

3 Volunteer Opportunities That Will Seriously Boost Your Career

by [Allison Jones](#) January 22, 2014



People are buzzing about volunteering these days, and with good reason: Studies have shown that volunteering strengthens communities, is good for your health—and can even help you land a job.

However, if you are a busy professional, it can be challenging to find an opportunity that allows you to give back *and* move forward. Chances are, you want to do something related to a cause you truly care about, that fits into your busy schedule, and that can make the best use of your talents—maybe even giving you the opportunity to bolster your professional reputation. How many types of volunteer opportunities really fit that bill?

Well, depending on what type of experience you're looking for, plenty. Here are three opportunities to consider.

1. Become a Charity Board Member

What's one thing that all 1.5 million nonprofits in the United States have in common? They all have a board of directors! Boards of directors are the governing bodies of nonprofits, and they approve budgets, establish long-term strategy, oversee various organizational policies, and help raise money. And given the wide range of responsibilities a board of directors has, they need people from all backgrounds to join.

What's Required

Typically, a long-term commitment of at least a year is required for board members, with good reason: To make smart decisions about an organization, you'll need to invest time into learning about its history, current operations, and future goals.

But exactly how much time you'll spend on board-related activities depends on the organization: Small nonprofits often have boards that are more hands-on (often called a "working board"), handling everything from providing direct services to constituents to accounting. On the other hand, large nonprofits usually have staff to deal with much of daily operations, so you'll be doing more governing: Instead of accounting, think oversight of the financial health of the organization and suggesting recommendations for change. CompassPoint has a great overview of the difference between a working board and a governing board if you want to learn more.

Who Will Like It

If you want to get involved in a variety of projects and help an organization grow over time, this is the opportunity for you. While it will require a good deal of responsibility, you'll reap a ton of rewards: In addition to strengthening various skills that are beneficial regardless of your field—such as fundraising and project management—you can grow your network by connecting with and through your fellow board members.

How to Get Started

Visit BoardSource to gain more knowledge about the ins and outs of board membership. If you know people who are board members, ask them about their experience and if they know of any organizations looking for new people. If you're ready to search on your own, try looking on LinkedIn's new Volunteer Network or exploring Idealist and boardnetUSA.

2. Lend Your Skills Pro Bono

Even with staff members and an active board, nonprofits might still need help with major projects, such as redesigning a website or developing a fundraising strategy. These kinds of projects are often too expensive for a nonprofit to pay for, so pro bono consultants, who lend their time and expertise to a good cause (at no cost) are lifesavers.

What's Required

Like any consulting project, it depends on what you can offer and what the organization needs. And, like any consulting project, you'll need to come to agreement on the scope of the project, the deliverables expected, and the timeline.

For example, at my last job, we had a team of pro bono consultants through Taproot Foundation—which included a designer, a copywriter, a financial analyst, and a project

manager—help us create our first annual report. Each person had a key role in bringing the project to fruition: The copywriter interviewed various members of our community to craft a compelling story; the financial analyst worked closely with our COO and managing director of finance to capture the financial health and needs of the organization; the designer helped tie everything together by producing mockups and walking us through her ideas; and the project manager helped keep everyone on task. At the end of six months, we had a fantastic annual report.

Who Will Like It

If you prefer to dig into **one project** and see it **from start to finish**, this is ideal for you. Additionally, if there is a **skill you want to sharpen**—say, you have a killer design eye and want to try your hand at creating marketing materials—**this presents an opportunity to do so** (and will nicely bolster your portfolio).

How to Get Started

There are several organizations that match professionals to nonprofits in need of pro bono services. Check out [Taproot Foundation](#), [Catchafire](#), and [Voolla](#) to find opportunities near you. Additionally, many businesses have pro bono programs where they invite employees to share their skills with local nonprofits. Check with HR to see if your employer has a program like this.

3. Help Others as a Business or Career Coach

There are many nonprofits that strive to help people excel by offering job training or entrepreneurship coaching. To do this effectively, these nonprofits rely on expert advice from successful leaders (hint: like you!). Whereas a board member or pro bono consultant actually manages or oversees projects, as a coach, you'll be working with a specific nonprofit to offer advice and insights to job seekers or budding entrepreneurs.

What's Required

What you'll have to do really varies depending on the program the nonprofit is offering. Some organizations, like [Upwardly Global](#), need experts to meet with constituents occasionally and talk about a specific challenge in job seeking or business building. Others, like [Career Resource Center](#), pair you up with one or two people in need of guidance, and you meet with them regularly as a mentor. What's required across the board is a good understanding of the topic you're discussing and commitment to whatever time you sign up for. Because you're working directly with the nonprofit's constituents, adhering to time is especially key.

Who Will Like It

If you need more flexibility in how often you volunteer, you'll enjoy this opportunity. It's also good if you want to work directly with people and **see the impact of your involvement**. Additionally, coaching **allows you to stretch your skills**, as you have to apply your knowledge

regularly to new situations. Plus, if you're participating in a formal program, you can network with other coaches.

How to Get Started

To get the most of an opportunity like this, it helps to volunteer with an organization that has a structured and successful program. [MercyCorps' MicroMentor program](#) often needs business coaches, while [Dress for Success](#) and [Net Impact](#) offer opportunities for career coaches. To find more opportunities, search on Idealist or reach out to a university or public library near you (they often have programs that support local business owners and job seekers).

Volunteering can be a rewarding way to help others while also growing your skills and expertise. Consider seeking one of these opportunities this year, and look forward to reaping the many benefits.

About the Author



Allison Jones is a writer and changemaker committed to helping people make the world a better place. She's an editor at [Idealist.org](#), a global nonprofit that connects people jobs, internships, and volunteer opportunities at social-impact organizations around the world. When not working she's blogging about how to create a career that makes a difference at [allisonj.org](#), exploring her New Jersey neighborhood by foot, and making a mess in her kitchen. Connect with her on twitter [@ajlovesya](#).