

## THE BENEFITS OF VOLUNTEERING WHEN JOB SEARCHING



**Summary:** *There's so much you can do when you're between jobs. Don't waste this precious opportunity to make a positive change in your life and in your career.*

Let's face it: It's hard to conduct a job search 9-to-5. It can be grueling as well as lonely. Most of us – even the most active jobseekers – find ourselves with more downtime than when we were gainfully employed, if only from not having to commute. Whether we become unemployed by choice or as the result of a downsizing, the time between jobs can be a gift.

Indeed, unemployment can have its advantages. There's so much you can do during this period. Don't waste this opportunity.

Now that you have more time than before, how will you use it? That was the first question I asked myself when unemployment became my reality. Some might seize their downtime as an opportunity to spend more time with their children, take up a hobby, write a book, take a class or pursue another personal interest. These are all productive outlets.

I decided to explore different career paths and to remain productive, despite not working full time. As a single guy living in the wilds of central [Pennsylvania](#) (not a huge hub of commerce), I had to be somewhat creative to find the right activity for me.

Since I'd once considered teaching as a career, I saw no better way to spend my free time than by volunteering at a local elementary school. I visited the school closest to my house and asked what I could do. I now assist teachers in their lessons and help run a program for bright creative thinkers called "[Odyssey of the Mind](#)," managed primarily by local volunteers in conjunction with schools.

I volunteer three times a week, which still gives me plenty of time to surf the Internet and network with contacts about new professional opportunities. The stint has helped me realize that teaching, though a fine and admirable career, isn't really for me. But I've gotten so much more out of it. For starters, talking in front of classes has improved my public-speaking skills, something I can apply to my next job. More importantly, the work gives me a sense of giving back to my community, as well as personal satisfaction. It also helps reduce the boredom and isolation that comes with unemployment and provides structure to my week, forcing me to focus on what I need to accomplish.

Knowing that you are doing something good for others is a great way to boost your self-esteem when you may otherwise feel down. This increased self-confidence and satisfaction will show during interviews. And, volunteering is something positive to discuss with interviewers. You can talk about how simultaneously with your job search you're actively participating in your community and using your transition to grow as a person. Giving your time to a cause you believe in is admirable and demonstrates dedication. This indicates to potential employers that for you, working is about enjoying what you do, not just a paycheck. Employers like employees who are passionate about their jobs.

Volunteering keeps your skills polished because you're getting up and participating in a real work environment on a daily basis. And you still have the flexibility you need to go on interviews. You even may gain experience that might help you land your dream job.

If you like the idea of volunteering, but don't know what to do, think about a cause you feel strongly about. Is it helping a certain group of people – children with cancer or senior citizens – or fighting for a specific issue, such as better health care or a cleaner environment? Most likely, if you can think of it, there's an organization out there that represents it.

Once you've identified your ideal cause, start researching it online. One website I suggest is [www.idealists.org](http://www.idealists.org). This site allows you to search thousands of nonprofits (it also lists job openings and nonprofit career fairs). Another site to check out is [www.Granted.com](http://www.Granted.com).

Identify specific organizations in your region where you'd like to volunteer. Give each a call and offer to work a couple of times per week. The vast majority would be more than happy to have some free labor for a while, especially during these times of government cutbacks and budget shortfalls.

Who knows? If you enjoy your stint, you might want to seek a paying position in the nonprofit sector. Volunteering is an excellent way to network for your next job. You can learn about the inner-workings of an outfit and gain nonprofit experience, all while doing something productive with your time. If a position you're interested in should become available, you might be considered for it before someone else. You might even split your volunteering among two or more groups. You'll get experience plus increase your chances of landing a paying job at one of them.

An employment transition presents the rare opportunity to make changes you've always wanted in your life. Use your time between jobs wisely. Remember to take care of yourself, network with your contacts and give something back to your community. If you do so, this period may well be something you look back on fondly.