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Pro Bono Perfection

Volunteer work can be seriously gratifying—for those who find the right opportunities

Michael Stauff's first attempt at early retirement didn't work out. Six years ago, at just 51, he retired from his job as chief financial officer of a Boston semiconductor company he had helped bring public. Immediately, he took on demanding new assignments to assist in starting up four new companies. It wasn't long before he thought: "I don't have to do this anymore."

A self-described inner-city kid who made good, he decided instead to "give something back" through volunteer work. But he didn't want to be slinging hash in a soup kitchen. He found his niche when he attended a volunteer fair and connected with the Executive Service Corps of New England, which places retired executives with nonprofits that need business and management expertise.

Now, Stauff has a new career—as a pro bono consultant to a charter school, a legal aid service, and programs serving single mothers and inner-city Hispanics. He schedules most meetings from Tuesday to Thursday, so he can also enjoy a more traditional retiree's life at his golf course home on the South Shore of Boston.

Like Stauff, many other early retirees realize that volunteering can replace the purpose and social interaction they had on the job. But it's not easy to find the perfect match for your skills and interests. A recent study by VolunteerMatch (volunteermatch.org) found that 63% of people 55 or older express interest in volunteering but are not doing so. The top reasons: They have not found the right opportunity or do not know where to begin.

Marc Freedman, founder of San Francisco-based Civic Ventures, an organization that encourages older adults to sign up for community service jobs, says it's a tricky transition to volunteering. Energetic early retirees often fall into the "trap of being pulled in many disparate directions," he says. "They tell themselves and their friends: 'I'm busier than I've ever been before,' but they end up with a portfolio that doesn't provide a deeper sense of satisfaction."

To avoid this, Freedman says that instead of saying yes to the first organization that crosses your path, step back and list the skills and experience you could bring to a volunteer job. These may include managing a large organization, writing convincing ad copy, or teaching. Then add your personal interests, including those you couldn't pursue while you were working.

To identify specific opportunities, talk to friends, approach local groups you already know about, or use Internet sites that allow you to enter your skills, location, and the type of job you want to connect with organizations that fit your criteria. You can even look for a

"virtual volunteering" job working from your computer.

Volunteer Match recommends that once you've identified a group that interests you, make an appointment to ask questions about its needs and goals and how you would fit in. Freedman says many nonprofits "are still guided by the 'Let's keep the old folks busy' approach" and are not attuned to the benefits highly skilled early retirees can offer. So be prepared to experiment with a series of short-term assignments to find what you're looking for.

Karin Bauer, 44, of San Francisco, who retired five years ago as a senior program manager for eBay ([EBAY](#)), describes her path to the perfect volunteer role as "kind of like dating." For a few years, she contributed time to animal welfare and theatrical groups. But what really clicked for her was New York-based Video Volunteers, which creates video production teams in poor communities to promote social change.

After reading in a magazine about the group's work in Ahmedabad, India, she visited that city last July to meet with key staffers. She came away thinking their mission fit perfectly with her professional background and personal interest in India, where she had traveled several times on vacation. So far, her contributions to Video Volunteers include advising on how to generate future income, helping recruit a bookkeeper, and funding and overseeing a summer internship program this year, says Bauer, who is also studying for a PhD in Indian philosophy and religion.

Because volunteers lack the authority of regular staff and may be shunted into stuffing envelopes, Freedman suggests that if you're an expert in, say, financial management, you should "craft the role as a senior fellow or special adviser. Getting the right language can help focus the work and give it substance."

Even if you have an unexplored interest, you can still become expert enough to get a good volunteer position. That's what Jim Pugh, 65, of Vienna, Va., did after he retired 10 years ago as executive officer of the U.S. Treasury's Executive Institute in Washington. He's a volunteer at the Elephant House at Washington's National Zoo, and he takes it seriously. To keep abreast of his new field, he attends elephant-management conferences and studies at an elephant sanctuary in Arkansas.

Three days a week, for six hours a day, Pugh's tasks include cleaning the three elephants' pens, preparing their food, educating visitors, and creating a photographic record of the animals' feet when medical personnel check them for injuries. When the zoo's youngest elephant, Kandula, was born five years ago, Pugh missed Thanksgiving dinner with his family because he was assisting with the birth. Pugh says people ask him why he works so hard now that he's retired. He answers that "these are the most magnificent animals in the world, and they're endangered. I appreciate the opportunity to contribute in some way to their welfare."

Early retirement carries with it the challenge of defining a new lifestyle, and for many people this includes a major commitment to volunteering. When you're not getting paid for your labor, it's all the more important to find a satisfying pursuit. Otherwise, why give up what was supposed to be a restful reward for all your previous years of hard work?