

Volunteers, Part I: What Makes them Stay?

by Christine Litch | April 6, 2007

It's no secret that a dedicated group of volunteers is an important cornerstone of many nonprofit agencies. In fact, according to a recent study, approximately 6 million volunteers are active in American nonprofit organizations, contributing a total of more than 15 billion volunteer hours. Volunteer hours equate to the work of more than 9 million full-time employees, making the value of volunteer labor close to \$284 billion. With statistics like these, it's also no secret that organizations should be willing to do what it takes to retain volunteers. But exactly what *does* it take to keep volunteers? And what causes volunteers to leave?

Simply put, to reduce turnover, volunteers must be pleased with the environment in which they work and motivated by the tasks to which they are assigned. This month, we look at the things that motivate volunteers to stay. Next month, we'll examine the environmental factors that cause them to leave.

Understanding Motivation

When someone shows up to volunteer, often there are many people making bids for his or her time. Everyone's "to-do" list rolls out, and a volunteer may find himself or herself shuffled to a variety of people doing a range of tasks. To retain volunteers, however, an organization needs to be aware of what motivates and leads each one to feel satisfied with the time he or she donates.

Skill Development

Some volunteers want to bring their expertise to your group, whether it is their marketing background, computer experience, or people skills. Others may volunteer to enhance certain skills or maintain ones they already possess. Still others come with the desire to learn something new.

For example, if you find out that your new volunteer, Susan, works in the telemarketing industry, your immediate thought might be to assign her the task of fundraising via telephone. If you dig deeper, however, you'll learn that Susan is volunteering to get *away* from the stress of her day job, and that she really wants to become part of the volunteer training team. Susan would like to learn about your organization and refine her management and speaking skills. With the experience she acquires by volunteering with you, she hopes to secure a new job.

This example illustrates how crucial it is to gather information from a newly recruited volunteer. Find out not only his/her current skills but also what skills he or she wishes to develop through volunteer activities. This is a valuable means of evaluating the tasks that should be assigned to maximize retention.

Personal Growth

Many volunteers come to an organization hoping to expand their horizons. Like Susan, some feel that their volunteer experience will help them advance in their careers. Others simply want to use their volunteer service as a way to cultivate new interests. Another portion will use their volunteering to aid them in making career or education choices.

Challenge

Volunteers enjoy challenging tasks and look for chances to step up to the next level. If this sense of challenge is lacking, volunteers will not generally continue service with an organization. Make sure you give your volunteers some interesting, more challenging activities along with more “routine” assignments.

Contact with Clients

Some of the most rewarding work for volunteers can be direct contact with the individuals an organization serves. They can see the direct benefits of their work in their role as a mentor, helper, or other capacity. Sometimes a volunteer’s greatest motivation to continue his or her service is a heartfelt “thank you” from a client.

Recognition of Service

Another integral part of volunteer retention is recognizing and appreciating the time and effort volunteers bring to your organization. Emphasize to your volunteers the importance of their contributions; volunteers who stay are ones who feel they are making a significant impact.

Of course, there are many ways to say “thank you.” Informally, something as simple as “You’re doing a great job!” can be a big morale booster. Making snacks available during projects or meetings is another way to show your appreciation. More formally, consider a once-a-year volunteer appreciation night to award certificates, etc. Although this latter idea seems obvious, a recent study by the Urban Institute found that just 30 percent of charities actually follow this practice.

It is important not only to recognize volunteers within an organization but also to promote their accomplishments within the community. Consider using the same methods your group already uses to publicize its programs to acknowledge your volunteers’ important work and accomplishments as well. In addition, you may want to ask volunteers if they would like their employers to be made aware of their contributions to your organization.

Rewards

Even though volunteers are not compensated monetarily, your organization should definitely consider rewarding them in other ways. Effective rewards can include such simple, no-cost things as reserving parking spaces for volunteers or giving them their own desks or workspaces.

As far as actual tasks are concerned, volunteer jobs can be designed in hierarchical levels, allowing a volunteer to advance over time and acquire a higher "status." With each level, an organization can allow for increases in self-direction and decision making. Not only will the added responsibilities make the volunteer feel "promoted" but he or she will also feel more engaged. Volunteer coordinators may also want to reward well-proven volunteers by allowing them to train or mentor new recruits or by assigning them special projects.

Summary

Even though volunteers come to an organization to donate their time and abilities, it's important to keep in mind that it's not what they can do for you that keeps them coming back, it's what you can do for them. Given the points we've outlined, it's easy to see that many volunteer retention factors are under the direct control of the organization. Although it appears there are many aspects to juggle, in terms of your organization's time and energy investment, it's worth the effort to keep a volunteer.

It's important to remember that your organization's general goals should be twofold. First and foremost, of course, you are there to fulfill your mission within the community. When a second priority becomes enhancing the lives of the volunteers who help carry this mission forward, you will see an increase in volunteer involvement and retention. As artist and author Florence Scovel Shinn put it: "Giving opens the way for receiving."

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