

PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS

Valuable expertise need not go to waste

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Dear Susan,

Until several years ago, I was a successful entrepreneur with two research companies, one in Canada and one in the United States. I maintained two fully staffed offices, two homes, was published widely and was a conference speaker in great demand.

I only provide all these details so you will see how far I have fallen. Because of a sudden illness and a disability insurance policy that wasn't honoured, my assets are now gone, as are my professional networks. I used to be active in many professional groups but now lack the funds to participate in their events. Most of my family and all my close friends live overseas. The only social contacts I have are my elderly parents and they have their own age-related problems. How can I deal with my feelings of marginalization?

- *Odd Man Out*

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Dear Odd Man Out,

I'm neither a child of the Great Depression nor a Pollyanna, but my first response to your story is that a lot of valuable business expertise is going to waste. Have you tried offering your time in exchange for membership in these professional groups?

Even if you can't travel, every organization I've encountered depends on the goodwill and hundreds of hours of volunteers. Surely, there are networking, community or business groups in your area that could benefit from your vast experience.

What they'd get is your business savvy, doled out as mentoring hours, organizational prowess or supervision. What you'd get in return is a niche - a place to be and belong.

This is not a consolation prize. Employers are now allowing younger professional staff time off to do precisely this kind of volunteer consulting, according to a recent article in The Wall Street Journal. These millennials don't want to dump their values at the door when they come to work. So, to lure talent and keep these young employees engaged, companies are giving them the opportunity to volunteer on the company's dime.

Ernst & Young and Pfizer Inc. are just two of many firms that see the opportunity to volunteer as an incentive to attract and retain talented employees. How's that for a new take on what

companies used to offer - the stock options, the tropical junket or the company car - as perks?
What's different is that giving, not taking, is now considered a benefit.

Young employees need wide experience--you need a network. The non-profit sector offers both at an affordable price.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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