

Keeping Volunteers: A Guide to Retention



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The Basic Rules of Retention

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1. Retention doesn't happen in a vacuum.

Volunteer involvement depends upon the creation of a good system for working with volunteers. A program that has insufficient infrastructure, inadequate staff and leadership support, insufficient budgeting, or other defects in management will fail to attract and keep volunteers. Brudney and Gazley (2002) suggest

“Extensive academic and professional literature supports the rather obvious argument that successful volunteer programs require more than a call for warm bodies. Volunteer programs also require an infrastructure and a set of management tools in order to place the right volunteers in the right positions, involve them effectively and retain them.”

A recent US report (Urban Institute, 2004) notes:

“The percentage of time a paid staff coordinator devotes to volunteer management is positively related to the capacity of organizations to take on additional volunteers. The best prepared and most effective volunteer programs are those with paid staff members who dedicate a substantial portion of their time to management of volunteers. This study demonstrated that, as staff time spent on volunteer management increased, adoption of volunteer management practices increased as well.”

Another recent study of volunteers in Toronto (Toronto Community and Neighborhood Services, 2004) notes the

consequence of not having a firm foundation:

“The agencies experiencing the greatest loss of volunteers were those with budget and program reductions. A quarter of these agencies had lost volunteers over the previous three years.”

Their conclusion is simple and straightforward:

“It is neither realistic nor responsible to expect that once a volunteer is recruited they can work without ongoing support.”

Organizations that involve volunteers can be paradoxical in their support for the concept of volunteering and their indifference toward its implementation. Hands for Nature (2002) examined volunteer management practices among community greening groups in Ontario and found “90% of groups indicated that volunteers were either “extremely crucial” or “crucial” to the work they do. However, the majority of groups do not have a paid coordinator to support volunteers and 79% of groups do not train their staff to work with volunteers.”

The practices for increasing volunteer retention we discuss below are most likely to happen when they are the responsibility of a designated and empowered volunteer program manager within the organization.

Volunteers, like paid staff, are also sensitive to the overall operation of the organization. As Clark (2003) comments, “Sick organizations make people sick. A sick organization is one that feeds its volunteers and staff a steady diet of unexplained change,

needless red tape, disorder, low or no recognition and little or no time for reflection.”

2. Don't waste the volunteer's time

Volunteering is a leisure time activity, and leisure time is an increasingly rare and precious commodity. When volunteers offer their leisure time to help a charity, they are offering something of great value to them. If volunteers get the impression that their time is not valued by charity staff they will go do something else with their leisure time. That impression is most deeply made when volunteers feel that their time is being wasted.

Volunteers may feel their time is wasted for a variety of all-too-common reasons:

- There is nothing for the volunteer to do when they arrive. Staff forget that the volunteer is coming, or that there is no need for the service the volunteer provides today. In such a case, staff should contact the volunteers to tell them this before they travel to the work site. Or staff should prepare other, useful activities for the volunteer to work on that day.
- The staff they were to meet with are not prepared for them. When a volunteer is asked to be present at a certain time to work with staff on a given task, the staff should make sure they will indeed be ready to work on the task at that time.
- The resources or equipment that the volunteer needs are not available or don't work.
- The client the volunteer was to work with is not available and although this was known in advance, the volunteer was not informed.
- They are given things to do that

don't seem to be worth doing or don't seem to be matched to their level of ability or interest.

- They spend a good portion of their time at the charity waiting for instructions or assignments.

A basic truism to remember is that no one volunteers simply to fill a hole in their schedule – people volunteer to do something *meaningful* during that empty time, something that makes a difference.

3. Let volunteers do work they want to do

Matching volunteers to appropriate assignments is a key to retention and motivation. No one continues to volunteer for a task that they neither enjoy nor are good at. Volunteers should only be asked to perform assignments in which they are interested and for which they are adequately prepared and supported.

Oddly enough, this obvious point that frequently is overlooked by paid staff. A study of sports volunteering in Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Tourism and Culture, 1990) reported that:

“Matching volunteers and tasks is an important motivational tool. It was not, however, identified by staff as a factor when motivation is low or as contributing to recruitment difficulties. This is an important concern as “doing something I like” and “feeling I accomplished something” are very important to 60 per cent of volunteers.”

People will volunteer for a short period of time to do practically anything, including work that doesn't suit them. They will not, however, tend to continue this work any longer than they feel they have to, usually through a personal obligation to the person who asked them to volunteer. When that obligation is paid off, the volunteer will cease

volunteering unless what they are doing is motivating and rewarding.

4. Thank volunteers for their efforts

By far the most common management mistake is the failure to express appreciation to people for the work they do. This mistake is particularly critical when it comes to volunteers. If they sense that others do not appreciate their gift of time, they will take it elsewhere.

A simple “thank you” (preferably with a smile) when the volunteer leaves can do wonders to keep them coming back. In addition, you might consider suggesting that all staff that work with volunteers keep these other easy methods of recognition in mind:

- Smiling when you see them.
- Thanking them for coming in.
- Writing them a note.
- Telling them they did a good job (but only if they did).
- Forwarding any positive feedback about them from the people the charity serves.

5. Don't automatically assume that you've lost a volunteer

Some volunteers may simply become unconnected with an organization. This is particularly easy to do when the volunteer commitment is one which comes and goes, without ongoing work or with periods in which the volunteer may not be in direct contact with the organization. In such cases it is difficult to determine whether the volunteer has actively decided to leave the organization or whether they are simply in a state of hiatus.

If the organization does not re-connect the volunteer – which can be easily done by contacting them and “re-inviting” them to participate – the

volunteer will tend to drift away from the organization and eventually cease to view themselves as a volunteer. Many organizations make the mistake of assuming that a volunteer who isn't pushing forward to be involved does not want to be involved; they may simply be waiting to be asked. Ignoring these prospective “lapsed” volunteers may be very common. Curtis (2000) noted about Australian Landcare volunteer efforts that 38% of groups in Corangamite and 42% of groups in Glenelg indicated that their group doesn't follow up with members when there is a pattern of absence from group activities, thus pre-emptively moving the member to the “former volunteer” category without verifying that status with the volunteer.

McSweeney and Alexander (1996) note:

“There may be times when a volunteer does not attend for a long period of time, perhaps due to illness, work or family pressures, or possibly disillusionment with their role as a volunteer. Many volunteer managers feel uneasy making home visits, fearing that this may be seen as intrusive. Perhaps we could look at it from the volunteer's, or their family's, viewpoint. Your failure to make contact could well be interpreted as being uncaring or ungrateful for the services the member has given. Even in the most caring of organizations, it can be very difficult for an individual to gain the confidence to return after a lengthy break. Your contact could well prevent the loss of a valuable volunteer.”

Osborne (2004) writes about re-engaging volunteers who have separated from the organization, in this case not from any decision of their own but from being called up for military service, and notes that with this group:

“A returning service member should be allowed to feel needed but may not be ready for extensive volunteer duties. The normal and expected emotions will run the full spectrum of being on top of the world to carrying the full weight of

the world. A slow and methodical re-engagement will provide a sense of being needed without over-commitment.”

In most cases, reconnection is a distinct possibility for many “lost” volunteers. How likely this reconnection may be is suggested by Fahey and Walker’s (2001) finding that among Volunteer Ambulance Officers in Tasmania who had resigned 74% indicated that they would consider rejoining.

You might even take a very long view about re-inviting volunteers to participate. Some age groups – such as teens – may very well stop volunteering as they approach going to university. Many may even leave the community during that time, but return following graduation. Hosting an “alumni reunion” party four years after they have departed gives them the opportunity to reconnect with the organization; an opportunity that they may not take on their own initiative.

Tillman (2002) writes about the re-involvement of young volunteers in the Heritage Railways program in the UK:

“Although many 16- to 18-year old volunteers drop out by their early twenties, they can make a positive contribution for 2 or 3 years. Moreover, some might become involved again in their 30s and later. For example, if 5 young people completed their work-experience activities each year, there would eventually be 150 ‘graduates’ in

their 30s-50s. If active encouragement resulted in 10% becoming involved again, there would be 15 experienced volunteers.”

Dorsch, Riemer, Sluth, Paskevich and Chelladurai (2002) sum up much of what we will discuss regarding the keys to volunteer retention. They note that volunteers will generally exert more effort when they:

1. Like the social environment (psychological climate) where they volunteer
2. Want to achieve a desired outcome (volunteer motivation)
3. Feel that their volunteer role, or link to the organization is important (role identity and organizational identity)
4. Understand their role and accept its responsibilities (role clarity and role acceptance)
5. Feel sure they can carry out the role (role efficacy)
6. Feel good about volunteering (role satisfaction)

Or, as Reilly (2004) puts it:

“The more people have a positive experience as a volunteer, the more likely that they will continue to volunteer and the more likely that they will encourage people they know to become volunteers.”

Matching Recognition to Types of Volunteers

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Getting to know each volunteer can be difficult in large charities where no member of staff can personally know all the volunteers. In such circumstances, you might have a bit of knowledge about individuals but not enough to gauge their individual tastes and preferences. Fortunately, it is also possible to think about systems of volunteer recognition that are appropriate to particular types of volunteers, thus allowing a program to make educated guesses about recognition items that would be appropriate and welcomed by entire categories of volunteers.

We'll consider three different ways of thinking about providing recognition items to volunteers:

- By varying levels of *intensity* - daily, intermediate and major
- By motivational *orientation* of the volunteer – achievement, affiliation or power
- By *style* of volunteering - short-term or long-term

Levels of Intensity

Here we match the effort we put out in recognizing the volunteer with the level of accomplishment that we are praising them for. Someone who shows up to do her work and who completes it routinely, for example, might get verbal praise such as “Thanks for coming in today.” If a volunteer brings in a million pounds to your cash starved charity, on the other hand, she or he should be praised in a more labor-intensive way, such as putting on a banquet in his or her honor. Here are some examples of different levels of recognition activity:

1. Daily means of providing

recognition:

- Saying “Thank you.”
- Telling volunteers they did a good job.
- Suggesting volunteers join you for coffee.
- Asking for their opinions.
- Greeting volunteers when they come in the morning.
- Showing interest in their personal interests.
- Smiling when you see them.
- Bragging about them to your boss (in their presence).
- Jotting small thank you notes to them.
- Having a refreshment with volunteers after work.
- Saying something positive about volunteer’s personal qualities.
- Telling volunteers what happened at the organization since their last visit

2. Intermediate means of providing recognition:

- Taking volunteers to lunch.
- Providing food at volunteer meetings.
- Letting volunteers put their names on the products they produce.
- Writing them a letter of commendation (with copies to personnel file and other appropriate people.)
- Putting volunteers on important task forces or committees.
- Giving volunteers best parking space to the “volunteer of the month.”
- Posting graphic displays, showing progress toward targets.
- Mentioning major contributors by name in your status reports to upper management.
- Inviting volunteers to present their

results to higher-ups.

- Giving volunteers permission to go to a seminar, convention, or professional meeting, if possible at the organization's expense.
- Writing articles about their performance for newsletters or newspapers.
- Having volunteers present a training session to co-workers.
- Decorating a volunteer's work area on their birthday.
- Asking your boss to write volunteers a letter of thanks.
- Celebrating the major accomplishments of a volunteer.
- Letting volunteers represent you at important meetings.
- Putting their picture on the bulletin board with news of their accomplishments.
- Cutting out articles and cartoons volunteers might be interested in.
- Organizing informal chats with organization leadership.

3. Major means of providing recognition:

- Making special caps, shirts, belt buckles or lapel badges honoring the group.
- Encouraging volunteers to write an article about some accomplishment at work.
- Giving a plaque, certificate, or trophy for being best employee, best crew, most improved results, etc.
- Offering tuition assistance to volunteers.
- Buying volunteers good equipment.
- Getting a volunteer's picture in the paper for outstanding accomplishment.
- Giving volunteers additional responsibilities and a new title.
- Renting newspaper space to thank volunteers.
- Putting up a banner celebrating a major accomplishment.
- Honoring a volunteer for years of service to the organization.
- Enlisting volunteers in training staff and other volunteers.

- Involving volunteers in the annual planning process.

Motivational Orientation

In chapter two, we noted that people volunteer for a variety of different reasons. Sometimes psychologists categorize those motivations into three major categories—the need for achievement, the need for affiliation, and the need for power. For volunteers who seem to be more motivated by one of these than another, you can tailor the recognition to fit the motivational need.

1. Achievement-oriented volunteers

- Ideal recognition for this type of volunteer is additional information or more challenging tasks, such as a book on the subject area of the organization or ability to participate in advanced training sessions or work with more difficult clients
- Work being recognized is best linked to a very specific accomplishment
- Phrasing of recognition through "Best," "Most" awards
- Recognition decision should include "Checkpoints" or "Records"
- Awardee should be selected by respected co-workers or recognized experts

2. Affiliation-oriented volunteers

- Recognition should be given at group event
- Recognition should be given in presence of peers, family, other bonded groupings
- Recognition item or award should have a "Personal Touch"
- Recognition should be organizational in nature, given by the organization, with symbols of the organization attached
- Recognition should be voted or affirmed by peers
- If primary affiliative bonding is with client, not others in the organization, then the client should take part in the recognition, through a personal note

of thanks or as presenter of the award

3. Power-oriented volunteers

- Key aspect of recognition is “Promotion,” conveying greater access to authority or information or a more important title or position
- Recognition item should convey status, such as a special parking space
- Recognition should be commendation from “Names,” either known in the community or from higher up in the organization
- Audience for the recognition should include higher-ups in the organization and the community
- Recognition should be announced to community at large, put in newspaper, volunteer newsletter and Web site
- Recognition decisions should be made or ratified by the organization’s leadership

Style of Volunteering

Recognition might also vary depending on whether the person is a long term volunteer or only with you for a short time:

1. Long-term volunteer

- Recognition with and by peer group of volunteers and staff
- Recognition items make use of group symbols
- Recognition entails greater power, involvement, information about the organization - “earned” status and preference
- Presenter of recognition is a person in authority from within the organization

- Recognition is linked to success in furthering the mission of the organization

You will note strong resemblances between the long-term volunteer and the affiliation-oriented volunteer. This is because long-term volunteers commonly form strong affiliative bonds with the organization, its cause, and with volunteers and other co-workers.

2. Short-term volunteer

- Recognition is given in immediate work unit or social group
- Recognition is “portable;” something the volunteers can take with them when they leave—a present, photograph or other memorabilia of experience, or training that may benefit them in another setting, etc.
- Recognition is provided via home or work—letter to employer, church, or family
- Presenter is either the immediate supervisor of the volunteer or the client with whom a relationship has been formed

The short-term volunteer is interested in very different forms of recognition, primarily those not directly connected as much to the organizational structure as to what is accomplished through volunteering or what volunteering there might mean for the volunteer. Zappala, Parker and Green (2001) comment:

“Recognition for individual volunteers is therefore less about awards for years of service (the ‘gold watch’ approach) and more about providing feedback to the individual about the outcomes achieved through their project-based volunteering.”