

Free is Me- What Moves Our Economies is What We Do for Free

By Kelsey Ann Truman

A slew of five thirteen year-old girls shuffled through the door of the office. They looked unsure, awkward, everything you would expect from girls about to hit the full tempest of teenage years. I had invited the group to the office at their request. It started out as an inconspicuous email. Hi, my name is, I've been trying to raise money for refugees in my community and I was wondering if I could visit your office. A visit seemed innocuous enough and there they were. Clutching onto their three by five note cards, leaning their tiny elbows on the giant cherry boardroom table, ready to present to me and some straggling members of the office that I had coerced into attending through persistent emails.

Ten minutes later, an entire boardroom of seasoned professionals, hardened by the Washington D.C. daily grind, was attempting to recover from sporadic fits of sobbing. Snot, wrinkled brows, bloodshot eyes, the works.

The U.S. Association for the UNHCR (The UN Refugee Agency) had been running on fumes responding to the massive influx of refugees that hit Europe's shores in late 2015. I had been managing community fundraising events since the crisis broke. At this point in time, the crisis had no indication that it would be decreasing in its intensity. The need was (and still is) immense. Corporate donors, individual donors and major donors all responded in a haze of whirring paperwork, sleepless nights, and seemingly endless weekend email exchanges. Following the Twitter photo of Aylan Kurdi, Americans poured out their wallets and resources to help in any way possible almost overnight.

Conventional wisdom would say that thirteen year-olds don't move the economy and neither do good intentions, nor the heart-wrenching idealism of children. At the very least, these sentiments motivate someone to such an extent that they are willing to act with no promise of financial gain. It's truly not about the behavior of commodities, as Peter Drucker predicted. It's about the way people behave and react.

What wallet does a thirteen year-old turn out? What resources does a thirteen year-old have to combat a six and a half billion dollar problem? All too often in businesses and nonprofits, we overlook these actors while trying to secure hundreds of thousands of dollars from corporations and high net-worth individuals because we think they have nothing to offer in terms of cold, hard cash and otherwise.

You may ask yourself what new technology may be on the horizon or what innovative start-up might be resounding with the millennials. You may look to see what's trending on Twitter or better yet; enlist a data scientist, gather some test groups, make conclusions about what resounds with people to determine the most effective marketing strategy. You can run the gauntlet of bulk data until you're blue in the face. At the end of it, hopefully, you'll extrapolate some sort of intuitive jab at collective consciousness that shows you exactly how people want to spend their money and time.

Or maybe you could ask this group of 13 year-old girls why they're doing what they're doing.

Maybe the next economic shakeup isn't simply about the next big product to buy or what technology empowers us, but what people feel so passionately about that they're willing to do it for free. Peter Drucker hinted that this type of phenomenon might follow in lieu of a "plant community."

Ask yourself: what would you do for free?

Let's consider the people who aren't paid for the work they do. Not slaves, the people that choose, of their own free will, to do work without monetary compensation. Why do they do it? Do people work for free because it's the right thing to do? Do people work for free because it helps them grow and learn? Granted, financial aims are always inextricably linked to any work people put forward, but if financial aims are a constant across all motivations for work, why do people choose to do the type of work they do for

free (opposed to being paid in the form of a real tangible paycheck)? Volunteers? Interns? Mothers? Wives? Caretakers? Why do they do all this work for free?

In the United States, 7.9 billion volunteer hours were logged in 2015 and an estimated \$184 billion dollars went into the U.S. economy. One quarter of Americans participate in formal community service. To put this in perspective, JPMorgan Chase reported a net income of \$24.4 billion in 2015. That is, if volunteers in America were a company, they would be 7.5 times more productive than one of the biggest Wall Street banks in the world. No one tries to claim that JPMorgan isn't a huge player in the economy and no one should try to claim that volunteers aren't a huge part of our economies as well.

Additionally, one of the biggest labor questions for advanced economies may boil down to the significance of interns. Right now, no government authority of any country has produced any conclusive data on the economic output of interns. In the United States, no data tracks or monitors how many interns there are or their impact on the economy because interns aren't considered part of the labor force by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. This is striking, especially when one considers the greater legal implications for labor laws. Interns are afforded little legal protection or recourse for discrimination, harassment and other forms of abuse.

Although, movements across the United States and Europe are manifesting to demand pay for interns, unpaid internships still persist and dominate seemingly everywhere in the workforce of advanced economies. Internships increasingly are the privilege of those who can just barely afford to not be paid. However, how can we afford to not count and take notice of the output that does occur from internships?

For women, unpaid work has real and severe economic effects we are just now fully beginning to comprehend through newly collected data. Women in North America and in Europe do twice the amount of unpaid work than men. Unpaid work includes cleaning, child-rearing, cooking and other time-consuming tasks that are usually relegated to women out of social custom. This has real economic effects in two ways. First, women

are contributing to the economy in indirect ways through unpaid work. Families, children and entire communities that are healthy and educated are more productive actors in the economy. Second, Melinda Gates argues if women “spend more time doing paid work, starting businesses, or otherwise contributing to the economic well-being of societies around the world.”

Melinda Gates also stated “the Post-2015 Development Agenda stands out because it contains a big idea that could change the future for billions of people. It says that investments in the world's poorest people won't generate the biggest possible return until we learn how to make sure women and girls benefit from them equally.” Gates’ analysis examines economic trends for developing countries, but it’s fair to hypothesize that gender inequality and unpaid work hurts development at the highest levels of political and economic power. If women are not benefiting as equally as their male benefactors in the most advanced economies in the world, the full amount of economic growth cannot be entirely realized. That is, the asymmetry of unpaid work both supports economic growth but also underscores the missed opportunities from discriminatory social constructs.

It’s easy to write-off all these actions as seemingly inconsequential byproducts of existence rather than recognizing them as the lifeblood of economies everywhere. Interns seek jobs to attain a more secure end to their wobbly financial existence, or even because it’s an academic requirement. The same could be said for community volunteers. If mothers (and fathers) didn’t do unpaid work, there are laws for child neglect. The point is: people don’t do just anything for free. People are selective in what they do for free, and what they choose to do for free deserves to be given full consideration regarding its cumulative effects on economies across the globe.

What people do for free shapes communities, it builds the foundations for capital markets before capital markets even begin to exist through town halls, credit unions and communal trust to provide loans and support for projects. Alexis de Tocqueville called this the “public spirit” and discussed how Americans formed local groups to address

problems in their community instead of relying on a head of state or a monarch to make decisions unilaterally, as Europeans favored. Americans during the period of de Tocqueville's analysis did this for free. They did not contract out to a private party or pay a governing body to solve their administrative issues, in contrast to the modern business practices. They did the thinking (and often times implementing) for themselves on a microscale.

Economies are moved and shook at every scale by the minutiae characterising the public spirit. Public spirit leads to public engagement and public engagement leads to civil society, transparency and even the combat of widespread corruption.

Economies are made at their core by the fashion in which the human spirit manifests. In the case of humanitarian volunteers like the 13 year-olds who made our hearts tremble, it manifested as a response to increased visualization of mass human suffering found in the powerful photographs that permeated our newsfeeds on Facebook. And where did the photographs comes from on Facebook? How much did it cost to post and repost these images again and again? \$0. Nothing. Digital media is free, although, some people may be paid to draft content and participate in campaigns; consultants like these use resources that are free to create social and economic rumblings. People take up social causes for free. They do not do it directly for their own benefit. They do it because they feel it is the right thing to do.

Now, more than ever, through internet access and global media, individuals are building groups, civic organizations, associations, etc. More and more people are finding volunteer opportunities with greater ease and greater numbers are turning out. Ultimately, the motivation for people who do work for free, of their own free will, is irrelevant. The work is still done and the work is still unpaid. But what they choose to do for free is spoken for through the increasingly interconnected human state underlying all economies around the world.

Ultimately, we might take all this unpaid work for granted and neglect to acknowledge how much it pushes our economies forward. These activities are both weight and counterweight to governments and to private organizations. They are the underground economic aquifers from which we draw water at our wells. To understand and to support these actors is to support economic and societal development at its very core.

Therefore, to nourish our societies and economies across the globe, we must ensure:

1. Governments and private organizations must provide framework for people to succeed in whatever volunteer activity they wish to take part in. It's essential for any and every business or governmental organ of any country to have a well-oiled system for engaging . Not only do volunteers directly contribute to the mission of the organization, they become part of the extended resources of the organization. We do not empower and treat our volunteers well enough, thinking of them as some sort of extemporaneous afterthought to our core missions. They are the public trust in any mission and giving them everything they need to succeed is essential
2. Governments and private organizations must gather data. It's unacceptable to not gather data on interns, especially in the United States and Europe. Calls to pay interns are not an excuse to avoid basic oversight of labor practices. It is essential to monitor and maintain data, for purely academic reasons alone, to know, measure and recognize labor trends in this regard. Furthermore, countries across the planet still have no concerted effort gathering data on women's unpaid work, among other important economic impediments like domestic violence prevalence.

In a post-recession economy, the new entrepreneurs are going to come from people who have been doing things for free for a long time. The greatest solutions and innovations will come from people that want to do more than just throw money at a problem, they will come from people who want to physically be part of the solution.

Whether it's dreams of a full time job, or the peace of mind of having a healthy dinner for your family, or just because you want to make the world a better place... What moves and shakes the economy is what people are willing to do for free. People take up these causes for free and because they are free to do so. They do it because they feel it is the right thing to do.

The greatest victories of humanity are won outside of the realms of practicality. Pablo Neruda, a career diplomat, was never remembered for his political identity as much as he was remembered for his hobbies and his art, the things he did for free, because these actions just felt like the right thing to do. Neruda was close to understanding the economic weight of this phenomenon when he stated "Of all the fires, love is the only inexhaustible one." Love and humanity present a concrete solution to scarcity in economies. Love motivates us and as a result we work for free because we're passionate and because we're determined.

Peter Drucker was also right in this regard. Our behavior as individuals (and as part of society) is as close to infinite as any economic model could ever come, and it often goes so unnoticed. To be free to act, to have agency to do what matters most to us is the essence of our societies and our economies. We do it because we love our families, friends and ourselves. We do these it with intangible motives, resulting in tangible economic effects. In the end, what we do for free is a part of all of us; free is you and free is me.