

# Getting the Work Done with Volunteers

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The challenge of trying to meet increased demand for services while struggling with declining enrollments and escalation of costs has led many librarians to explore the possibility of using volunteers to keep pace. This article discusses the rationale for having a volunteer program and describes today's typical volunteer. Careful, advanced planning will enable you to avoid many pitfalls. Planning a volunteer program includes selecting a coordinator, assigning suitable tasks, and setting policies and procedures. Ideas for recruiting volunteers are discussed as well as interviewing and hiring techniques. Recognition is a volunteer's paycheck, so detailed suggestions for rewarding your volunteer staff are given. With a well-supervised volunteer program, libraries can reap many positive benefits.

## Why Use Volunteers?

Christian education and volunteers are traditionally paired. We remember that Harvard, Yale, and most other colonial colleges were privately founded and supported with the goal of training pastors and furthering the kingdom of God. These schools are voluntarily financed and guided. Great libraries such as the Boston Athenaeum and the Library Company of Philadelphia were also begun and staffed with volunteer labor. The tradition of volunteer excellence, initiative, and vision is well established.

Many libraries of the 90s have mature collections which require labor-intensive maintenance. They are coping with demand for expensive access tools on CD-ROMs and are struggling with escalation of serials costs which erode materials budgets. Most libraries have backlogs of special collections which are inaccessible to patrons. At the same time, administrations are reducing staff size, eliminating departments, barely maintaining levels of service, or worse yet, reducing them. As librarians scramble with their backs against the Red Sea to continue to provide the best possible service with limited resources, one solution may be to initiate a volunteer program.

Herb White cautions us that the use of volunteers is a double-edged sword, that your funding body will never give you money for additional staff if you can get the work done free.<sup>1</sup> Using unskilled volunteers may give the impression that library work is easy, that no skills or training are necessary. But experience has shown that there are more positive than negative results when the program is properly administrated. Volunteers are used in hospitals and schools all the time, but not to operate on patients or teach classes.<sup>2</sup>

### **Their Work is Valuable**

Sometimes the belief that anything worth having is worth paying for causes people to devalue the work of volunteers. However, libraries do pay for the services of volunteers by supervising, training, and recognizing them. We have already seen the value of volunteer-initiated efforts in the founding of schools and libraries. When we believe in volunteers, we empower them to do their best.

### **Their Work Enhances Library Jobs**

The work that volunteers do should supplement, not supplant, that of the regular library staff. The volunteer's presence frees staff from repetitive tasks, allowing staff to use their special training and skills in more productive and creative ways. By understanding how the library works and how pressured the staff feel trying to deliver quality service, volunteers can be effective ambassadors to the funding community to bring in additional support. Volunteers can also be instrumental in soliciting materials. The Newberry Library's annual book fair netted \$25,000-\$35,000 a year and was run entirely by volunteers.<sup>3</sup> Volunteers can bring a new outlook, a different perspective, and added talents to the work force.

### **Volunteers Raise Staff Morale**

As volunteers perform meaningful duties and assist in providing valuable services, the paid staff recognize the resulting savings in their time and efforts. They appreciate the lifting of burdens and take on renewed energy.

### **Volunteers Enable Libraries to Maintain and Expand Services**

The tasks that volunteers are performing in libraries result in savings of time and dollars that can lead to services not possible without them.

Use of volunteers may expand in the future. As we go on to discuss the profile of the typical volunteer, we can see that modern trends toward earlier

retirement, limited financial support for educational institutions, lower college enrollments, increased demand for sophisticated tools and services, a more highly educated populace, more discretionary time available, and more people working in unfulfilling jobs, point to an increased pool of potential volunteers.

### Who Are Volunteers?

Volunteer workers are unpaid staff; they give their time and energy to assist an organization or institution to conduct certain kinds of programs or specific services. Volunteers are generally part-time workers, giving time over periods of short or long duration.<sup>4</sup>

One out of every five people over the age of sixteen in the United States has been a volunteer according to the Current Population Survey of 1990. The typical volunteer is white, thirty-five to forty-four years old, and most likely a college graduate. The higher the income, the more likely one is to volunteer. Fifty-six percent of volunteers are women; forty-four percent are men. Most volunteer less than five hours a week. Four out of ten volunteer half the weeks of the year. Thirty percent volunteer every week.<sup>5</sup>

The Gallup survey of 1990 indicated that volunteer workers work an average of two hours per week. Sixty-two percent of volunteers do so to do something useful; 34 percent volunteer to do enjoyable work; 29 percent want to benefit family and friends. Seventy-five percent of the people surveyed said they would not refuse if asked to volunteer.<sup>6</sup>

Often, one hears the lament that the volunteer pool has grown smaller, attributing this to the fact that more women have entered the work force. This is not supported by a recent Gallup poll. Ninety-eight million adults volunteer.<sup>7</sup> Another source states that more than half of the United States population is involved in some type of volunteer activity on a regular basis.<sup>8</sup> The typical volunteer believes that one's actions can make a difference. He works best with short-term commitments and flexible hours. He wants to learn new skills, to develop new relationships. She is interested in being a leader, in helping to make decisions, and in looking for opportunities for personal growth. Volunteers are more likely to work for religious organizations than any other group.

Not only have volunteers something to give, but they also have needs to be met. Reasons that people volunteer include:

- They want to feel useful, needed, and to make a contribution.
- They want to impact and influence others.

- They want to make social contacts, to get out of the house, and to combat boredom and loneliness.
- They want to renew or learn new skills to enable them to enter the job market.

## **Essential Management Steps**

The church is not an institution to be served but a force to be deployed. We must use tried and true management skills in enabling people to offer their gifts of service.<sup>9</sup> Without the support of an organization's director and staff, a volunteer program is destined to fail. Some directors are philosophically opposed to using volunteers but initiate a program to satisfy their upper administration. Other directors think that volunteers are acceptable, but only for menial tasks. The ideal director will be confident in a program and value good volunteers.

## **Planning**

### **Who Will Supervise Them?**

It is essential to appoint a volunteer coordinator whose job will be to do the required preliminary planning and who will supervise volunteers once they are on the job. This person will be in charge of recruiting, assigning duties, scheduling, and rewarding. He will handle conflicts and solve problems. She will decide to what extent volunteers will have autonomy in performing their jobs.

### **What Will They Do?**

It is important that volunteers be given meaningful work to do. How does one determine that work is meaningful? Ask yourself these questions: "Is it useful, significant?" "Does it serve the mission of the school or organization?" "Does it provide service to your clientele?"

The trend is for volunteers to move away from devoting large blocks of time on a regular basis. Jobs that can be split into tasks are ideal. Necessary skills should be easily learned.

The time and energy to recruit and train volunteers may preclude their use for some projects. The contemplated programs and services must be planned bearing in mind the possible termination or unavailability of volunteer staff. The use of volunteers should be considered as a temporary measure pending the employment of regular staff. American Library Association guidelines strongly state that volunteers should not supplant or displace established staff positions.

Volunteers should also not be used to perform work that is essential, because they are difficult to replace. "Useful" is a special project that will enhance library services. "Essential" is the interlibrary loans and photocopying. Volunteers can be assigned to essential work, but not more than three to four hours per week, the amount a staff person could pick up should that be necessary.<sup>10</sup>

Brainstorm with your staff and make a list of possible tasks, ideally those with a low priority and no specific deadline which various volunteers can work on over the year.

Following is list of tasks that volunteers can and do perform effectively:

- Preparing books (including sorting, inserting security targets, shelving, mending, labeling, filing)
- Filing government documents
- Inspecting, cleaning, and/or fixing equipment
- Loading paper and toner
- Recording books for the blind
- Providing information and referral services
- Writing grants
- Fund raising
- Preparing overdue notices
- Helping with public relations campaigns (publicity materials, displays, exhibits)
- Organizing historical, archival, genealogical, or other special collections (sheet music, drawings, personal papers)
- Assisting at the circulation desk
- Giving library orientation tours
- Working with clipping and/or pamphlet files
- Providing crowd control
- Indexing local publications (college, student publications)
- Assisting with conversion projects
- Training other volunteers
- Dusting shelves, caring for plants
- Helping with book sales (sorting, pricing, selling)
- Searching new orders for duplicates
- Sorting and opening the mail (stamping periodicals)
- Pulling card sets
- Preparing bulk mailings

Other things to consider at this stage are the number of volunteers needed and the number of hours needed per week.

### **Communicate With Your Staff**

Basic to the success of the program are prior planning and approval on the part of the paid staff. They should share in the responsibility for planning, because they can then share in the success of the program. Communicate with them and seek their input in the planning stages. Allay their fears that volunteers will replace them. Build a support framework of acceptance.

### **Policy, Budget, and Legal Considerations**

Prepare a policy and procedures manual. Plan for training. Establish some funds for advertising and for recognition and reward of the volunteers on a regular basis. Decide what kind of record keeping you wish to establish. Check with your human resources department to see what kind of insurance coverage your institution has for work-related injuries or operating a vehicle.

### **Recruiting**

Where will you find your volunteers? Libraries with good, established programs rarely need to recruit at all. The need spreads by word of mouth among the volunteers themselves. But if you are just beginning, the big trend now is to recruit senior citizens. Other possible sources of volunteers are graduate students, churches, friends groups, alumni, and international students.

### **Job Descriptions**

Job descriptions enhance recruitment efforts by focusing your search, thus enabling you to select only qualified volunteers. Prospective volunteers themselves can make more intelligent decisions about committing to the project when they know the details.

Job descriptions should include the title and purpose of the job, the activities and responsibilities of the job, and the scheduling and duration of the job. Establish a definite period of commitment. The volunteer's supervisor should be clearly identified; stipulate volunteers will be evaluated. Make the main focus of the document the expected results, not the enumeration of duties.

### **Marketing**

You can use specific tasks to create interest as part of your advertising.

Include some motivation that will appeal to volunteers. Some ideas are:

- Helping others appeals to a need to enhance one's self worth
- Improving the institution appeals to the human desire for immortality
- Using talents, gifts, and skills is an outlet for creativity
- Learning new skills enables one to gain work experience
- Meeting new people satisfies the need for personal relationships
- Gaining recognition and influencing others appeals to power motivated people
- Putting faith into action is an opportunity for Christian service
- Empowering others appeals to those with high achievement drive
- Showing that one cares is a role model for others

Select target groups and direct your advertising accordingly. You may wish to present talks to target groups and include an audio-visual component illustrating the school, students, graduates, library, or present volunteers. Some places to advertise are:

- Churches
- Academic departments
- RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteer Program)
- Condominium associations
- Large companies' pre-retirement seminars
- Clubs (sororities, service)
- Grocery stores
- High schools, for student or retired teachers
- Newspapers
- Libraries
- Friends groups
- United Way

## **Interviewing and Hiring**

Using an application form will enable you to get a feel for the potential volunteer's needs and suitability for the tasks you have decided to assign. The form should include the kind of work needed, the amount of time available, the specific times the candidate wants to work, and the question, "Why do you want to volunteer?" You may also want to ask for references.

In the interview, express appreciation that the individual is willing to volunteer his time. Make the job duties and the time commitment clear. Explain any policies. Show them your manual.

Your goal is to discover what would satisfy the volunteer, then match the volunteer with the task. Ask, "Do you prefer social activity or solitary work?" Senior volunteers often want socialization. If you put them in a back room sorting all day, you will likely lose them. It is better to put them in a more public area, and include them in staff breaks. On the other hand, if the volunteers see their activity as a job after retirement, they will want a set schedule, set tasks, and a no-nonsense attitude. For this type of person, doing the job is as important as socializing. Another good question to ask is, "What would make you feel like you've done a good job?"

### **Orientation and Training**

Your volunteers will only be as valuable as the training they receive. On the first day, the volunteer coordinator should try to make the volunteer feel comfortable and to anticipate as many questions as possible. Introductions to all of the staff and a tour of the facilities are mandatory. Allow the volunteers to get to know you and assure them access to you as they need it. Make sure each one knows where to hang her coat, store her valuables, find the restroom, and eat lunch. Go over the mission of the institution and the organization of the library. Talk about your service philosophy, what to do in an emergency, and how to deal with an unruly patron. Give each one access to the policy and procedures manual so they have a written source they can consult after you have shown them what to do. Go over how they will be evaluated.

### **Evaluation**

Setting up a formal evaluation procedure allows the volunteers a chance to have input in decisions affecting the program. On a regular basis, ask their opinions of their work, and ask if their needs are being met. In return, tell them how they are doing, or how they can improve. After all have had a chance to give input, make a list of the positives and negatives. Move quickly on any problems that surface, such as tardiness, gossiping, failure to work assigned hours, or inattention to detail. Share your findings with your staff to make adjustments in the program and report successes.

If a volunteer needs improvement, there are a range of options to choose from:

- Reminder
- New assignment
- New supervisor
- Retrain
- Retire



- Benign neglect
- Dismiss

Firing a volunteer is admittedly difficult. It should be done immediately in cases of abuse of a patron or theft of materials. Sometimes, if all other avenues of improvement fail, a nice discussion on how a mismatch has occurred may soften the blow.

When a volunteer decides on his own to leave, use an exit interview or questionnaire as another source of evaluation.

## Recognition

Volunteers need lots of attention: coffee, snacks, greetings when they arrive, and conversation. But formal recognition is the volunteer's paycheck. Plan to use as many of the following ideas as possible, keeping in mind that each person is unique and will respond to different kinds of rewards:

- Banquets, complete with entertainment
- Lunches out
- Letters, notes, verbal appreciation, certificates, plaques
- Articles in newsletters, newspapers
- Public chart with hours worked posted
- Opportunities to interact with ranking administrators
- Conferences, continuing education
- Staff meetings and parties, social hours with donuts
- Control over their job
- Pins, smocks, badges, tee shirts
- Use of equipment, a desk, mail box, coffee mug
- Free parking, fine waivers
- Radio interviews
- Gifts (bookmarks, pens, candy)
- Birthday recognition
- Paid position

## Conclusion

Both frustration and elation are emotions which the volunteer coordinator may expect to experience while supervising a crew of busy volunteers. Some may prove slow and tax your patience; others may take charge of a project and complete it efficiently. Doubtless, with good planning and supervision, the library will benefit greatly from the work of volunteers. Avoiding pitfalls by investing the time and effort required to manage volunteers will lead to a

harvest of benefits. Just as with paid staff, when volunteers feel satisfied and productive, the entire library and its patrons can see positive results.

### End Notes

1. White, p. 66
2. Chadbourne, p.27
3. Wyly, p. 322
4. American Library Association
5. Hayghe, p. 22
6. Wyly, p. 317
7. Peterson, p. 5
8. Karp, p. 1
9. Obrotka, p. 247
10. Dudden, p. 14

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