

Creating High Impact Jobs for Volunteers



Steve McCurley
2831 Nisqually View Loop
Olympia, WA 98516 USA
360/943-8251
shm12@aol.com

Management

Working with Staff to Develop High Impact Volunteer Jobs

Developing high impact volunteer jobs is the most effective method of upgrading the involvement of volunteers. The work done by volunteers is the essential currency of volunteer involvement, giving value both to the volunteer and to the organization. Directors of volunteer service must work continually with staff to ensure that requests for volunteer assistance are channeled to areas that are significant and meaningful, offering volunteers a chance to make a real difference in the agency. As every volunteer director has learned, however, this is not just a matter of asking staff what volunteer positions they would like filled. Most staff have neither the knowledge nor the energy to develop interesting volunteer positions, and some will resist involving volunteers in serious work. Here are three ways to work effectively with staff to develop high impact volunteer jobs.

Link Volunteer Jobs Directly to the Agency Mission

If you can link volunteer jobs to the accomplishment of the agency's mission, and avoid having volunteers working in peripheral areas ("nice, but not essential"), then you can better guarantee that volunteers will be spending their time on meaningful activities.

Gail Moore and Marilyn MacKenzie noted this vital need:

If directors of volunteers want to establish credibility they must demonstrate a commitment to helping the organization (and the people that direct it - the executive director and the board) meet its objectives and achieve its mission.

To determine where within your agency volunteers can be linked to accomplishment of the mission, ask the following questions:

1. Where do we have the greatest difficulty in delivering effective services?
2. What are the biggest unmet needs of our clients?

McCurlley's Rule of Respect

The respect staff accord the volunteer director in an organization is directly proportional to the respect accorded the work done by volunteers.

3. Where do we have problems in reaching new populations?
4. Where are staff spending their time on work beneath their skills and capabilities?

The best time to ask these questions is either during the strategic planning process for the agency or during the initial planning phase of a new project. Each of the questions above will give you answers that could be turned into volunteer positions.

Ultimately it is desirable to have the role of volunteers directly linked to accomplishment of the agency's mission, preferably in a written statement which outlines the involvement of volunteers. Consider this example from the Volunteer Program of the Bureau of Land Management:

In the decades to come, volunteers will be woven into the fabric of BLM, playing a key role in protecting the health of the public lands and providing better service to our publics. Volunteers will be vital stewards of the public lands by serving as BLM team members, providing innovative ideas and key resources, and serving as ambassadors in their local communities.

Link Volunteer Jobs Directly to Assisting Staff

Staff will value volunteer positions which they see to be of direct assistance to them. Unfortunately, you, as the volunteer director, are not in a position to determine what these jobs might be. To uncover possible volunteer jobs you will need to conduct interviews with staff to determine their needs and interests. This role basically engages the volunteer director as a consultant to staff, much as computer specialists seek to specifically match applicable software and hardware to computer users.

To successfully undertake this, you will need to ask the right questions, and to ask them in the right fashion. Here are some examples of different question types that a good interviewer might use in working with staff to develop opportunities for volunteers:

Factual Questions

Factual Questions are designed to obtain objective data about the other party and their work. They are intended to give you a picture of the status of the other party, and are usually best phrased in a manner which will allow them to

be answered with short, unequivocal responses. Examples include:

- "Do you do any volunteer work yourself?"
- "Have you ever worked with volunteers in the past?"
- "Are you utilizing any volunteers in your department now?"
- "How many volunteers are here now?"
- "How long have they been with you?"
- "What sort of jobs do these volunteers do?"
- "What are the major services that you deliver?"
- "What do you see as the biggest needs in your area?"
- "What kind of training should a person have to do this type of work?"
- "What resources or assistance would you need to involve volunteers in your area?"

Feeling Questions

Feeling Questions are designed to obtain subjective data on the other party's feelings, values and beliefs regarding. They are intended to give you information on how the other party thinks or feels about the situation. Feeling Questions are most useful when used to follow-up a Factual Question. Examples include:

- "How did you feel about working with volunteers then?"
- "What do you think it would take for a volunteer to enjoy working here?"
- "What do you like to do most in your job?"
- "What do you like to do least in your job?"
- "Is it possible that volunteers could do some of the things you're working on if they were under your supervision?"
- "Are there jobs that you do not think it is appropriate for volunteers to do?"
- "Do you think you could train volunteers to do the job adequately?"

Third Party Questions

Third Party Questions are an indirect way to discover what the other party is thinking. They are useful because they seem less threatening than a forced direct request or question. Examples include:

- "Some people would use volunteers to do _____. How would you feel about that?"
- "One thing that other departments have tried is _____. What would you think about that?"
- "A problem that other people sometimes have is _____. Do you think that might occur here?"
- "Has anyone else expressed any concerns about what volunteers might be doing here?"

Checking Questions

Checking Questions allow you to see how the other party feels as the discussion progresses. They also allow the other party involvement and participation in the decision-making process. Examples include:

- "How does this idea seem to you?"
- "What would happen if we did this _____?"
- "What would make this a negative experience for you?"

This process of direct interviewing of staff should be familiar to most volunteer directors, since it is precisely the kind of thing that is done in interviewing prospective volunteers about their interests and abilities. You can also extend this process by advertising interesting talents that prospective volunteers have shown, thus allowing staff to "recognize" a potential volunteer job. Publicizing of success stories is another way to encourage creativity among staff, as is periodically distributing a listing of all the types of work that volunteered in within your agency.



To help in this process we've included at the end of this article a guide that you can distribute to staff to "seed" their thinking about prospective volunteer positions. And we've also included a sample "Staff Request for Volunteer Assistance" form that will aid staff in making more specific requests for volunteers.

Link Volunteer Positions to Wishes and Dreams

Another way to approach the development of new volunteer positions is to allow staff to dream about what they would like to do to really enhance their work. Assisting in this can be done either during direct interviewing of staff or during a planning session. It basically involves prompting staff to think about the ways they can both improve themselves and the quality of the work they are doing. The way to do this is to ask what is called a *Magic Wand Question*, one that allows the respondent to do a bit of daydreaming and wishful thinking.

Examples of good questions to ask to stimulate this process include:

- "What have you always wanted to do but never had enough staff?"
- "What would it be like here if you didn't have this problem or concern?"
- "What would you do if you had a full-time person assigned as your assistant?"
- "If you could design the perfect person for you to work with, what would they be like?"

Steve McCurley

STAFF PLANNING GUIDE

Potential Volunteer Jobs

In thinking about how and where volunteers might be involved in your area of responsibility, there are several factors you will want to consider. You might, for example, think about creating volunteer jobs through consideration of the following categories of work:

1. Are there areas of work that staff don't want to do? This may be because they are not skilled in that type of work, or else simply have a preference to concentrate their effort in another area which better matches their interest and expertise.
2. Are there areas in which there is *too much work* for staff to do alone, and for which we might create volunteer assistants who can extend staff resources? These assistants might work directly with a staff person or could do tasks that benefit all staff.
3. Are there areas in which we can *initiate or extend* services because volunteers would allow us to begin work that we cannot now consider undertaking with current staff resources?

You might also want to consider the creation of volunteer jobs based on the recipients of the service. Consider the following:

- 📎 jobs that are of direct assistance to an individual client (counseling, visitation, mentoring, etc.)
- 📎 General assistance to staff (information services, filing, messengers, computer aid, etc.)
- 📎 Direct assistance to individual staff (research, training, etc.)
- 📎 Outreach (speakers bureau, fundraising, client marketing, etc.)

Volunteer Job Design

Keep the following keys in mind as you think about the specific work you would like the volunteer to do:

1. The work must be meaningful and significant, both to the agency and to the clientele. The work must be needed and should be interesting to someone. This means that your volunteer job must have a *goal or purpose* which the volunteer can work to accomplish and can feel good about having achieved.
2. The volunteer ought to be able to feel some *ownership and responsibility* for the job. Volunteers are not robots, but must feel that they have some input into and control over the work they are asked to do. This will mean including the volunteer in the

flow of information and decision-making within the office.

3. The work must fit a *part-time situation*. Either the work must be small enough in scope to be productively handled in a few hours a week, or else it must be designed to be shared among a group of volunteers.
4. Volunteers must be *worked with*. They should be assigned to staff who are capable of supervising their activities in a productive fashion and providing on-going direction, evaluation, and feedback.



Scheduling the Volunteer Job

The more flexible the timeframe of the volunteer job, the greater the likelihood that we can find someone who will be willing to undertake it. Think about the following as different options for the job:

- ✓ Are there set hours during the week when the volunteer work will be needed?
- ✓ Can the work be done in a totally flexible schedule at the discretion of the volunteer?
- ✓ Could the work be done on evenings or weekends?
- ✓ Must the work be done on-site at our office?

Assessing Managerial Readiness

The following considerations must also be addressed in thinking about a new volunteer position:

- Do you have adequate assigned workspace and equipment for the volunteer?
- Have you assigned a supervisor for the volunteer?
- Do you need to provide any orientation or training for the staff before they work with volunteers?
- Do you have a clear idea of the qualifications we will be looking for in a prospective volunteer?
- Do you have a firm description of the goals and objectives of the work to be done, and of the timeframe for the work?
- Do you know what training a volunteer would need to do the job in the way we want it done?
- Do you have a plan for including the volunteer in our office activities and communications flow?

DEVELOPING A VOLUNTEER POSITION

Volunteer Job Development Questions: Interviewing Staff



Background Investigation

- ◆ Have you ever worked with volunteers before?
- ◆ What was that experience like?
- ◆ Have you ever directly supervised a volunteer before?
- ◆ Did you have any problems in that relationship?
- ◆ Are there any problems you anticipate now in working with volunteers?
- ◆ Why do you think those problems might occur?
- ◆ What would a volunteer get out of behaving that way?
- ◆ Is there anything you could think of that you could do to minimize the likelihood of those problems occurring?
- ◆ What do you think a volunteer would require in order to have a satisfying experience here?
- ◆ What would make the use of volunteers a satisfying experience for you?
- ◆ What would make the use of volunteers more trouble than it is worth to you?



Development of Options

- ◆ What are the types of things you are in charge of? What kinds of things do you do to accomplish this work?
- ◆ What would you do if you had a full-time staff person assigned as your assistant?
- ◆ What are some things that you would like to get done that you never have time to get around to?
- ◆ Is there anything that you've always wanted to learn how to do?
- ◆ Is it possible volunteers might be able to do some of the things you could do by working under your supervision?
- ◆ What parts of your job do you not like to do?
- ◆ What parts of your job do you really like to do?



Implementation

- ◆ What kind of knowledge or training would a person need to do this job?
- ◆ How might we ensure that they have the necessary training or knowledge?
- ◆ Are there any changes in the way you work that you think you will need to make in order to utilize volunteers?
- ◆ What changes in office operations should be made for volunteers to work here?
- ◆ What resources will you need in order for you to work with volunteers?
- ◆ What types of people do you prefer to work with?
- ◆ What types of people do you prefer not to work with?

Creating Strategic Volunteer Jobs

1. What is the problem your organization is trying to solve or the need in the community it is trying to meet? Solving this problem is your agency mission.
2. What are the factors that contribute to that problem? What are the obstacles you face in accomplishing your mission?
3. What are the best strategies for overcoming these obstacles? These strategies form the basis of your strategic goals.
4. What are the actions necessary to carry out these strategies? This is your strategic plan.
5. What actions do paid staff lack the time or skill to do? These are your high-impact volunteer opportunities.