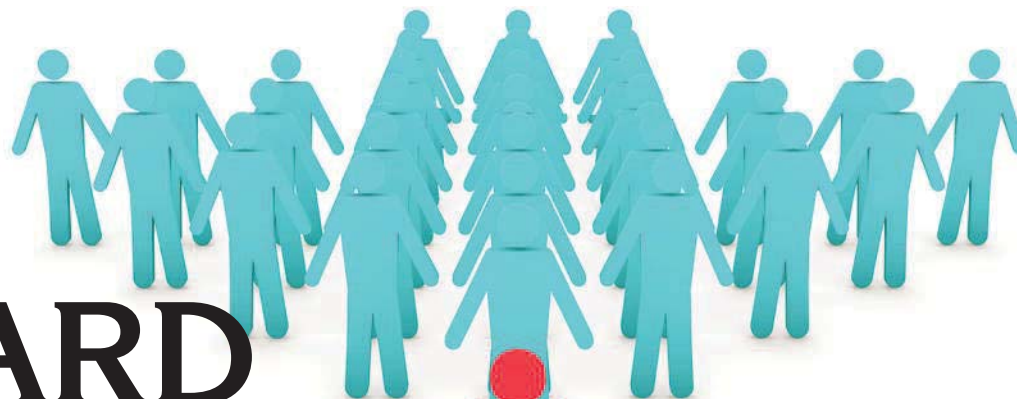


# BEST FOOT FORWARD



**VOLUNTEERING CAN BENEFIT YOUR CAREER**  
BECOMING A VOLUNTEER COULD PROVE AS REWARDING AND BENEFICIAL TO YOU AS IT IS TO THE PEOPLE YOU SERVICE.

By BILL QUINNAN | FOR O.C. REGISTER SPECIAL SECTIONS

Volunteering is not only a great way to provide service to others and build a better community; it can also be a great way to enrich your career and possibly open up new job opportunities. Regardless where you are in your career, becoming a volunteer could prove as rewarding and beneficial to you as it is to the people you service.

### Breaking into a field

Kathy Johnson, president of Vital Link, a non-profit agency that introduces youth to career paths, noted that students or recent graduates can use volunteering as a means of learning and demonstrating new skills, making connections and building accomplishments for a résumé.

“If you don’t have that history of work-based experience, by ... volunteering, you have experience to list,” she said.

Johnson noted that volunteering opportunities can be found through a variety of channels, from working with a non-profit organization, to an unpaid internship, to assisting with a class at a local school. Another possibility is working special projects with a professional organization related to one’s career path.

“(Professional organizations) often have special projects to work on,” she noted. “If they don’t, propose one.”

### Coping with unemployment

Employers typically prefer to

hire people who are currently employed over those who are not. Johnson noted that volunteer work can provide a means of staying actively engaged during a period of unemployment, keeping job skills current and avoiding a sense of isolation and frustration that may accompany a prolonged search. It can also be valuable for building connections that might lead to new employment.

“By volunteering, you have just multiplied your network of people tremendously,” she said. As a volunteer, one can establish relationships with other volunteers, people within the organization for which one is volunteering, or people who attend the events held by that organization, among others.

### Stepping out of the workforce

Former Irvine resident Colleen Jones observed that for those who step out of the traditional workforce for various reasons – such as taking care of children or aging relatives – volunteering offers a way to remain connected with other adults, learn and apply skills, and make a positive difference in their communities.

Jones, who recently launched a volunteer-oriented blog ([volunteercheer.wordpress.com](http://volunteercheer.wordpress.com)), has found volunteering to be enriching on a number of levels. As a classroom volunteer, she helped foster a better educational environment for her own daughters. Through

running a group for stay-at-home mothers at her church, she established solid friendships as well as professional contacts, such as guests speakers she was responsible for scheduling. When she moved to Georgia a few years ago, volunteering offered a quick way to build relationships in a new community.

“I think sometimes we think we don’t have time or our problems are too big, but when you do it, you always get back more than you put into it ... I can’t imagine going into a job that didn’t allow me time to volunteer,” she said.

### Giving back

Stay-at-home mom Janelle Daniels of Tustin has been involved in a wide range of volunteer projects, ranging from restoration projects in Upper Back Bay in Newport Beach to holiday activities and summer camps for foster children through Orange County Social Services.

“I was a foster kid myself, so foster care is dear to my heart” she said.

Daniels notes that volunteering sometimes provides a break from her duties as a stay-at-home par-

ent, such as when she assists with making crafts with other moms at her church.

“As a stay-at-home mom, my only adult conversation comes from my volunteer work.”

Daniels noted that her husband also participates in volunteer projects and has often found new business connections and potential clients in the process.

### Treat it like a job

Dr. Mark Wegener, director of Balance, a physical therapy and wellness center in Mission Viejo, regularly participates in free screening events, speaking engagements and other volunteer activities. In 2008, Wegener was named a Volunteer of the Year for his work with a local chapter of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society.

While Wegener finds the benefits from volunteering to be mostly indirect, he has seen the fruit of his efforts, such as when someone will tell him that he inspired them to pursue physical-therapy treatment, which led to an improved quality of life.

He knows of at least one situation in which volunteering has led to paid employment. One of his current staff members initially came to him as volunteer, but so impressed him that he offered her a job. He noted that she stood out from other volunteers through her eagerness to learn and enthusiasm for her work. He suggests that oth-

ers hoping to have a similar experience treat their volunteer assignments as seriously as they would a paid position.

“Employers aren’t going to be looking at whether you are paid or not,” he said. “They’re looking at how you work.”

### Finding the right opportunity

Personal goals should be considered when considering volunteer positions, noted Vital Link development director Ruth Harrell. One position may be better for demonstrating skills in a current career; others may provide a means of exploring new paths. Still others may not tie directly into a career, but may still impress civic-minded employers.

“I think the best point is that volunteering is good for your résumé, good career development, and good for the community,” she said.

OneOC is an organization that helps connect volunteers to opportunities, in addition to providing training, consulting and business services to non-profit organizations. The organization’s Web site, [oneoc.org](http://oneoc.org), offers a calendar of volunteering opportunities for prospective volunteers, enabling them to find assignments based on interest and availability.

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