

Recruiting and Retaining Volunteers: How Organizations Can Overcome the Challenges of Working with Volunteers

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Abstract

Volunteers provide organizations with numerous resources and can work to make a positive difference in the community. Volunteer rates in the United States are declining making it very important for organizations that rely on volunteers to work more effectively and efficiently with their volunteers. The recruitment and retention of volunteers are some of the biggest issues volunteer organizations face. By understanding the challenges encountered when working with volunteers and using theory to identify ways these challenges can be overcome to create a positive experience, volunteer commitment is built and recruitment and retention rates increase.

Introduction

Americans have a long tradition of volunteerism. Over 60.8 million people in the United States volunteered at least once between September 2006 and September 2007 (Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), 2007). These 60.8 million people volunteered a total of 8.1 billion hours worth around 159 billion dollars (BLS, 2007). Based on the number of organizations who filed 990 tax forms in 2003, which provides nonprofits and charities with tax exempt status, it is estimated that 174,000 organizations in the United States use volunteers in some way (Urban Institute, 2004). Volunteers provide organizations with numerous resources and can make a huge difference and produce change for the better in the world. Volunteers bring economic, time and manpower resources and support to organizations, but because the word volunteer implies choosing and doing something of your own free will, many problems can arise when working with volunteers.

While 60.8 million people volunteered from 2006-2007, this only amounts to 26.2% of the population. Volunteer rates in the United States have been slowly declining since 2004 and will likely continue to decline in the coming years (BLS, 2007). The "Volunteering in America 2008" national study found one third of all volunteers serve one year and then do not continue (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2008). Declining volunteer rates, lack of attrition and the current state of the economy make it more important now than ever for organizations to understand volunteers in order to better recruit and retain them.

Identifying Challenges

In a review of relevant literature I identified five underlying issues that can impact an organization's ability to successfully recruit and retain volunteers. All five of these issues are linked and work to create a positive or negative volunteer experience.

•Motivation

- intrinsic(for the activity itself) and extrinsic(personal reward)
- not everyone's motivations for volunteering are the same
- how to balance extrinsic rewards with intrinsic motivations
- motivations change over time

•Defined Roles and Goals

- setting realistic expectations for volunteers
- matching volunteers to the roles they are best suited for
- ability to see progress

•Trainings and Professionalization

- volunteering versus a job
- volunteers versus staff
- finding the right amount of training to give skills but not turn volunteering into a job

•Utilizing Available Resources

- not enough time or money to continuously recruit volunteers
- thanking volunteers and showing them they are appreciated
- who should be doing the recruiting?

•Building Commitment

- commitment to a cause, an organization, a volunteer role and volunteering in general
- how to build commitment and what type?

Theory

Life Span Development Theory

Motivations for volunteering change over time as different needs surface throughout a person's lifespan

Conflict Theory of Organizations

Ritual and ceremony help to build commitment as well as create structure and control within an organization

Social Exchange Theory

People will enter a relationship with volunteering when the benefits of doing so are greater than the cost

Implications for Practice

The following suggestions are general and can pertain to all organizations working with volunteers. No one suggestion is more important than another. When one is used others can easily be put into practice. By implementing these suggestions organizations can work to create a positive experience for their volunteers which in turn builds volunteer commitment and will lead to higher recruitment and retention rates.

Defining Roles and Goals

1. Create a defined organization mission statement and a list of goals.
2. Offer and clearly state a variety of different volunteer roles.
3. Provide volunteer tasks that are meaningful and allow for relationships to be built.

Recruitment Techniques

4. The main way volunteers should be recruited is through face to face interactions and personal invitations. These face to face efforts can be enacted by organization staff or current volunteers.
5. Offer opportunities that give a small taste of volunteering.

Increasing Volunteer Benefits

6. Advertise all of the benefits that could be obtained from volunteering.
7. Provide a balanced amount of training and support.
8. Give volunteers thank yous and rewards in the form of ritual and ceremony.

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