Volunteer Recruitment, Management, and Retention

by Kim Cabrera

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Introduction

Many organizations rely on volunteers to fill out their workforce or to complete tasks that the organization would be unable to pay someone to do. Volunteers are an important part of such institutions, and the recruitment, management, and retention of dedicated and skilled volunteers are all key to an organization's productivity and well-being.

Volunteers have a variety of reasons for choosing to work for an organization, and these motives can affect their level of work or the amount of time they choose to stay. In this guide, each overarching theme is broken down into subsections for easier reference. Sources referenced in the creation of this guide include scholarly research articles, mainly done on small non-profit volunteer programs, volunteer guidebooks and pamphlets for professionals created by a variety of institutions; volunteer handbooks created for volunteers themselves, and blog posts written for websites that offer volunteer management training, toolkits, and other resources. In the cases where blog posts appear on sites that also sell resources such as volunteer management software, research has been done to ensure the writer is a qualified professional. It is the hope that this handbook will provide both guidance on issues currently facing an organization, as well as ideas for the future of growing volunteer programs.

Recruitment

This section covers the process of volunteer recruitment. Finding volunteers that care about the organization's mission and have certain skills or qualities is important to ensuring that they will be a good fit, and committed and productive workers. Below are pointers that discuss **information to provide potential recruits and language to use in volunteer descriptions; ways in which to recruit a diverse range of individuals; and methods by which to boost or improve recruitment.**

Information to Provide in Recruitment Literature

Using certain language and message in recruitment literature (whether that takes the form of posters, pamphlets, social media posts, volunteers position descriptions, etc.) is helpful in attracting potential volunteers to an organization. Information provided for consumption by potential recruits should:

- **Tell the story of the organization.** Give the history and mission of the organization, as well as its goals for the future.

- **Tell specific stories of what volunteers have accomplished in the past.** This makes the real-life impact of volunteers visible, which is important for those who are looking to make a difference. It proves that volunteers are an important and appreciated part of the organization's efforts.

- **Pay attention to phrasing.** Individuals have been known to react positively to terms like *civic engagement*, *personal development*, and *professional development*. These sorts of terms highlight both the importance of volunteering and engaging with the community, as well as the benefit to the volunteer personally (Ellis, 2006). Another tactic is to keep your description of the organization's importance relevant – edit these descriptions, when necessary, to make mention of current political and cultural occurrences that are related to the work your organization does.

- **Create written volunteer position descriptions.** These can be used to advertise for volunteers, but are also useful internally, as a way of recording the specific skills and qualities you would like your volunteers to have. Keep these descriptions on file and update them as needed. Once you know exactly what you are looking for, you will be able to more easily identify those who are a good fit (Ellis, 2006). Additionally, if you have a change in the staff that manages volunteers, you will have documentation of

the kinds of people you are looking for and the roles they need to fill, so recruitment can continue unhampered.

- **Indicate openness to volunteers' interests and ideas.** Mention within a volunteering handbook or position description (or however else) that your organization is interested in hearing your volunteer's thoughts. This may draw volunteers who have useful ideas, and is helpful in building a sense of ownership within new (or any) volunteers (Hunter, K., & Zwerling, S., 2020). This openness to thoughts from volunteers should be within reason, of course. Not every idea is a good idea. Also, accepting a volunteer's suggestion doesn't necessarily mean they'll be in charge of implementing that change (Ellis, 2006).

Diversifying Recruitment

Diversifying recruitment efforts allows an organization to reach out to people who they were not reaching before, or to ease the way of individuals who have obstacles impeding their desire to volunteer. There are many changes that a volunteer program can make in order to find and on-board a more diversely varied range of individuals.

- One simple way to make volunteering easier for many people is to **offer volunteer trainings at different times than you usually might**. Many volunteer organizations hold trainings between the hours of 9 and 5, a time frame that does not work for a lot of people (Hunter & Zwerling, 2020). If the institution has volunteer shifts that are outside of this time frame, then it is reasonable that they also offer volunteer trainings outside of the time frame as well.

- **Allow volunteers to do remote work.** This has sometimes become a necessity during COVID. Of course, not all organizations have the technology or the need for this, but it does allow those who may not be able to leave their homes easily to donate their time regardless (Hunter & Zwerling, 2020).

- **Allow children.** Some individuals are not able to leave their children or unable to pay for child care. Depending on the situation, allowing volunteers to bring children makes it possible for them to volunteer. Some organizations have dedicated "family days" where the tasks are family-friendly.

- **Forms of compensation**. Providing some form of compensation can remove obstacles to volunteering that may stand in the way of those who are of a lower socio-economic status. Compensation is discussed in the section on Retention.

Boosting Recruitment

There are a variety of ways to boost recruitment. This can either mean increasing the number of volunteers recruited, or recruiting more skillful and experienced volunteers. Methods include:

- **Using volunteers to recruit other volunteers**. This is has been called "social network recruitment" (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2014). Through building investment in current volunteers, the organization can then utilize them to interest those they know in the possibility of volunteering. Not only is this a useful recruitment technique, it can also further build investment by providing the volunteers with a social network they feel comfortable with.

- **Online volunteer recruitment services**. There are many websites that assist in linking organizations and volunteers, and that allow those interested in volunteering to search for opportunities to do so. Some of these services are listed below in *Additional Resources*.

- **Utilize social media.** If your organization has a social media channel of some kind, posting about volunteer opportunities will ensure that you get your message out to your followers – who, if they are already engaging with your social media, clearly have an interest in your mission (Volunteer Hub).

Remember that increasing volunteer numbers is only useful if you have the resources to handle the increase. This is discussed further in *Expanding Volunteering Efforts*, in the *Management* section. If it is not practical to increase you numbers, investing in finding and retaining skilled volunteers is also an excellent way to ensure that projects are well-done and are being completed on time.

Management

This chapter discusses methods of volunteer management. It outlines what a **handbook,** complete with **volunteer policies and/or codes of conduct,** might look like**; provides guidance on expanding and deepening an organization's already existing volunteer program;** and **suggests ways in which to evaluate the success of your volunteer program.**

Volunteer Handbook and Policies

Many organizations provide volunteers with a handbook when they first begin. Some examples of such handbooks can be found under *Additional Resources*. These handbooks are a useful reference for volunteers and typically include:

- **Volunteer policies / codes of conduct.** These are helpful for both the institution and the volunteers to have on hand, to know what behavior is not acceptable, and what will happen if the rules are broken.

- **History of the organization.**

- **Explanation of organization's structure.** This helps volunteers become acquainted with the institution, and helps them get a better sense of their place within it. It also provides information on who they should be reporting to, and ideally contact information for at least their immediate superior.

- **Outlines of the tasks of different kinds of volunteers.** This describes the tasks expected from various volunteers in working in different roles.

Expanding Volunteering Efforts

This section explores some ways in which an organization can sustain an increase in their number of volunteers. Increasing volunteer numbers can allow an organization to get more done; however it can also be a strain on whoever is training and managing those volunteers. The specific ways in which a volunteer program might be expanded or deepened vary depending on an organization and their structure, but general points to keep in mind are outlined below.

- **Firstly, figure out why you want to expand and what you want new volunteers to be doing.** Do these volunteers need special skills? Is there a department that they will be working within, and can the staff there handle overseeing and possibly training these volunteers? Unless you ask and answer these questions beforehand, incoming volunteers will not have the resources they need to complete new projects (Society of American Archivists, 2018).

- Related to the first point, having a **volunteer coordinator** may be necessary if an organization wants to track and manage a large number of volunteers. Employees within specific departments may be able to do training related to specific skills, but someone is needed to organize and provide general guidance and training to volunteers, and be clear about what is expected of them (SAA, 2018). If employing a full-time coordinator is not possible, then a dedicated project manager, who will take responsibility for volunteers' work, should be identified.

- Some organizations utilize **volunteer management software**. This is an investment that may or may not be worth it based on the institution's size and budget. Some examples of volunteer management software are included below in 'Additional Resources.' Volunteer management software allows for recruitment, scheduling, communications to volunteers or certain groups of volunteers, and more. Some systems can integrate with social media, or can also help plan and coordinate events on a larger scale.

Evaluation

Evaluation of your volunteer program allows you to improve the program and ensure that your volunteers are happy with their experience (and therefore willing to stay on). There are a few different ways of evaluating your program.

- **One method of evaluation is setting certain goals (or key performance indicators, as they are often called) and seeing if you meet them**. KPIs can include, for example, number of volunteers, number of volunteer hours logged, individuals served, or monetary value of services rendered (Hunter, K., & Zwerling, S., 2020). Decide on quantifiable achievements that are important to your organization and track them throughout time. This will allow you to know if you are improving, or where you could do better, in your volunteer program.

- Another method of evaluation comes from **feedback provided by volunteers**. A **volunteer survey** is useful for this. There are many templates for different volunteer services. Some templates have been included below in the *Additional Resources* section for reference. Exit interviews can also be useful, as someone who is leaving is likely to be more honest about their experience as a volunteer (Kendricks). No matter the method of gathering feedback, it should be made clear to volunteers that their honesty is valued and encouraged.

Retention

Volunteer retention is one of the more challenging aspects of working with volunteer staff. Volunteer turnover is an issue for many institutions. The loss of a skilled volunteer is difficult, and identifying and training new volunteers of course takes up a fair amount of time.

Volunteers are different, obviously, from salaried workers in that they do not rely upon the organization for a paycheck. People volunteer for a number of reasons, the main one being belief in the mission of the organization. Other reasons may include that it is a requirement for their school or encouraged by where they work, or that they have friends that volunteer or are looking to make new connections. There are many ways to improve volunteer retention, but two key ways are **providing learning and professional development opportunities for volunteers; and providing if possible, forms of compensation (which may not be specifically monetary).** These motives are described within each subsections.

Note that **there are times when a volunteer may be ready to cease working with the organization**, not due to a lack of investment but because of other unavoidable factors. Reasons can include changes in someone's life; for instance, a high-school student graduating and leaving for college. It may simply not be possible to have such volunteers stay. In this case, plans should be made to account for the volunteer's timeline, to ensure that they are productive while they are there, but also that they will not leave projects half-done with no one to take over when they leave.

Learning and Professional Development Opportunities

Providing learning and professional development opportunities appeals to volunteers who are interested in using their work with your organization to further their career, or to more generally learn new skills.

There are a few ways to help your volunteers grow and learn as they work:

- **Assignment of challenging tasks**. In many cases it may be easier for an organization to provide simple tasks to volunteers – there is less need of training and of oversight in the completion of these tasks. The also may want to not overburden volunteers. However, studies have shown that providing volunteers with challenging tasks increases their desire to stay with an organization (Jamison, 2003). Challenging tasks of course may also appeal to those that are attempting to use volunteer service to learn new skills or develop their resume.

- **Access to conferences, webinars, and research.** For those volunteers interested in learning and professional development, access to conferences or webinars that the institution holds, or to research such as journal articles that they publish, is a valuable perk. Another possibility could even be to "partner up with other cultural institutions in your community to offer professional development opportunities jointly, or to share access to each other's learning opportunities" (Hunter & Zwerling, 2020). This provides volunteers with an opportunity to educate themselves, which may also make them even better in their volunteer role. And who knows – they could even be a future staff member.

- **Be open to new ideas and allow volunteers to be a part of new initiatives if possible**. Earlier, in the section on recruitment, this guide discussed using the appeal of volunteers being able to contribute ideas as a recruitment pull. This method ideally ensures that volunteers see their work as important, by giving them a) real responsibility within their role (to an extent) and b) a chance to work on their creative or entrepreneurial skills.

Perks and Compensation

It is not possible to provide volunteers steady pay of any kind, however, there are different ways to 'compensate' your volunteers for their time and show appreciation of their work. Below are some pointers and suggestions on volunteer compensation:

- **Forms of recognition.** This is a perk that is mentioned in almost all literature as a great way to build investment. Direct praise from supervisors is one of the most basic forms of this. There are also a number of ways to ensure that the work of volunteers is more visibly appreciated. One is a volunteer newsletter. This allows for the accomplishments of the volunteers to be extolled more widely (Alfes & Schantz, 2016). Celebrating volunteers on social media is another option if your organization does not have a newsletter.

Telling volunteers that they are doing a good job increases their pride in their work and in themselves; and letting volunteers know that, for instance, a certain project they worked on led to a success for the organization, or provided assistance for a certain number individuals, reminds volunteers of the importance of what they are doing. Both increase volunteers' investment in your

organization's mission.

- **Reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses incurred by the volunteer** in doing their work. This may mean expenses such as train or bus fare to get to the volunteering site, or perhaps money paid for lunch. Not all organizations will be capable of this, but it should be considered, as the volunteer is more likely to stay if they do not feel that they are incurring expense due to their volunteering efforts. Out-of-pocket expenses are likely to be an obstacle to those of lower socioeconomic status who wish to volunteer (Stirling, 2011).

Do note that there are **possible pitfalls to providing compensation or benefits to volunteers**. For instance, the consignment clothing company Rhea Lana was audited in 2013 by the Department of Labor, which judged that their consignment volunteers were employees. This was based on the facts that volunteers received the benefit of early access to sales events, and that Rhea Lana was a for-profit business using volunteers. This serves as a cautionary tale, however, it is certainly possible that the "DOL may be more lenient in an analogous situation where a nonprofit offered a similar benefit" (Cooney & Shinaman, 2017).

Additional Resources

Below are various resources that may prove useful in volunteer recruitment, management, and retention efforts. The list was compiled based on research and through reading reviews of different paid services related to volunteer management. It is not comprehensive, but is meant to offer an idea of some of the useful resources available for those working with volunteers.

General Information

Trainings and Resources

Council of Nonprofits: https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources/volunteers

Energize, Inc.: https://www.energizeinc.com/

AAM Toolkit

American Alliance of Museums Volunteer Toolkit (for purchase): https://www.aam-us.org/programs/toolkits/designing-a-museum-volunteer-program/

Insurance Coverage for Volunteers

A few articles that discusses some of the ways in which volunteers can incur liability, and how to protect your company:

https://www.insureon.com/blog/does-nonprofit-insurance-protect-your-volunteers

https://visvolunteers.com/what-kinds-of-insurance-coverage-should-a-nonprofit-or-volunteer-driven-organization-have/#:~:text=Nonprofit%20volunteer%20insurance%20protects%20the,of%20a%20volunteer%20liability%20claim.

https://www.psafinancial.com/2019/08/are-your-volunteers-protected-by-your-workers-comp-or-liability-policy/

Pamphlets from SAA

Society of American Archivists. (2018). Best Practices for Volunteers in Archives. Retrieved from

https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/Best%20Practices%20for%20Volunteers%20in%20Archives_SAA_RevisedNov2018.pdf

Society of American Archivists & National Archives and Records Administration. (2012). *Resources for Volunteer Programs in Archives.* Retrieved from http://files.archivists.org/pubs/free/Resources_for_Volunteers-Final-V3.pdf

Samples of Handbooks, Surveys, and Waivers

Examples of Handbooks Provided to Volunteers

Chester County Historical Society. (2008). *Volunteer Organization Handbook*: http://download.aaslh.org/StEPs+Resources/Volunteer+Handbook+Chester+County+Historical+Society.pdf

National Wildlife Federation: https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/sites/default/files/documents/Vol%20Handbook%20policies%20and%20proc%20sample.pdf

Oregon Historical Society. (2019). *Volunteer & Intern Handbook:* https://www.ohs.org/about-us/staff/upload/Volunteer-Handbook-2019-v2.pdf

Examples of Volunteer Experience Surveys

American Red Cross Volunteer Survey: https://www.redcross.org/content/dam/redcross/atg/Chapters/Division_3_-_Media/Volunteer_Survey.pdf

General template from Question Pro: https://www.questionpro.com/survey-templates/non-profit-volunteer-satisfaction-survey-template/ (an account is needed to use this service, but helpful examples can be gleaned without creating an account).

Suggestions on how to write surveys: https://volpro.net/how-to-write-volunteer-surveys-for-big-impact/

Example of Waiver of Liability for Minors

Habitat for Humanity, San Antonio, TX: https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/sites/default/files/documents/Sample%20Minor%20Waiver%20Habitat%201.2009.pdf

Recruitment Websites and Management Software

Volunteer Recruitment Websites

Volunteer Match: https://www.volunteermatch.org/

New York Cares: https://www.newyorkcares.org/

Points of Light: https://engage.pointsoflight.org/

Volunteer Management Software

Volunteer Hub: https://www.volunteerhub.com/

Get Connected by Galaxy Digital: https://software-info.gartnerdigitalmarkets.com/galaxydigital-volunteer-management-software/?PPC_Referrals=capterra

Bloomerang: https://bloomerang.co/ (free up to 250 contacts).

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American Red Cross Volunteer Survey. Retrieved from https://www.redcross.org/content/dam/redcross/atg/Chapters/Division_3_-_Media/Volunteer_Survey.pdf

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Hunter, K., & Zwerling, S. (2020, October 14). "How Can We Make Volunteer Programs More Inclusive and Accessible?" *American Alliance of Museums*. Retrieved from https://www.aam-us.org/2020/10/14/how-can-we-make-volunteer-programs-more-inclusive-and-accessible/.

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https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/Best%20Practices%20for%20Volunteers%20in
%20Archives_SAA_RevisedNov2018.pdf

Society of American Archivists & National Archives and Records Administration. (2012). *Resources for Volunteer Programs in Archives.* Retrieved from
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Stirling, K. (2011). A psychological contract perspective to the link between non-profit organizations' management practices and volunteer sustainability. *Human Resource Development International*, 14(3), 321–336. https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2011.585066

"Volunteer Recruitment Strategies for Your Nonprofit." *Volunteer Hub*. Retrieved from
https://www.volunteerhub.com/blog/volunteer-recruitment/.