Volunteering 101: What’s In It for You?

Volunteering teaches new skills and hones existing ones, introduces you to new ideas and people, and provides opportunities to gain experience that can benefit your career.

BY TOM RINK, MLIS, AMY SAROLA, MLS, AND REBECCA VARGHA, MSLS

At the SLA 2013 Annual Conference in San Diego, newly named SLA Fellows and Rising Stars teamed up to deliver presentations on selected industry topics and trends. Tom Rink and Rebecca Vargha, 2013 Fellows, and Amy Sarola, a 2013 Rising Star, presented “Volunteering 101: What’s In It for You?” In this column, Tom, Rebecca and Amy share their latest thoughts on that topic.

Your schedule is busy and your time is valuable, so how do you make time to volunteer for SLA? Why do you volunteer?

Tom: Yes, my time is very valuable, but so is my commitment to SLA. Before agreeing to serve in any capacity, I attempt to determine the expected level of time commitment. It’s all about time management and work-life balance.

Why volunteer? The survival of any member-driven organization relies heavily on the contributions of member volunteers, and I see volunteering as one of my responsibilities as a professional.

Amy: When considering volunteer opportunities, I think that it is very important to set realistic goals. I think we can all empathize with being victimized by our own grand plans, and I have found that having an honest conversation with myself about what I can realistically take on leads to the best possible outcome for everyone and a satisfying sense of accomplishment at the end of the day. It’s OK to start small and build over time, too!

Rebecca: Every SLA member who makes a choice to volunteer is influencing the future of our association. My motivation to volunteer began early in my career. That pathway was largely influenced by both an excellent boss and local SLA members who supported all the work that I did on behalf of our organization. They understood the importance of professional development at all stages of your career. Time is a commodity, and you choose how to use it.

Every membership survey shows that networking is one of the top benefits of being an SLA member. In your experience, what are the benefits of networking globally?

Tom: By networking globally, you gain access to an unequalled diversity of ideas, cultures, and experiences. You discover and share new perspectives and fresh ideas. In turn, your actions foster a greater understanding of, tolerance for, and sensitivity to the differences between cultures. In a world where information is king and is shared nearly instantaneously, having a global network is an excellent advantage when you need the right information at the right time.

Amy: SLA provides abundant opportunities to build out your professional network before you need to tap into it. You can meet a lot of different people through the organization—future friends, colleagues, mentors, mentees, like-minded individuals, and those who will challenge your ideas and help you become a more well-rounded, thoughtful individual.

Rebecca: There are many benefits of connecting with other professionals, especially on a global scale. We learn and grow from interactions with each other within SLA. Our organization is unique among professional associations in North America in having both members and chapters located around the world. We all face common challenges, and having an inclusive network is a distinct advantage for our members in solving issues.

How has volunteering in SLA changed and benefited your career?

TOM RINK is an instructor for library services at the Broken Arrow campus of Northeastern State University in Oklahoma. He can be reached at rink@nsuok.edu. AMY SAROLA is a senior research analyst specializing in biopharmaceutical industry research at Oliver Wyman in New York. She can be reached at amy.sarola@oliverwyman.com. REBECCA VARGHA is head of the library at the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina, where she also works as an adjunct faculty member. She can be reached at vargha@email.unc.edu.
Tom: SLA has provided me with opportunities to acquire and hone skill sets that have been relevant and coveted in every job I have held. By being an active participant, by putting yourself “out there,” your work and effort get noticed. With notice comes recognition, awards, and an enhanced reputation. Reputations make or break careers—mine has been made!

Amy: SLA motivates me to keep trying, keep pushing. It allows me to interact with skilled information professionals who, being more established in their careers, give me something to aspire to. SLA helps me see possibilities.

Rebecca: Being a long-term member of SLA provides so many benefits, especially in terms of my career. I am energized by the opportunities to continue learning new skills that are available online through Webinars and at our annual conference. The opportunities to develop leadership skills are also numerous and directly benefit my employer. From conference planning to serving on a committee, the range of potential roles is diverse.

Has mentoring been a factor in your SLA experience? If so, how? Do you mentor students and people who are new to SLA?

Tom: Mentoring has played a huge role in my professional and personal growth. Having had the ability to reach out over the years to more experienced colleagues has been a godsend. I mentor colleagues frequently and reach out to the local library school. I also look forward to the Fellows/First Timers event at the annual conference to provide a structured yet informal mentoring opportunity to conference newcomers.

Amy: I have been very fortunate in my professional life to have had some really great mentors, and I am not sure that I would be quite where I am today professionally without their caring and constructive advice. As a result, I feel a strong duty to try to pay these kindnesses backward, forward, and sideways. Taking time out for other people is important. We’re in such a dynamic market—you never know how your experience may benefit someone.

Rebecca: With my current job in a library and information science graduate program, there is always an opportunity to mentor and “walk the talk” on a daily basis. The students in our program may not be aware of SLA, and as their faculty advisor for the SLA Student Group, I make sure they learn about our organization quickly. My motto is that I never met a student I did not want to mentor!

What are the benefits of volunteering? Does it set you apart in the job market or for a promotion?

Tom: Volunteering helps you meet and connect to other people. It can provide you with practical experience as you learn or develop additional job skills, and it can be fun and offer you a sense of fulfillment. Any time you are investing in yourself to develop or add new skills to your existing toolkit, you are paving the way to a successful career.

Amy: You can really distinguish yourself from the crowd by running an event or program or taking on a leadership position in your local chapter or division. Volunteering also demonstrates to your employer, in a very tangible way, that you are a valuable employee who is committed to ongoing professional development—which is useful when it’s time for performance reviews.

Rebecca: There are specific benefits in volunteering, on both personal and professional levels. Being a volunteer gives you insights into the work and challenges of all information professionals while making a difference within SLA. In terms of careers, there is less job security now, and new technical skills gained through volunteer work can help in finding the next job. A current employer may change the organizational structure and need employees with totally different skill sets. Flexibility is a key attribute when your career path is no longer linear.

What leadership skills have you developed, and how did you develop them?

Tom: I’ll go with managing conflict, taking responsibility, and decision making à la the school of hard knocks. I recall one conflict that arose from my lack of communication. I listened to all sides, accepted responsibility (and apologized) for the miscommunication, and made a decision based on all of the available information.

Amy: Soft skills, most definitely. I am naturally much better at leading processes than people, and leading a team of volunteers on an SLA chapter committee was a constant gentle reminder to me to always consider the human dimension in work situations.

Rebecca: SLA involvement is an excellent way to develop your capacity for leading effective teams in virtual and physical environments. In one specific

‘A new graduate degree is good for about two years; after that, you need to keep re-tooling consistently to keep pace with the rapid rate of change.’

—Rebecca Vargha

Continued on page 29
Fellows and Rising Stars
Continued from page 23

meeting that I will never forget, there were several team members who were very articulate about a specific agenda item. As their leader, I asked everyone in the room to systematically share their thoughts and reflections one by one. It leveled the playing field and gave everyone a voice at the right time.

Does volunteering within SLA affect your skill sets and knowledge base?

Tom: Absolutely! Anytime you put yourself in a position to learn something new, you are investing in yourself and your professional development. SLA gives you access to a host of resources—other leaders, mentors, Webinars, certificate programs, etc.—all of which are designed to help you develop the knowledge and skills you need to succeed as a volunteer or leader. It’s up to you to take advantage.

Amy: Of course! SLA provides some fantastic opportunities for expanding one’s skill set. Volunteering is a great way to try something new in a supportive environment that you can then apply professionally. It’s also really useful for young professionals and job seekers who want to increase or diversify their ability to be able to say, “Yes, I’ve done that!”

Rebecca: Yes, continuous learning is essential for professional success. From my viewpoint, a new graduate degree is good for about two years; after that, you need to keep re-tooling consistently to keep pace with the rapid rate of change. SLA has several venues for professional development that you can access without leaving your office!

What motivates you to make a difference in SLA and the profession? What do you want to contribute as a volunteer?

Tom: What motivates me? Loyalty to the organization and my commitment to a “service above self” attitude. My contribution is all about giving back to an association that has already given me a great deal. It is about the sustainability of SLA and ensuring that our organization will be around to provide benefits and opportunities for growth to others down the road.

Amy: I believe that our profession has so much to offer in this age of information overload, and SLA is a wonderful platform to showcase ourselves. It also allows us to keep ourselves relevant by sustaining fresh ideas, to which we can all contribute by volunteering.

Rebecca: My motivation is to share SLA experiences and benefits with graduate students and new members. Through teaching classes and serving as a mentor and a role model, I can show aspiring and newly minted info pros what our association can provide at every step of their careers. To make a difference in the professional lives of others by “paying it forward” is the goal.

How can you achieve the most benefit from volunteer experiences with SLA?

What is the right balance of activities?

Tom: Take a risk and try something new. SLA offers a safe environment for learning and asking for help. The association is full of experienced leaders willing to assist. Take advantage of all the member benefits available. Have fun in the process. Know when your plate is full, and develop the ability to say “no.”

Amy: Pick opportunities that will challenge you, but that you’ll also enjoy. Better to execute something smaller well than to spread yourself too thin. Soak up as much experience as you can from those around you, and have fun!

Rebecca: Be willing to follow through with the tasks that you take on. If work and life are really hectic, speak up and let the team know that you can use some help. Enjoy the friendships, cooperation and professional connections that develop over time through volunteering for SLA.

SLA