Winning Volunteer Scenarios: The Soul of a New Machine

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Abstract

In this article we introduce a new metaphor of volunteer involvement based on a "slot machine," founded on generating "winning volunteer scenarios." We define a volunteer scenario as a combination of the Assets of a potential volunteer, the Availability of volunteers, and a particular volunteer Assignment or job offered by the host organization. Our model seeks to optimize "winning" volunteer scenarios -- that is, triple A ratings (AAA) -- in which the Assets and Availability a potential volunteer brings to the organization is matched with, or negotiated to fulfill, an organizational Assignment. The article shows that this model can be useful in understanding changes in the world of volunteerism, designing strategies to adapt to them in a variety of organizational contexts, and helping both individuals and organizations learn how to create and integrate diverse offers of time and resources from prospective volunteers.

Keywords:
episodic volunteering, matching, assets, availability, assignments

The past two decades have witnessed great changes in the scope and nature of volunteering. Scholars of volunteerism and participation document the assumed "passing" of the traditional volunteer, the rise of episodic (Cnaan & Handy, 2005; Handy, Brodeur, & Cnaan, 2006; Macduff, 2005) and other forms of volunteering (stipended, service-learning, employee volunteer programs, campaigning, virtual, etc.), an apparent loss of social capital (Putnam, 2000), the emergence of postmodernism (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003), and problems in building citizenship and community. Practitioners in the field of volunteerism, such as directors of volunteer programs or resources, find themselves at the front lines of these changes, and struggle to make sense of them, let alone to cope with them. Such dramatic changes prompt volunteerism experts Steve McCurley and Susan J. Ellis (2003, p. 1) to ask, "Are We using the wrong model for volunteer work?"

In this article we introduce a novel model for adapting to these changes based on analogy to a "slot machine." The model is founded on generating "winning volunteer scenarios." The article shows that the new

model can be useful in understanding changes in the world of volunteerism, designing strategies to adjust to them in a variety of organizational contexts, and helping both individuals and organizations learn how to create and integrate diverse offers of time and resources from prospective volunteers. We begin by differentiating types of volunteers; we then introduce and explicate the slot machine metaphor and it's application to volunteerism.

Emerging Types Of Volunteers

Despite the complexity of volunteering, most offers and requests to contribute time can be broken down into two basic components: availability and assets. Discussions of episodic versus traditional volunteering center nearly exclusively on the issue of (changing) availability (Cnaan & Handy, 2005; Handy, Brodeur & Cnaan, 2006; Macduff, 2005). Episodic volunteering can be defined as giving one's time sporadically without an ongoing commitment, only during special times of the year, or at one-time events, often in the form of self-contained and time-specific projects (Weber, 2002). By *traditional*, we mean volunteering at regularly scheduled intervals, such as weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly on an ongoing basis. We can thus classify episodic volunteers as having *low*

availability for organizational assignments, and traditional volunteers as having relatively *high* availability.

Our model introduces the concept of volunteer assets into this mix, that is, the talents, capabilities, knowledge, and expertise that volunteers wish to use or apply in their assignments, or those elements that the host organization needs or is willing to accept. For heuristic purposes, we again classify assets into the categories *low* and *high*, with the caveat that the classification is not an inherent quality but an assessment of the assets the prospective volunteer wishes to devote to an assignment or that the organization cares to use. Cross-tabulating availability and assets in Table 1 yields four emerging types of volunteers that confront administrators of volunteer programs. For convenience, we label the different types *service*, *star*, *sweat*, and *specialist*.

Service volunteers are characterized as offering high availability but low assets. These are the traditional back-bone volunteers who supplied the donated labor on which so many social services are predicated and traditional volunteer programs built. We stereotype them as low assets not because of anything inherent to their capabilities, but because volunteer programs may not have called upon them or expected them to use many of their assets

Table 1. *Emerging Types of Volunteers*

Traditional/ Episodic	Assets	Availability	Emerging Type of Volunteer
Traditional	Low	High	Service
	High	High	Star
	Low	Low	Sweat
Episodic	High	Low	Specialist

in volunteering. These volunteers simply gave their time or services based upon more or less general competencies and what the organization asked them to do.

Stars are volunteers with high availability that host organizations engage precisely to benefit from their assets, such as high levels of professional training or accomplishment, influence in the community, association with important decision-makers, etc. These volunteers might make ideal board members. Organizations design positions around their assets, which might include legal, accounting, risk management, etc.

Sweat volunteers have low availability and also low assets to contribute for a given assignment. In many cases, they include younger volunteers and students engaged in service learning, who may just be starting work in organizations and lack experience. Alternatively, they encompass individuals changing careers and looking to volunteering for professional development or experimentation but without the skills or background to proceed (Handy & Brudney, 2007). They can also be trained professionals looking to do something outside of their chosen career field (for example, a doctor who would like to prepare meals). From the perspective of the organization, these volunteers bring few assets to the assignment beyond those commonly encountered.

Specialists again have low availability, but they have high assets that they wish to contribute. Accomplished professionals such as doctors, engineers, attorneys, and highly trained people spanning the gamut of fields (including the physical, natural, biological, organizational, and other sciences) may wish to donate their talents to recipient organizations for concentrated, nonrecurring time intervals. Indeed, they may not have the opportunity (availability) to contribute these valuable skills on an ongoing basis but are attracted to episodic volunteering.

For heuristic purposes, Table 1 displays the dimensions and resulting types of volunteers as categorical. In actuality, they are continuous and dynamic. Individual offers to volunteer fall along a continuum from low to high, and the assets they bring or are asked to apply in organizational assignments are likewise variegated. With regard to types, individuals can choose to be "sweat" volunteers in one organization, while they are "stars" in another. Within the same organization, too, individuals can transition or change from one type of volunteering to another. For example, a change in the life circumstances of a volunteer (for example, retirement) can increase availability so that a "specialist" volunteer becomes a star. We would also hope that an organization provides opportunities for asset-building and productive experiences that can transform "sweat" volunteers into "specialists." As well, they might offer "sweat" possibilities to former "stars" who want to lessen their engagement but remain involved.

The types of emerging volunteers identified and described here are logical categories for analysis, not judgments of the value of the contribution. Indeed, our model presented below is intended to adept to these developments in the world of volunteerism and optimize the involvement of all four types of volunteers.

Optimizing Winning Volunteer Scenarios

Understanding that the dimensions and types of volunteering are dynamic, we require a more dynamic way of negotiating volunteer assignments in host organizations. In our judgment, we need to move beyond the dichotomy of either starting from existing volunteers to define organizational tasks, or, alternatively, beginning with pre-set tasks to recruit volunteers that "fit" them

(Meijs and Hoogstad, 2001). Also there is a growing understanding that different organizational settings necessitate different models of managing volunteers to include the matching and selection process (Meijs & Hoogstad, 2001; Rochester 1999). We seek and develop a new model that incorporates both perspectives.

For this purpose, we introduce the metaphor of the slot machine to create "volunteer scenarios." A volunteer scenario is a combination of the *assets* the volunteer has and wants to offer or develop, the *availability* of the potential volunteer to offer them, and the volunteer *assignments* the organization has to engage her or him in this activity. Volunteer assets consist of skills, competencies, and resources; availability pertains to frequency, duration, and location; and assignments embrace goal-oriented and task-oriented.

In our model, volunteer scenarios can be "winning" or "losing." A winning scenario is a feasible combination of volunteer assets and availability with a volunteer assignment -- an AAA match -- that is accepted by the volunteer. A losing scenario is a nonfeasible combination; such as an individual with low, general assets for the assignment who is available for only 4 hours a year but wants to be chair of a Red Cross chapter (an assignment requiring specific skills and high availability). The volunteer scenario machine conceptualization offers a promising method to create and optimize winning volunteer scenarios.

In this article we present and discuss the model conceptually, although we see no inherent obstacle to developing a computer program or interactive Web site that would put it into practice. We use the slot machine metaphor because it is readily understood and communicated, yet distills and conveys important insights for the engagement of volunteers.

As in a slot machine, our model begins with three tumblers that represent the components of a volunteer scenario: assets, availability, and assignments. These three tumblers combine to form winning (feasible) or losing (non-feasible) volunteer scenarios. Just as the slot machine player seeks a pay-off by matching three tumblers, the prospective volunteer tries to find a winning volunteer scenario, that is, a practicable combination that meets her or his preferences for involvement. We envision, that much like the slot machine, the potential volunteer will play the volunteer scenario machine repeatedly until she or he encounters a winning volunteer scenario. In that happy circumstance, the administrator of volunteer services would follow-up with the standard tools of the profession, such as further screening, orientation, training, and eventual placement.

Alternatively, if in playing the game, potential volunteers *lose* too much or too often -- that is, they fail to encounter feasible winning volunteer scenarios in which their offers of availability and assets match organizational assignments -- the volunteer administrator is to intervene and provide assistance in the matching process. At this stage the opportunities for learning are robust, for both sides. For his or her part, the volunteer administrator would explain to prospective volunteers the reasons that the offer to volunteer is not feasible (lack of availability for organizational assignments, lack of assets, or both) and work with them to remedy the situation. In complementary fashion, the administrator of volunteer services would consider if, in light of the offer to volunteer (that is, combination of availability and assets), organizational assignments should be altered or new ones created to increase the stock and diversity of winning volunteer scenarios. The purpose of the volunteer scenario machine is, thus, not to "fill"

positions, but to optimize the opportunities for successful volunteer engagement.

Accordingly, the volunteer scenario machine differs in important ways from conventional, organization-centered approaches to volunteer job design and placement (compare Culp et al., 1998; McCurley & Lynch, 1996; Ellis, 1996a, 1996b; Brudney, 1990; Wilson, 1976). First, any of the three concepts or *tumblers* (assets, availabilities, and assignments) can be used as a starting point for a potential volunteer or an organization to create a winning volunteer scenario: The organization, or the volunteer, can begin the *game* from assets (what resources do the volunteer want to contribute and that the organization also needs?), availabilities (how often and for what length of time does the volunteer want to contribute, and can important organizational tasks be accomplished within this framework?), or assignments (what tasks might motivate the volunteer and at the same time satisfy organizational needs?).

The second, more fundamental difference is that in developing volunteer scenarios, the needs of the organization are not the only focal point. Also the needs of the volunteer, and we would argue, of the client but most important the community over the long run, have to be taken into account. Through mutual learning, the goal is to create so many winning volunteer scenarios that the machine yields a profitable (if not optimal) pay-off for all volunteer "players," that is, the four types of volunteers identified above: service, star, sweat, and specialist. In this conception the "house" (organization, client, and community) wins only to the extent that potential volunteers also succeed by finding winning volunteer scenarios. In our view, volunteer administration can no longer be only about "tapping the resources of your community" (Ellis, 1996b, p. 107) but also

has an obligation to maintain and grow these resources in the long run.

To do so, the volunteer scenario machine shifts the focus from filling pre-determined volunteer jobs to designing and maximizing winning volunteer scenarios. In the short-run, organizations may not realize an immediate pay-off from some volunteers. Handy and Brudney (2006) acknowledge that volunteers can "cost more than they return" to the host organization (Graff, 2006, p. 24), especially when they bring low assets and uncertain availability, or when organizational assignments are haphazard. Nevertheless, as Handy and Brudney (2006) argue, they are still worth the "investment," as a result of the positive externalities or spillovers volunteer involvement generates for the community. As Graff (2006, p. 25) observes… most volunteering is organized to generate benefits beyond the persons engaged in it. Hence, it is widely acknowledged that volunteering can produce benefits for the organization engaging the volunteer and/or for service users, program participants, and communities at large. In this sense there is usually an expectation that volunteers will generate value through their involvement.

In sum, the volunteer scenario machine is concerned with fostering learning by individuals and organizations that will generate and increase the possible opportunities for volunteer involvement in the community.

Deconstructing The Machine: Tumblers

The most visible parts of the volunteer scenario machine are the tumblers. As described above, a volunteer scenario is a combination of the assets the volunteer has and wants to offer, the availability of this offer, and the volunteer assignments the organization creates or provides.

The first tumbler represents the assets a volunteer wants to exercise or extend in an

assignment. We draw on research by Cnaan and Amrofell (1994), who proposed Volunteer Mapping Sentences as a categorizing device to track differences in types of volunteering so that apparently disparate research findings could be more easily comprehended and cumulated. Cnaan and Amrofell described ten facets of volunteering, including what is being volunteered (such as service, expense, prestige, connections). In our model, the assets tumbler consists of three components: skills, competencies, and resources. Skills can be general, or can be specialist proven skills (Ellis, 1996a). For the assets tumbler the generalist skills are called *competencies*. Specialist skills can be in line with what the organization uses in its core business or not. Resources encompass the things the volunteer may bring to the assignment, such as use of a computer, office space, transportation, etc. Important for this tumbler is that it is the potential volunteer who decides what she or he will give to the organization. If, for example, an accountant does not want to donate that skill but prefers to do direct service, the organization gets a generalist skill.

The second tumbler is the availability of the volunteer. As discussed above, changes in the availability of potential volunteers toward more episodic engagements constitute one of the most critical trends in volunteerism. Again we rely on a facet of Cnaan and Amrofell (1994) to include frequency of the volunteer offer (for example, times per year or per month) and its duration (for example, number of hours per volunteer session). We extend this facet or tumbler to include other availability factors, such as geographical location for volunteering (on-site, off-site, automobile, virtual, etc.).

The third assignment tumbler consists of two main categories: goal-oriented and task-oriented. These two categories are not exactly the same as direct service (working with clients) and indirect service (working for but not in direct contact with clients). The goal-oriented classification is the broader categorization that helps potential volunteers make the crucial first choice of the policy area or focus in which they would like to donate their time (that is, youth service, recreation, health care, literacy, etc.). To a large degree these choices have already been made by the volunteer before she or he seeks to find a winning volunteer scenario in a particular organization. The volunteer scenario machine presumes that the policy preferences of volunteers are met, and offers them assignments within this broader domain given their particular assets and availabilities. The task-oriented category is most similar to what current volunteer administration defines as volunteer positions.

Table 2 portrays the main features of the volunteer scenario machine, with illustrative detail. We emphasize that the particular characteristics of the tumblers will differ by host organization: Each agency must explicate the assets, availability, and assignments tumblers in accordance with the assets it regards as most useful and meaningful; the availability parameters that it views as most relevant and critical for effective participation; and the assignments that it seeks to place and accomplish.

Populating a Database of Feasible (Winning) Volunteer Scenarios
The central element to the volunteer scenario machine is a database of feasible volunteer scenarios. Ideally for a given organization, this database will be developed with input from prospective volunteers, and will include a wide variety of feasible volunteer scenarios commensurate with the preferences of emerging types of volunteers (see above). For illustrative purposes Table 3 presents a few examples.

Table 2. *Tumblers for the Volunteer Scenario Machine*

Assets Tumbler	Availability Tumbler	Assignment Tumbler
The assets the potential volunteer wants to offer	*The availability of the potential volunteer*	*The assignment for the potential volunteer*
Skills • Specific skills related to the core business of the organization • Specific skills not related to the core business of the organization	Frequency • Times willing to volunteer per year or per month, etc.	Goal-oriented assignment • Part of program in which volunteer prefers to work • Target groups or clients whom volunteer wants to help
Competencies • Prestige, contacts, general capabilities, etc.	Duration • Number of hours per volunteer session, etc.	Task-oriented assignment • Administrative, indirect service, direct service, fund raising, special, events, public relations, advocacy, etc.
Resources • Computer, fax machine, automobile, office space, etc.	Location • On-site, off-site, automobile, virtual, etc.	

Table 3. *Illustrative Feasible (Winning) Volunteer Scenarios*

	Assets	Availability	Assignment
1	General competencies	4 hours a year, on-site	Help with festival to recruit new members on certain days
2a	Specialist skills, non-core (financial)	A few times a year on call, virtually	Financial adviser to the board
2b	Specialist skills, non-core (legal)	A few times a year on call, virtually	Legal adviser to the board
3a	Specialist skills, core (first aid)	Bi-weekly on Saturday	First aid volunteer at bi-weekly home soccer game
3b	Specialist skills, core (first aid)	A few times on call, on site, hometown	First aid volunteer at special tournaments
4a	Specialist skills, core (violin player)	Monthly 4 hours, on site, hometown	Perform in orchestra of church choir
4b	Specialist skills, non-core (violin player)	Monthly 4 hours, on site, anywhere	Perform at volunteer recognition event with Red Cross
5	Prestige and contacts	A few times per year	"Celebrity" Ambassador

We can illustrate nonfeasible volunteer scenarios based on the feasible (winning) scenarios depicted in Table 3. The first example becomes nonfeasible immediately if specific skills are needed, or if the availability is only off-site, or if the organization offers only very limited days. The second example likewise becomes nonfeasible if the potential volunteer wants to offer specialist skills (for example, legal) that are not needed at this moment. The third scenario becomes difficult if the soccer association plays on Sundays, or if the days of the tournaments do not meet the schedule of the potential volunteer.

The database of feasible volunteer scenarios can be created in different ways. The first way is quite traditional: The volunteer administrator develops a range of assignments and defines minimum and maximum values for assets and availabilities. Ellis (1996a) and McCurley and Lynch (1996) present methods of volunteer job design based on involving paid staff. In this way many winning volunteer scenarios might be created in advance. As an illustration, for the assignment to be a chair for a local scouting chapter, the minimum availability might be 4 hours bi-weekly with a maximum of 8 hours per week, on site, requiring assets such as well-developed general competencies and proven skills in chairing. For the assignment to be an organizational "celebrity" ambassador, (i.e., a well-known or -recognized spokesperson) (Table 3), the requirements for availability might be very low, but the assets needed, such as prestige, contacts, and reputation, would be very high and selective.

The second approach to developing a database of feasible volunteer scenarios is quite nontraditional. It begins with the organization seriously considering the different minimum and maximum availabilities of potential volunteers, and carefully examining and questioning whether it can/should devise meaningful volunteer assignments to accommodate them. The same procedure can be implemented from the starting point of assets: Can/should the organization design assignments to meet all the assets offered? This approach can lead to the development of new, probably noncore business related assignments.

A third, non-traditional approach made possible by the volunteer scenario machine is for administrators of volunteer resources to keep track of all "losing" availability and/or assets readings of potential volunteers, and to discuss with them possible assignments that would make a winning scenario: both volunteers and organizations can learn as a result. The opportunity for the former is to become more realistic about their availability in light of aspirations for asset use or development. For the latter, the learning centers around becoming more adept and creative in regard to developing volunteer assignments attuned to societal changes. The volunteer assignments are revised and incorporated into the database of feasible (winning) volunteer scenarios.

This last method, in particular, illustrates the feedback and mutual learning that the volunteer scenario machine builds into the volunteer-organization negotiation process. It does not start from the perspective of the organization and is not dominated by it.

A New Conception of Volunteer Matching and Selection

According to Ellis (1996a, pp. 94-95), in the matching and selection process a volunteer administrator should explain honestly to prospective volunteers the tasks that need to be done, the context of the work, the time considerations, possible out of pocket costs, the training the organization offers, the qualifications and characteristics

that would be ideal, and the benefits for the volunteer (cf. Brudney, 1990). Rather than finding the best candidates for vacant volunteer positions by "screening out," the volunteer scenario machine conceptualization aims at "screening in." That is, the purpose of applying the model is to find or create meaningful assignments that give (all) interested individuals an opportunity to demonstrate the investment they are prepared (assets) and willing (availability) to make in volunteering (assignment). This perspective leads to having many feasible volunteer scenarios, some of which may not fall within the core business of the organization but are important, nevertheless, in building community capacity.

A concern that we have and alleviate through our model is that by refusing offers of citizens to contribute time, organizations lessen the chances for future engagement, not only within their own auspices but also for other groups, agencies, and causes in the community. Moreover, since giving time and giving money are highly correlated, diminishing the supply of volunteers will likely decrease the number of financial contributors to nonprofit institutions and activity in the community as well. These effects seem to be particularly pronounced among younger people, and are likely to be carried over the life-course with negative consequences for community building.

A study by the Independent Sector Organization (2002) in the United States found that adults who participated in volunteering in their youth give more money and volunteer more time than adults who began their philanthropy later in life. Fully two-thirds of adult volunteers began volunteering their time when they were young, and adults who began volunteering as youth are twice as likely to volunteer as those who did not volunteer when they were younger. In every income and age group,

those who volunteered as a youth contributed more and volunteered more than those who did not. The Independent Sector (2002) report strongly suggests that choking off the influx of people into volunteering by refusing their offers is hazardous to community health.

From the perspective of the volunteer scenario machine conceptualization, this problem translates into not having or finding suitable assignments that match the assets and availabilities offered by prospective volunteers. A strength of the model is that the volunteer, or the organization, can begin the matching process with any tumbler: assets, availability, or assignments. The approach fails when these potential service collaborators can arrive at no winning scenario, that is, feasible combination of the volunteer's assets and availabilities that can be matched to the organizational assignments that move prospective volunteers -- a result we wish to avoid. Before this juncture is reached, however, the model calls for the volunteer administrator to discuss with the prospective volunteer the reasons why there is no winning match, and what can be done by either or both parties to resolve the impasse. This is an important feedback loop offered by the approach.

Perhaps the problem lies in rote reliance on today's winning volunteer scenarios, which can reduce the flexibility and adaptability of the organization to meet its own needs and those of volunteers over the long run. Or, perhaps there are institutional obstacles to volunteering that can be ameliorated (Ellis, 1996a). Or the reason may be that potential volunteers bring novel or unique assets that need to be translated into new winning volunteer scenarios.

But it can, of course, also be the case that the potential volunteer seeks an impossible or unrealistic combination of assets, availability, and assignments. In this instance the volunteer administrator needs to

educate or negotiate with the potential volunteer. Conceptually one can say that this potential volunteer is over-demanding in the sense that she or he seeks to maximize the pay-offs for herself or himself at the expense of the organization, the client, or the community.

This type of feedback comes from repeated playing of the game in which potential volunteers and the volunteer administrator discover that there are not enough winning volunteer scenarios. The implication: the tumblers have to be adjusted or expanded so that more winning volunteer scenarios are possible. If potential volunteers continue to play the scenario machine but too rarely or never receive a pay-off, that is, a winning volunteer scenario, the danger is that they will become disillusioned, frustrated or worse, and elect not to play the game again -- much to their own detriment, and that of the client, the organization, and the community. The volunteer scenario machine is designed to encourage learning to minimize, or overcome, this negative outcome. In this way it will improve the long-run volunteerability in the community (Meijs et al, 2006).

Conclusions
The volunteer universe is changing. New volunteers, mainly episodic, dot the landscape. Volunteer administrators seem to be very active and inventive in chunking existing job descriptions into much smaller parts to accommodate them. Yet, the volunteer universe is not traditional or episodic -- it is both and all gradations in between. We maintain that organizations working with volunteers need to develop winning volunteer scenarios that together over the long run are:

- useful for organizations and clients by providing more and better services.

- attractive for potential volunteers and at the same time offer them enough flexibility to be able to do something for the organization (and for themselves) within their assets and availabilities.
- conducive to change in the asset and availability combinations of volunteers.
- helpful in building the volunteer capacity of the community

In this article we have developed a volunteer scenario machine. conceptualization with the objective of generating multiple winning volunteer scenarios attractive to different types of volunteers. The types are defined by their assets and availabilities: service, star, sweat, and specialist volunteers. Volunteer administrators need to invest strategically both in creating assignments attuned to these volunteers and in educating prospective volunteers to the concept of winning volunteer scenarios. Our model offers one approach to meeting these vital, inter-related goals.

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