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Keep job skills sharp with volunteer work

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Sunday, July 26, 2009

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(07-26) 04:00 PDT 07/26/09 -- When you're out of work, it's easy to get into a mindset where you're willing to take on any paying job. It may be better to drop the word "paying" from your criteria, though, because doing volunteer work may actually do far more good than taking a paying job outside of your skill set.

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It may seem counterintuitive to take time away from your job search to work without a paycheck, but there are some huge advantages. One of the biggest is that it can prevent unattractive gaps in your work history. Hiring managers in this economy may be willing to overlook of periods of unemployment, but even the most qualified job seekers can lose their luster if

they're "on the beach" for too long. "It's a good way to show that the time has not gone idly by," says Steven Joiner, the director of the Career Transitions Program at Idealist.org. "People want to know you've done more with your time than watch soaps and stare at job boards."

That said, simply falling in line and doing the same volunteer work as a high school student is equally unimpressive. Instead, job seekers should put their skills to use if they want to have something to impress future employers. "There are two ways to be a part of volunteer organizations," says Joiner. "One is to see what's out there, and the other is to create something yourself. A lot of people miss the concept of the second. If they don't see something they're interested in, they just stop." Instead of browsing the job boards for volunteer opportunities in their specific fields, job seekers should find an organization they're passionate about and look for ways to make themselves valuable to that organization.

A common pitfall when using non-profit work to enhance one's career experience is not committing fully to seeing a project through. "I've had people say, 'I gave this non-profit a fantastic marketing plan for how to redo their image and their logo, and a year later nothing's happened,'" Joiner says. Volunteers need to show initiative, both as a boon to the non-profit and as a way to demonstrate their capabilities to their future employers. "People come up to me and say, 'I love Idealist, how can I help?' I say, 'I have no idea how you can help. You need to come to me and tell me how you're going to help,'" Joiner adds. "And then you need to go do it."

Taking the lead may be intimidating to those who haven't been accustomed to leadership roles in their previous jobs, but the upside of having to run the show solo is getting to run the show solo. "If the organization likes your project but doesn't have the time to put it into action, there's no reason in the world you can't recruit other volunteers and implement it yourself," says Lou Reda, executive director of HandsOn Bay Area, a San Francisco-based organization that creates opportunities for people to volunteer in local communities. Job seekers can leverage these kinds of successes to show that they have real-world experience in planning, executing and managing a team of people on a project that has real influence for an entire organization.

Another advantage in an interview situation is more subtle, but no less important. Job seekers who spend their time hunting down work without any other activities begin to get desperate, and it shows. "It's easy when you're isolated to feel like the world is falling

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apart and everything is horrible," Reda explains. Getting out in the real world, interacting with other people, and making tangible accomplishments can help dissipate that negative attitude. "You feel better about yourself and you come off as more excited, engaged and confident. -- all of which are qualities that are extremely attractive to potential employers.

If job seekers see an opportunity to take on more responsibility or a different skill area opens up, they should snatch it and leverage that experience to show future employers what they're capable of. Have the folks at the non-profit write letters of recommendation for you, urges Reda. Get that third-party acknowledgement and verification of your work. Enthusiastic referrals and recommendations can go a long way toward giving job seekers that extra boost in an interview if their potential employer isn't sure they're capable of handling their needs. The networking opportunities that come from volunteer work are significant, too. You spend more time communicating with human beings, meeting people who may actually know someone who can help you out, who likes the work they see from you, Joiner says. Companies in every sector contribute to non-profits and participate in their events, and that expanded network may be just what's needed to give job seekers a boost in their search. The bottom line about volunteering? It's a whole lot more useful than sitting home filling out applications, Joiner says. Get out there. Show them what you can do.

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