

RECRUITING, RETAINING, AND REWARDING VOLUNTEERS: What Volunteers Have to Say

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RECRUITING, RETAINING, AND REWARDING VOLUNTEERS:

What Volunteers Have to Say

Recruiting, Retaining, and Rewarding Volunteers

Introduction

Many voluntary organizations face an ongoing need to recruit new volunteers. Many have also had to become more sophisticated in their recruitment strategies in order to attract volunteers who are reflective of the population. However, recruitment is only half the battle. The knowledge of experienced volunteers is an important asset for an organization. Retaining experienced volunteers is, therefore, a critical issue for voluntary organizations.

In this report, volunteers give their opinions on how voluntary organizations can better recruit and retain volunteers, and how governments at all levels might support volunteerism. As a part of a research project for the International Year of Volunteers, we conducted intensive one-on-one interviews with 111 volunteers in social service organizations and community associations.¹ All of these volunteers were involved directly in delivering services to individuals, particularly to the elderly, youth, and children. Probably nowhere in the voluntary sector are the pressures for recruitment, training and retention felt more acutely than in these kinds of organizations.

What the volunteers say

- Organizational infrastructure, especially staff to answer questions and provide information, is key to effective volunteer management.
- If organizations “tell the story” — why volunteers are needed, why the cause is worthwhile, and why volunteering is beneficial — people tend to be more motivated to find time to volunteer.
- The top three factors that help keep volunteers involved are appreciation and respect, meaningful and varied experiences, and good communication.
- Government could support volunteerism through more funding, more promotion of volunteering, and policy changes such as tax credits to volunteers and reduced liability for volunteers.

We asked volunteers:

- how the organizations for which they volunteer support them in their efforts;
- how the organizations for which they volunteer impede the work they do;
- how voluntary organizations could improve recruitment of volunteers;
- how voluntary organizations could improve retention of volunteers; and,
- how public policy makers might support volunteerism.²

How volunteers are supported

In general, the volunteers we interviewed felt that the organizations for which they volunteered were very supportive. As can be seen in Figure 1, they mentioned three kinds of support in particular: organizational infrastructure, appreciation, and training.

Organizational infrastructure was the most frequently mentioned form of support, especially the support provided by staff who were available to answer questions and provide information. A key aspect of this infrastructure, mentioned explicitly a number of times, is the manager or coordinator of volunteer resources. As one volunteer noted, “if the volunteer coordinator is not top notch, your volunteers aren’t going to be top notch.”

Appreciation was the second most frequently mentioned type of support. Repeatedly, we heard that showing recognition and respect does not have to take much effort. Organizations do not have to hold an elaborate annual awards dinner. Rather, a genuine thank-you or a comment on a job well done at the end of the day is rewarding enough for most. As one volunteer noted, “a thank-you is more important than a certificate.” Indeed, a number of volunteers said they were uncomfortable with big award dinners at which selected individuals are honoured.

Retention in today’s society is a major problem. I do not buy into the provision of awards, such as a watch, for years of service ... praising an individual for years of service through recognition at annual general meetings is something I reject. That is just me. I volunteer to do something for someone, not to receive recognition. What keeps me volunteering is the continuance of a challenge that is fulfilling and within my ability to do.

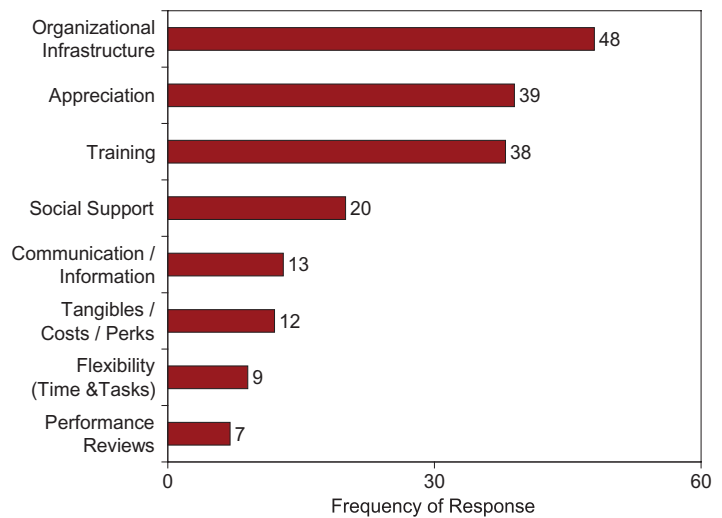
Training, including initial orientation sessions and regular workshops on specialized topics, was cited as the third key type of support. As one long-time, highly active volunteer told us, “some organizations offer very intensive training while other organizations prefer to let you learn on the job. I have found that a good training program is preferable and makes me more comfortable in my volunteer work.” Training was viewed as a necessity, not a luxury, by volunteers who work with children, where there are liability concerns, or with frail elderly and Alzheimer patients, where specialized knowledge makes a difference.

How voluntary organizations hinder volunteers

While most voluntary organizations strive to support the efforts of their volunteers, many, knowingly or not, also hinder or impede volunteers. This leads to volunteers who feel that they cannot work to their full potential, or that they are not as effective or satisfied as they could be. To identify some of these sources

Figure 1

How voluntary organizations support volunteers



¹ Participants were recruited through social service organizations and community associations, and thus most of the focus is on these organizations. Many participants are involved in other types of voluntary organizations as well. Their comments on the practices of these organizations were included.

² For ease of presentation, we have grouped their responses to our open-ended questions into broad categories. Note that respondents could give more than one answer to each question, and were not pushed to give a response if none seemed appropriate. This means that overall responses shown in charts may be more or less than the number of study participants.

Recruiting, Retaining, and Rewarding Volunteers

of frustration, we asked volunteers, “How have the voluntary organizations for which you volunteer hindered or impeded your volunteer work?”

The good news is that relatively few volunteers felt that their work was impeded in any significant way by the organizations with which they volunteer. Nevertheless, as can be seen in Figure 2, two sources of frustration stood out.

According to some volunteers, rules often seem to get in the way of doing a good job. This applied particularly to volunteers who work with children and

youth, and who must strictly adhere to certain protocols. There was a clear sense that rules and screening procedures have become more onerous in recent years. Although all indicated that they understood the reasons for, and value of, police checks and other screening procedures for volunteers with access to children, sometimes the tone (the sense of being guilty until proven innocent) and length of time (months to receive word on a police check) made these processes annoying. Many also lamented that, as a result of stricter regulations, they could not do some of the fun things with kids that they used to, such as overnight camping trips.

A second major source of frustration arises from a lack of organizational resources. This includes limited financial resources, inadequate staff or volunteers to carry the workload, lack of training, and insufficient information about clients and users.

Other frustrations that were noted with less frequency were organizational politics, ineffective management of conflict, inadequate communications, and unclear roles. It is interesting to note, however, that a lack of flexibility in timing (either in the length of time that one must initially commit as a volunteer, or the day of the week or time of day that volunteer activities must be carried out) was not cited as a major source of frustration. This is probably because our respondents were already active as volunteers and, therefore, had already accommodated themselves to their volunteer schedules, so that timing was not as limiting a factor as it might be to potential recruits.

Figure 2

How voluntary organizations hinder volunteers



Improving Recruitment of Volunteers

Active volunteers had many suggestions about how volunteer recruitment could be improved (see Figure 3). These suggestions can be grouped into the four stages of recruitment: selling the organization, the cause, or the need; making contact with potential volunteers; making a good first impression; and, matching and screening volunteers.

Selling the organization

The essential first step is to tell the story — why volunteers are needed, why the cause is worthwhile, why volunteering is beneficial and why the organization is a good choice. As one volunteer noted, “the lack of volunteerism is not about time, it’s [about] lack of awareness . . . once people know more, and [if] the process to apply is easy, they will find the time.”

Making contact

Targeted approaches and the personal touch (through word-of-mouth, inviting a friend or neighbour to participate or reaching out to people directly affected by the organization’s cause) were seen as the most effective ways to reach potential recruits. Advertising through city and community newspapers and the Internet, as well as going directly to the community by hosting volunteer fairs or sponsoring booths in shopping malls were also seen as good ways to make contact with potential volunteers.

Making a good first impression

Volunteers said that getting off on the right foot when making contact with new recruits is critical. In particular, voluntary organizations must clarify and communicate their expectations. This includes clearly

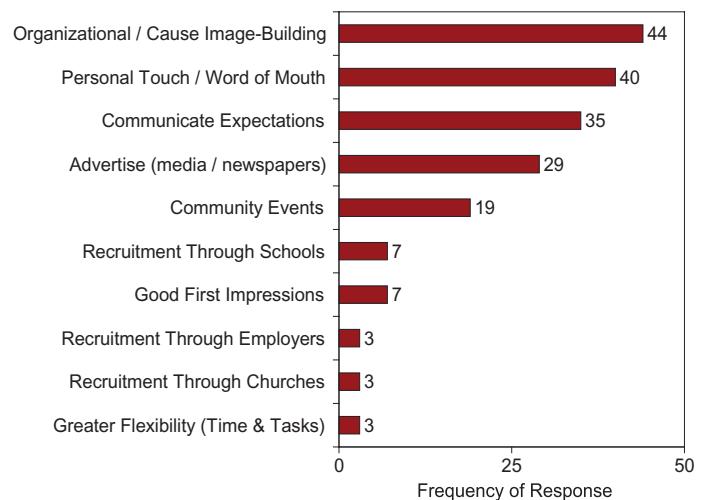
communicating and discussing with volunteers what will be expected of them, what they will be doing, how much time will be required, and when they will be expected to volunteer.

Matching and screening

Voluntary organizations also need to dedicate the resources and take the time to make good matches between volunteers and volunteer assignments, and to screen volunteers appropriately. Too often, noted one respondent, such matching is not done “because volunteering is based on availability, not ability.” As a result, people are not put in the right positions to start with. Small things like getting back promptly to people who have expressed an interest or making the interview an informative process were also noted as important.

Figure 3

How voluntary organizations can improve recruitment



Improving Retention of Volunteers

In exploring recommendations for better retention, we tried to make things concrete and personal by asking people to think about what would work best for them. Although volunteers had a broad range of good ideas about retention, there was considerable agreement on the top three factors (see Figure 4). A fourth factor was identified as important to specific volunteers.

Show appreciation and respect for volunteers

As previously noted, saying thank you and showing volunteers that they are valued on an ongoing basis is probably more important than holding a splashy event once a year.

Provide meaningful and varied volunteer experiences

This includes providing a chance for volunteers to try out different things within the organization in order to

find their niche, offering new and varied experiences and responsibilities that involve testing different skills and learning new things, providing training and other means of personal development, establishing clear expectations at the outset and checking in on these from time to time, and not asking volunteers to do the work of staff.

Communicate with and be responsive to volunteers

This ranges from providing information through newsletters to involving volunteers in program and activity planning. As one volunteer put it, “In general, I think communication is key — volunteers should know exactly what is expected of them, share in the planning, understand the overall purpose of the activity, and have input into decision making, although not actually control the decisions.”

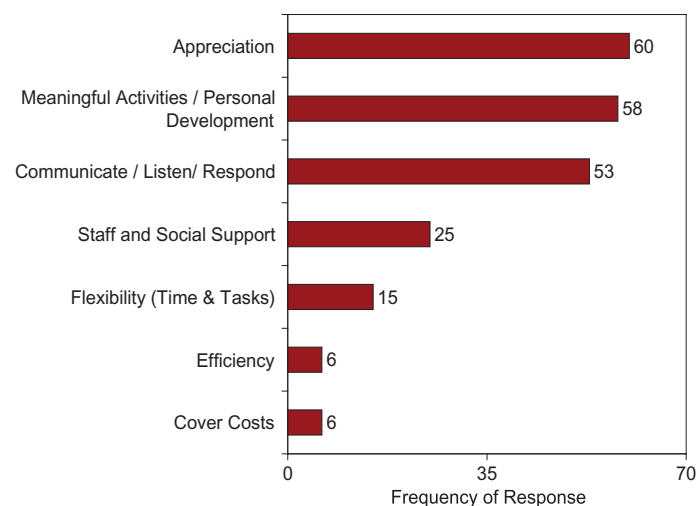
Provide staff and social support, and social experiences

Staff and social support, although mentioned much less frequently, was important to a particular group of volunteers: retirees. For this group, volunteering is a valued way to make new friends and have the ongoing social contact they used to enjoy at work. Creating opportunities for these volunteers to get together in a social context, giving them the opportunity to discuss their experiences, and inviting them to events are key aspects of retention.

When we compare the types of support volunteers say they are provided with to what they say it would take to retain them as volunteers, it appears that the main shortcoming is ineffective communication. While 48% of volunteers in this study said that communication and responsiveness are vital to retaining volunteers, only 12% noted that such support was forthcoming from their organizations.

Figure 4

How voluntary organizations can improve retention



How Governments can Support Volunteerism

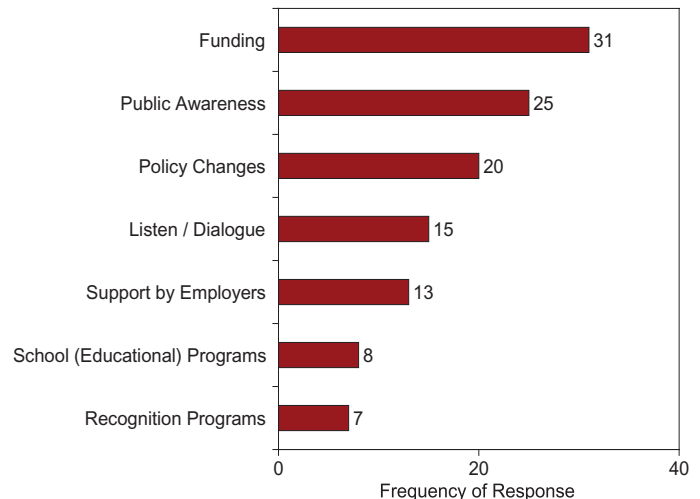
Voluntary organizations have the most direct impact on the nature of the voluntary experience. However, governments at all three levels can have an effect on whether volunteerism is promoted or hindered. According to the volunteers that we surveyed, public policy makers could do several things to help support volunteerism (see Figure 5), including:

- Provide funding to voluntary organizations.
- Promote public awareness of the needs and benefits of volunteering.
- Make some policy changes. In particular, it was suggested that the federal government provide tax credits to volunteers, make the tax system more beneficial to voluntary organizations (including reducing some of the hassles of reporting), and reduce the liability of volunteers. In addition, provincial and municipal governments could decrease the time for police checks; and,
- Listen to what voluntary organizations have to say. There was considerable concern expressed that governments are expecting too much of volunteers by asking them to deliver what are essentially public services.

Although our questions focused on policy makers, study participants spontaneously mentioned the importance of getting employers (in both the public and private sectors) involved in supporting volunteerism. Employers have an important role to play in providing time off and more flexible hours to accommodate volunteering and in promoting volunteering as a corporate value.

Figure 5

How public policy makers can support volunteerism



Conclusion

For the most part, volunteers in the social service organizations we studied felt well served by their organizations. However, these organizations face strong pressures to better recruit and retain volunteers. Effective recruitment and retention strategies require two things: dedication of organizational and managerial resources, and a receptive culture that values personal growth and respects differences. The most important

steps that voluntary organizations could take to recruit, retain and reward their volunteers are to ensure that the experiences they provide are meaningful and facilitate personal growth, voluntary organizations should communicate with and have a genuine dialogue with volunteers, and ensure that their volunteers are appreciated and respected, day in and day out, as part of a caring organizational culture.