

## Abstract

Nonprofit volunteers are becoming more important to mission success even as the traditional model of service is being replaced by more flexible, skills-based, and partnership-driven approaches. Current research points to four big shifts: episodic service is replacing recurring weekly commitments; skills-based and virtual roles are expanding; corporate volunteer programs are becoming a major pipeline but demand measurable outcomes; and legal, screening, privacy, and worker-classification risks are growing. For nonprofit leaders, the implication is clear: volunteer programs can no longer be managed as side functions. They must be redesigned as strategic systems that build capacity, reduce risk, and strengthen organizational resilience.

---

# NMN Executive Briefing—Changing Roles & Importance of Nonprofit Volunteers

Week of April 20, 2026

## From Nonprofit Management Navigator

*Please See About Nonprofit Management Navigator and Understanding This Information and Disclaimer at the Conclusion of the Article*

---

*The following NMN Executive Briefing is the seventh installment in a new weekly feature from Nonprofit Management Navigator. Each week, we publish an analysis devoted exclusively to a high-priority nonprofit management topic—a topic likely to significantly affect 2026 nonprofit performance and beyond. The NMN Executive Briefing is provided in addition to your regular weekly Navigator News Update. You can subscribe to both for free at [NonprofitManagementNavigator.com](http://NonprofitManagementNavigator.com).*

*The April 20 NMN Executive Briefing examines the changing roles and importance of nonprofit volunteers. The analysis provides nonprofit senior executives and their boards with the insight they need to make better volunteer management decisions in the near and longer term—decisions that promote long-term mission success and organizational resilience.*

---

## Importance and Definitions

Volunteer engagement remains a core part of nonprofit mission delivery, community legitimacy, and operating resilience. What is changing is not the importance of volunteers, but the form their service now takes. Research from the Johnson Center shows a multi-decade shift away from the long-term, recurring volunteer model toward short-term, project-based, and episodic service, making the old assumption of a dependable weekly volunteer base far less reliable. <sup>1</sup>

## Major Developments

Several developments now define the volunteer landscape. First, flexibility has become the price of entry: volunteers increasingly prefer short assignments, remote options, and clear evidence that their time produces visible results. VolunteerHub reports that virtual volunteers can contribute substantial annual hours, while hybrid design improves both recruitment and retention.<sup>2</sup> Second, skills-based volunteering is growing because nonprofits can access marketing, legal, finance, technology, and strategic expertise they often cannot afford to buy in the market.<sup>3</sup>

Third, corporate volunteerism is becoming a larger and more strategic force. Benevity reports record levels of approved corporate volunteer hours and participation but also shows that much of this activity remains micro-volunteering rather than long-term capacity building. Double the Donation similarly points to growing employer-sponsored programs and paid volunteer time off, which means nonprofit organizations increasingly must present structured, measurable opportunities if they want to attract and retain these partnerships.<sup>4,5</sup>

Fourth, volunteer demographics and engagement patterns are shifting. The American Red Cross reports that Gen Z is now its largest and fastest-growing volunteer cohort, while national data cited by Nonprofit Learning Lab shows volunteering has rebounded from pandemic lows but remains below the pre-2020 peak. The message for nonprofit leaders is that volunteer energy is returning, but it is returning in different forms and at uneven rates.<sup>6,7</sup>

## Implications for Nonprofits Near Term and Longer Term

In the near term, nonprofits need to redesign volunteer roles, so they are modular, easier to onboard, and connected to specific outcomes. They also need stronger systems for recognizing value. Tobi Johnson's ROI framework underscores that disciplined tracking of volunteer hours can support financial storytelling and grant positioning, while Galaxy Digital notes that appreciation and year-round recognition are central to retention and can also support donor development.<sup>8,9</sup>

Over the longer term, the volunteer function is becoming more strategic and more operationally demanding. VolunteerHub describes the volunteer coordinator role as a management function now tied to digital onboarding, retention, corporate partnerships, and metrics. At the same time, policies and handbooks can no longer be treated as optional. Galaxy Digital, Cerini, and multiple legal and insurance sources make clear that onboarding, screening, role definitions, safety procedures, handbook policies, and annual review are essential risk-management tools rather than administrative extras.<sup>10,11,12,13,14,15,16,18</sup>

Legal exposure is also rising. Federal and state volunteer protection rules do not eliminate organizational liability, volunteers should not serve as supervisors over paid staff, and misclassification can trigger wage-and-hour claims. Organizations serving vulnerable populations face additional background-check and safeguarding obligations, while nonprofits giving volunteers access to donor, financial, or email systems must fold them into cybersecurity and privacy controls.<sup>13,14,15,16,17,18,19</sup>

## Action Steps for Nonprofit Leaders

Nonprofit leaders should respond by treating volunteer programs as strategic infrastructure. The most practical next steps are to: redesign roles into shorter, clearly scoped assignments with

visible impact;<sup>1,2</sup> expand hybrid and remote opportunities where appropriate;<sup>2</sup> build more formal skills-based and corporate volunteer projects;<sup>3,4,5</sup> invest in trained volunteer coordination and management systems;<sup>10</sup> track hours, outcomes, and recognition more consistently;<sup>8,9</sup> and tighten handbook, onboarding, screening, classification, supervision, insurance, and cybersecurity practices.<sup>11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19</sup>

## Summary

The central lesson is straightforward: volunteerism is not fading, but it is changing rapidly. Organizations that continue to rely on yesterday's volunteer model risk lower participation, weaker retention, and greater legal and operational exposure. Organizations that redesign volunteer engagement around flexibility, skills, measurement, and risk discipline will be better positioned to convert volunteer service into stronger mission capacity and longer-term resilience. <sup>1,2,3,4,5,7,10,19</sup>

---

## List of References

1. [Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University \(January 2025\)](#)
2. [VolunteerHub — How to Recruit and Engage Virtual Volunteers in 2026 \(March 2026\)](#)
3. [SUCCESS Magazine — Skills-Based Volunteering: The Smarter Way to Give Back in 2026 \(April 2026\)](#)
4. [Benevity Impact Labs, State of Corporate Volunteering 2026 \(March 2026\)](#)
5. [Double the Donation — Volunteerism Trends in 2026: Corporate Incentives and More \(January 2026\)](#)
6. [American Red Cross \(March 2026\)](#)
7. [Nonprofit Learning Lab \(January 2026\)](#)
8. [Tobi Johnson & Associates — Calculate Your Volunteer Program's ROI with this Easy Framework \(updated February 26, 2026\)](#)
9. [Galaxy Digital — Step by Step Guide to Volunteer Appreciation \(December 2025\)](#)
10. [VolunteerHub — How to Manage Volunteers Effectively in 2026 \(January 2026\)](#)
11. [Cerini & Associates, LLP — Volunteer Liability and Risk Management: What Nonprofits Need to Know \(December 2025\)](#)
12. [Galaxy Digital — Creating Effective Volunteer Policies and Procedures \(January 27, 2026\)](#)
13. [Charity First Insurance Services \(October 2022\)](#)
14. [The Miller Group Insurance — Understanding the Volunteer Protection Act and Liability \(February 2024\)](#)
15. [Law Office of Cameron Hawkins \(August 2025\)](#)

16. [Nonprofit Risk Management Center — Developing Risk Management Policies for Your Volunteer Program \(September 2024\)](#)
  17. [HRdeck — Nonprofit HR Compliance Risks and Pain Points in 2026 \(April 2026\)](#)
  18. [gcheck.com — Volunteer Background Checks: Avoiding Legal Consequences & Lawsuits \(November 2025\)](#)
  19. [Larson Gross / Aprio — Cybersecurity Best Practices for Nonprofits \(January 2026\)](#)
- 

## **About Nonprofit Management Navigator**

Nonprofit Management Navigator is a trade name of PMG46, LLC doing business as Nonprofit Management Navigator. Nonprofit Management Navigator provides this complimentary weekly subscription service designed for nonprofit leaders. This essential resource provides curated news updates on the legal, regulatory, and operational developments impacting organizations, saving executives time while keeping them informed about the important changes directly impacting their organizations. In addition to timely news, Nonprofit Management Navigator also offers in-depth reports and practical management guidance to help leaders navigate an increasingly unpredictable operating environment. What makes Nonprofit Management Navigator particularly valuable is its commitment to accessibility—the entire service is available as a complimentary subscription, ensuring critical operational intelligence reaches nonprofit leaders regardless of budget limitations during these chaotic regulatory times.

## **Understanding This Information and Disclaimer**

Nonprofit Management Navigator is a trade name of PMG46, LLC doing business as Nonprofit Management Navigator. This update from Nonprofit Management Navigator is designed to offer general insights and information. It is crucial to understand that this content is not, and should not be considered, a replacement for professional legal, accounting, or operational advice. Nonprofit Management Navigator does not provide legal advice. We urge you to consult with qualified legal, accounting, or operational professionals before taking action based on this content. While we aim for comprehensive and accurate information, Nonprofit Management Navigator cannot guarantee that every relevant development is included or that all information from our sources is entirely reliable or precise. This report draws on public sources, compiled with the support of artificial intelligence and Nonprofit Management Navigator staff.