

Help Business People To Be Good Volunteers

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In most ways volunteers who come from the business world are just like any other new volunteer. They will need the same orientation, training, and supervision any newcomer requires to be effective as a member of your team.

As always, the rule is *don't assume*.

Don't assume that any applicant necessarily wants to do the same thing as a volunteer as she or he does all day on a paying job. It's fine to offer an assignment based on the person's work credentials, you may get greater enthusiasm by offering employee volunteers a complete change of pace than by typecasting them into the roles they hold at the company.

Interview all candidates. Just because they are employed by a corporation doesn't mean they are automatically qualified to help your organization or fit in with your culture. Don't assume that the person actually wants to volunteer! Sometimes an employer "strongly implies" that community service is expected, which is not a great motivator. Most business volunteers fully welcome and enjoy the opportunity, but it's always good to check.

It's also advisable to assess the actual skill level a business volunteer brings to your work, and how open the person is to transferring and adapting the way a job is done at the company to your situation. This is a theme that starts during the interview process and continues in orientation and training. Don't assume in either direction:

- That every businessperson has or doesn't have skills that are applicable to your setting.
- That the volunteer can or can't automatically apply business skills to a nonprofit or government setting.
- That business people can relate to your mission or lack understanding of social issues.
- That the volunteer has access to the company's money or goods.

Be prepared to explain the things that a businessperson might not know:

- What makes a nonprofit or public agency different from a for-profit business
- Your client base and their problems and assets
- The history of the concern or need the volunteer will be addressing
- Current resources available from the agency

- A profile of the paid and volunteer staff (including their education) and something about their workload
- How decisions are made In your organization, who makes them, and how long it takes

The more you introduce employee volunteers to the realities of life in a nonprofit, the more capable they will be in adjusting their expectations to meet yours.

Define the Work for Success

It is not necessary for a nonprofit to be "like a business," but to behave in a "businesslike" manner, particularly when it comes to respecting volunteers' time. In the for-profit world, time really is money, and most employee volunteers will have little tolerance for inefficiency. A good working relationship starts with a written volunteer role description that sets out a mutual agreement as to what will be done, with what support, and by when.

Pay special attention to timetables and reporting plans. Articulate clear goals and objectives and estimate how long each required activity will take. Agree on intermediate deadlines and on how you will both know when the work is completed. This includes discussing the form and frequency of communications and reports. Do you want written progress reports? How often? Similarly, when will it be necessary to meet in person and who calls such meetings and how? In fairness, be sure to commit to two-way communication: how will you keep the volunteer informed about your side of the work project?

Creative Opportunities

Businesses, large and small, have a wide range of assets. Be creative in tapping these. Make sure employees from all levels of the company hierarchy are recruited as volunteers. This means the top brass and the secretaries. Also reach out to all units or departments about your volunteer needs: sales, accounting, the lab, maintenance, whatever. Just think of how many different skills are potentially available.

If the company works six or seven days a week, or has an evening or night shift, you can also develop special assignments for those employees who, in fact, are most available during some part of the normal work week. Remember that night shift workers are wide awake at 8 a.m. and might be perfect for that before-school program or breakfast assistance service you need to staff with volunteers.

The volunteers themselves are the greatest resource, but don't be reluctant to ask if the business is willing to help in some tangible ways. How about meeting space or a training room equipped with audiovisual bells and whistles? Can the employee volunteers use the company's high-speed color copier for your flyers or borrow the company van to haul supplies? Sometimes it is simply a matter of making employee volunteers open their eyes to what they usually take for granted on the job, without realizing how much help it might be to you and your clients.

By Susan J. Ellis, president of Energize, Inc. (www.energizeinc.com), an international training, consulting and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism. This was the Tip of the Month for July 2015.