

People with Disadvantages: A Source for Innovative Recruitment

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INTRODUCTION

How many administrators of volunteer programs represent agencies that deal with people suffering from specific diseases or conditions, *i.e.*, multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, blindness, alcoholism, etc.? How many allow these same people to become program volunteers? In fact, how many have volunteers with any type of disadvantage? Examining one's own attitudes is not meant to produce guilt feelings, but may help to indicate where one is in order to go on from there.

In relation to disadvantages, the biggest barriers to be overcome before exploring the potentials awaiting the programs are internal. These barriers prevent thinking creatively to solve problems that separate most people from "those people" who have disadvantages. Inner barriers result from negative expectations often based on myths and fears—fears based on the consciousness of how frail all people are. That car coming down the road may be operated by a drunk who can turn me into a paraplegic; but, if I don't deal with a paraplegic person, I won't have to think about it ever happening to me. Many tell their children that they can't be like the ostrich with its head in the ground and that they must learn to face life. Yet, all do their best not to face their own frailty.

WHAT IS A DISADVANTAGE?

The author has chosen the word "disadvantage" rather than handicap or disability or some other word because of his

belief that all people have some disadvantage, probably more than one. Most are willing to admit to a disadvantage, even to compete with one another about their number and severity. Take, for example, a conversation recently overheard: "My back is bad and my legs hurt because my feet are so flat." "That's nothing, I can hardly get out of bed in the morning because I'm so stiff with arthritis, and I can't see across the room until I find my glasses."

Using this conversation as a guide for what might be considered a disadvantage, it would be possible to make a very long list of potential disadvantages from which all could select a number which would fit them.

Once reaching the conclusion that almost all have some sort of disadvantage, how is it possible to manage to survive and run society? People *compensate and accommodate*. They wear glasses, knee braces, arch supports; they're careful about how much they lift, how much they eat, what they eat; sometimes people even ask for help to accomplish a task that may be a bit too much for them. They manage to get through the day and control the environment through the use of gadgets, self reliance, and, sometimes, a little help.

Therefore, using this word with the above understanding, a "disadvantage" becomes a matter of degree. A wheelchair becomes a tool as does a pair of glasses; an ex-athlete with bad knees has a condition needing awareness as does the epileptic;

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the asthmatic has a lung disease that requires some knowledge and understanding as does the alcoholic. Yet, all of these *people* can be great volunteers.

CREATIVITY

The author's volunteer program has been able to take some interesting situations and problems and turn them into some very workable programs. This didn't happen because of a wondrous fountain of creativity or unusual sensitivity. As often happens, a change in attitude happened more by accident than anything else.

The New York State Library for the Blind and Visually Handicapped is a Regional Library serving the upstate 55 counties of New York. It's part of a program coordinated by the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, a division of the Library of Congress, and is also a unit of the New York State Library. The Library provides free braille and recorded books, magazines, and other library services to any individual who cannot use printed material.

The Coordinator of Volunteer Services interviews all prospective volunteers. One day, he was introduced to a totally blind young woman who wanted to volunteer. After the usual interview, struggling with his own internal barriers, he announced that there were currently no positions available for someone with her (considerable) abilities, but her application would be kept on file.

Rather than accepting the interviewer's inability to deal with her, this young lady made a statement that changed the way the program would operate from then on. She said, "Wait just a minute, this is *my* Library and I have a *right* to volunteer here." After several seconds of internalized battle between his fears and her logic, the volunteer coordinator had to admit that she was correct. The Library was confronted with adapting the program to accommodate her disadvantage. It turned out to be very little accommodation on its part, and she became a valuable member of the team. Even more importantly, she established that there were many individuals who wanted the *right* to volunteer but weren't being asked.

With increased emphasis being placed on volunteerism and increased competition among programs for volunteers, new directions need to be examined. The days of the stereotypical portrait of the perfect volunteer—the housewife with the school age children seeking to occupy spare time with good works—are gone. Program administrators need to approach volunteer recruitment and the use of volunteers with more creativity.

EXAMPLES

Stop looking for the "perfect" volunteer. In spite of some claims, nobody's perfect. It may be necessary to accommodate, adjust, go an extra mile, but help for the program is out there. Don't overlook or underestimate the disadvantaged.

The Library is fortunate to have some of the residents of Maplewood Manor, a county infirmary, as volunteers. These senior citizens are institution-bound and have a variety of disadvantages, yet they perform many needed tasks. With some assistance (accommodation) from the Maplewood staff, they stick address labels on posters that will be sent all over the state to publicize the Library and its services or stamp our return address on pamphlets for distribution. They also stuff and address bulk mailings for the Library.

Volunteers from an Association for the Blind inspect and test records for flaws and take the damaged ones out of circulation. These volunteers come from a work adjustment program and volunteer along with their instructor. The instructor is teaching them how to adjust and accommodate to a work situation. The Library provides a realistic task and training site.

Be creative!! Accommodate! The Library recently received a call from an intelligent eager-to-help young woman who had been hit by a car and couldn't go to her job or come to the Library to volunteer because she was able to sit for only very short periods of time. The Library was able to take a variety of tasks to her. She was willing to hand-address form letters from a computerized list—adding a nice personal touch to a pedestrian task. She felt useful again and happy. The Library was delighted!

The Library has 38,000 "talking book"

playback machines in circulation. Like all technical equipment, these machines break down and require repair—about 4,000 each year. The Senior Elfuns (a group of retired General Electric managers, engineers, and technicians) voluntarily repair about 100 machines each week so that they can be returned to borrowers. Although some of the Elfuns are hearing impaired, they use oscilloscopes and testing devices to assure quality control.

CONCLUSION

In the case of the infirmary, the Library needed to find a way to get materials to and from the volunteers. Once this difficulty was overcome by finding a vehicle to borrow, the Library was able to present the volunteers with huge, "piece-work" types of tasks which would have otherwise been impossible to complete.

These experiences, which are just in their genesis, have taught those running

the program to be open to different ways of viewing the volunteer program and traditional tasks. They have also taught that there are many more tasks which the volunteer program can accomplish with a bit of accommodation.

Flexibility will be the key to volunteer programs in the 1990s. If we are able to be flexible in dealing with the needs of volunteers, both individuals and cooperating agencies, and flexible in viewing traditional tasks, there is virtually no limit to the development and vitality available to programs. Additionally, by expanding programs, volunteer administrators will be instrumental in helping to change some fundamental attitudes toward people with disadvantages, permitting them to have the same right to volunteer as all the "perfect" people. Finally, this very manageable challenge in a program will provide an opportunity to use creativity and imagination—two important ingredients for helping to prevent "burnout."