technologies can rapidly fall to a point where they are accessible by the everyday person.



Drone usage has grown exponentially, to the point that Price Waterhouse predicts that drones alone will contribute \$127 billion worth of value to emerging global business market solutions as we move forward.

Might drones also replace volunteers who are undertaking traditional voluntary tasks like security surveillance, surf life-saving, search and rescue, the delivery of goods (meals on wheels) or even volunteer dog walking? While this may all seem like some sort of pie-in-the-sky futuristic mumbo jumbo, remember that for many of us (especially those of us working with technology), our jobs didn't even exist a few years ago.

The point I want to make is that for those working in the non-profit sector, it is incumbent on us to be considering all of these potential futures. We need to lead discussions about where volunteers will and won't be able to be replaced.

I don't want to give the impression that volunteering is doomed, but rather, voluntary agencies need to think strategically about how they position themselves, in order to remain relevant to a changing market place.

So, what might be some of the roles immune from this type of change? Which might be the areas of volunteer involvement we should be looking to strengthen? I believe that one area in where volunteers won't be easily replaced, are those roles where support and care are required.

Think of roles like counselling, hospice work, youth guidance and other roles where physical touch, a wise head and an empathetic heart are required. Even though I am sure that one day a robot will do these roles, I find it hard to imagine a time where the human touch is a lesser solution to technology.

So, the good news is I believe there is a strong future for volunteering. However, I think we need to be mindful of, and open to, the change that is upon us. Let's focus on how we engage volunteers in the most productive ways and be accepting of change where and when it needs to occur.

How do we go about this?

- Make time in your professional role to read reports, journal articles and research.
- Be eager to learn.

- Think outside the box – seek out information about societal change that's happening outside the volunteering sector.
- Discuss these topics with your peers at network meetings and conferences.
- Embrace change – new technologies can be your friend.

Let's embrace the future of volunteering.



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