

# The Case for Hiring a Manager of Volunteers

By Nan Hawthorne

I will never forget the day I walked through the lobby of an agency where I was the full-time manager of volunteers and overheard a sarcastic comment from someone in the waiting area, "You have to pay for volunteers?". He was looking over the agency's annual report and voicing an all too common belief that volunteers just happen.

Beyond the sense that my own efforts to make our volunteer program a highly effective force in service to our clients, I realized that the man demonstrated another broader unfortunate attitude that could be summarized with the well-known truism, "You get what you pay for". Just listen to the way people speak of volunteers and volunteering, with phrases *like just a volunteer, cant you get a volunteer to do it? I need five volunteers this afternoon for a mailing*, and, for that matter, the title *Volunteer Coordinator*. No one calls the head of a non-profit the Executive Coordinator. Each of these phrases in its own way reveals the attitude that volunteer work is without value, or at best low value. They do low level work, are ready to do anything at a moment's notice and are easy to organize and supervise.

No wonder then that it can be an uphill battle to convince your own executive director or board that volunteer value is multidimensional and, really, priceless. Trainer Nancy Gaston told me in an email that one of the most common questions she gets when teaching is how to convince the powers-that-be that a well managed volunteer force is an asset to the organization and deserves **allocation of sufficient resources**. We know their value and the importance of fostering their effort and not just exploiting it, and simply want the words to advocate effectively.

The most often referenced piece of advocacy is the Independent Sectors assessment of the dollar value of volunteer work. In 2000 the figure given was \$15.40. ([http://www.independentsector.org/programs/research/volunteer\\_time.html](http://www.independentsector.org/programs/research/volunteer_time.html)). (The same page cites dollar values by US state.) The times I have used that figure to try to impress a director, I have been met with a wry smile: the director does not credit that amount. It is clear then that we need to find more credible bases for our claim.

## The Dollar Amount

The figure the Independent Sector cites for the hourly value of volunteer work is, at best, an average. It includes figures for everything from traditionally low wage tasks like cleaning and deliveries, to those that are better paid, such as professions like law or medicine and high-cost consultancy. That is why the figure seems so inflated to those in a decision-making role. To offer your director or board a figure they can accept, you would be better off doing a little classification work, a term human resources professionals give to analyzing job responsibilities and assigning position titles, salary levels and qualifications needed for a new job.

To find the real dollar value of your organizations' volunteers, figure out what it would cost to hire people to do all these tasks your volunteers perform. Realistically analyze each position and decide what job classification each would fall into. Then either look in your towns newspaper want ads, contact your local association of human resources professionals, or call your local employment office to find out what hourly rate those positions generally draw. Multiply that by the number of hours your volunteers work and you have a figure that relates to your particular situation and has the credibility of what it would cost us if we had to pay wages.

Then point out to your director that chances are you could not even find people who would be willing to do the jobs for such short hours as two hours a week or so.

### ***Human Resources***

Another aspect of the volunteer as opposed to hiring someone for a wage is that by and large you could not hire the caliber of workers for your positions that you can recruit to be volunteers. I remember meeting a fellow volunteer at a science museum who had a PhD in Physics. The work he did at the museum could not possibly have a salary equivalent to what he could command in the job sector. Often volunteers come with advanced degrees or considerable experience, even simple, less tangible qualities like compassion and sensitivity. These are qualities you generally cannot hire.

On top of that, these volunteers are conduits to other resources. They know people with unique skills that their personal contact can glean for your organization. They have access to community leaders, media, corporate leaders, lawmakers and more. The value volunteers bring into the organization is, as the old saw goes, beyond what money can buy. As I used to say in trainings, you never know when your newest volunteer might turn out to be Paul Allens favorite cousin's best friend. Managing that resource well can be the destruction or deliverance of any organization.

### **Risk Management**

Speaking of destruction or deliverance, one of the most pressing reasons why an organization *must* hire -- and pay well -- an effective manager of volunteers is to protect it. A qualified manager knows the laws related to privacy, screening and discrimination when it comes to hiring and that includes volunteers. This is an area where the expression just volunteers can be deadly. If you fail to screen out a pedophile in your tutoring program or turn down a potential volunteer because she is deaf the organization can find itself in court, and the wronged individual will almost always win in court over the impersonal organization. A social worker once said to me, Our sweet little old ladies would never sue us! To which I replied, Maybe not, but their insurance company or greedy nephew almost certainly will. One Seattle organization responded to this possibility by, sadly, eliminating its entire volunteer program. But when it found that it had lost all the other benefits discussed in this article, its leaders changed their minds.

## **Community Relations**

I mentioned the value of what volunteers bring into an organization in not only their labor and talents, but also in access to money, publicity, resources, talent in the community at large. Equally important is what volunteers take back out into the community and that is community relations that, again, you simply could not buy. A volunteer who believes her work is meaningful and appreciated is the best person to have present when someone has his checkbook out, deciding to whom to make a charitable donation. After all, we read product reviews on the web for items we plan to buy before we do. Why would we not make charitable decisions the same way?

Even the fact of volunteers mentioned in organization publications and marketing is a great selling point. What does the face of a happy, fulfilled, effective volunteer in an agency brochure communicate? That your organization is frugal and uses resources well. That your organization values the community in which it operates. That the organization is not afraid of scrutiny by community members. That the organization can be trusted.

On the converse, a poorly managed, disgruntled volunteer can be a PR nightmare. His complaints to his friends and perhaps ultimately community leaders carry a considerable amount of weight. After all, he has seen the mismanagement, the squandering of resources, the mistreatment of clients and volunteers, the corruption, or whatever he reports, for himself. An op-ed piece in a neighborhood newspaper may well have identified why an otherwise popular urban development program in Seattle was voted down in two successive elections. It described how the writer and his friends tried to get involved, to volunteer for the attractive plan, but never receiving any reply concluded that the oppositions criticisms were correct.

## **Givers Give**

Volunteers continued to make larger financial contributions, on average, than people who did not volunteer. Contributing households with a volunteer gave over two and a half times more on average than contributing households where the respondent did not volunteer. (Independent Sector [http://www.independentsector.org/GandV/s\\_keyf.htm](http://www.independentsector.org/GandV/s_keyf.htm))

Need we say more?

## **How You Talk About It**

Making the case as we have here will not be enough if you yourself do not talk about volunteers and your volunteer program in a professional, respectful way. In every conversation about your program you must convey that you value the work they do. You yourself must adhere to the highest of professional standards. Get rid of demeaning language. Educate yourself. Become a leader in your local profession. Formalize your program, the language and titles associated with it, and give of yourself generously.