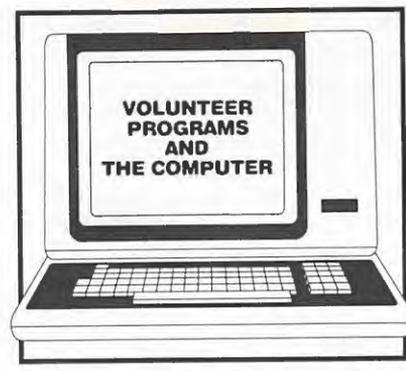


# The Value of a Computer Share Group for Volunteer Programs



By Joan Klubnik, Ed.D. and Jonathan J. Pavloff

**A**s volunteer groups begin to use computers, they are discovering the good news and bad news: Computers allow more data to be tracked in a shorter period of time and in more meaningful ways, but they can create problems of selection and utilization. They help personnel work "smarter," but they require special training to use.

Is there anything that can be done to avoid some of the problems?

One approach often used by industry is the "user group." This is a group of organizations with similar needs and/or equipment that meets regularly to share concerns and developments. The rationale for forming such a group is that you learn by another's successes and failures and that person learns from you. The net result: Everyone benefits from the sharing process.

Industry has found that sharing is cost effective because of the increased potential for learning, avoiding errors and developing group "power." Our thought: Can volunteer groups afford to ignore any technique that might allow for progress and that is dollar and personnel efficient?

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## PROFILE OF TYPICAL VOLUNTEER AGENCY RESPONDENT

- Agency does not have a computer.
- There is no national organization or computer tie-in at this level.
- Agency has no set timeframe for purchasing a computer.
- When a computer is acquired, it will be a budgeted item.
- The agency has given/obtained computer-related advice. This occurred within the past six months. Interchange occurred at a convention.
- One person, a staff position, has had computer training. Training was offered by a college. Course content was introduction to data processing or programming.
- There are no volunteers available to the agency who are experienced with computers.
- Reasons for wanting a computer are recordkeeping and word processing.
- Greatest concerns related to computers:
  - feasibility of owning one
  - staff training
  - cost
  - choosing the right computer
  - lack of knowledge about the field
  - defining software needs
  - adapting a data base to agency needs
  - getting the machine into the agency
  - getting the right software
- Topics of interest for share meetings:
  - software and hardware costs
  - how to move from ground zero up
  - what other agencies are doing
  - benefits to an agency of using a computer
  - how to define software needs
  - how to adapt the computer to own special needs
  - how to choose the right computer
  - how to get the best deal—efficiency of machine related to system cost

Because we felt that a share group might help volunteer organizations interested in computers, we decided to conduct a survey to see if there was interest in the concept. The value for volunteer organizations participating in share groups would be fewer mistakes in implementing their data processing systems.

We approached the Volunteer Center in Orange County, Calif., about our survey, suggesting that perhaps it would be appropriate for local volunteer organizations to borrow the share concept and begin developing a group that would allow for the mutual exchange of computer-related information. We agreed to explore the concept in our area in hopes that enough volunteer organizations were using computers to provide the core for a share group.

The preliminary step was to focus on groups within the county. We developed a survey (see box) to determine an agency's experience with computers, their future plans and their major concerns related to the acquisition and/or implementation of data processing systems. The responses were compiled and discussed at an organizational meeting for interested volunteer groups.

We then decided to send the survey to the entire Volunteer Center mailing list—over 1,000 contacts. The response rate was 2 percent. We felt that some groups who did not return the survey probably should not have received it because they differed in funding and personnel from the volunteer groups we hoped to reach. These included school districts, large-scale government agencies, etc.

Our target audience included small to medium-sized agencies; those interested in automating some of their functions; and

those who recently had purchased machines or were "getting their feet wet."

Because we did not follow up on nonrespondents, it was impossible to be certain how representative the sample was of the potential audience—those who could benefit from the proposed share group.

Not surprisingly, the average survey respondent is an agency that does not yet have access to a computer but is interested in future possibilities. There were more respondents without machines; however, those interested in the share group tended to be the ones with machines. To see if/how the groups with computers differed from the average survey respondent, we also developed a profile of the typical agency with a computer.

The second step was to hold an organizational meeting. Sixteen volunteer groups expressed interest in such a meeting; representatives from 13 attended. The agenda included

- a brief overview of the share concept;
- a self-introduction by each attendee highlighting his/her organization's pro-

## PROFILE OF TYPICAL VOLUNTEER AGENCY WITH A COMPUTER:

- Computer is an Apple; peripherals include a CRT and printer.
- Cost of the system is \$6,000 or more.
- Computer was included as a budget item.
- Software programs most used are word processing and financial system.
- Computer is used equally for record-keeping, financial data and mailings.
- Executive director/administrator is responsible for getting the system; staff is responsible for operations and programming.
- Greatest concerns related to computers:
  - staff usage of equipment
  - cost of programs
  - full machine utilization
  - information about specific programs
  - help in setting up the system
  - aging of the system
  - benefits of the system
  - user training
  - expanding the system
- Topics of interest for share meetings:
  - specific program-related issues
  - information about programs currently on the market
  - interaction with other agencies
  - benefits of the system



# SURVEY RESPONSES

**Does your agency have a computer system?** 43% yes; 57% no.

Over one-half of the responding agencies do not have access to computers. But of those interested in a networking group, the ratio is 2:1—machines to no machines.

**Manufacturer.** Fifty percent of those with machines have an Apple; 17% have an IBM, and the remainder (33%) have some other brand. Information on size of systems was not consistent/sufficient and could not be tabulated.

**Peripherals.** More than 75% of volunteer organizations with computers have CRTs and printers. Approximately half have a modem.

**Cost of the system.** Thirty-three percent have systems that cost less than \$3,000, while 50% have systems in excess of \$6,000. The tendency appears to be to buy high or low.

**Three most popular software programs.** Although no data was provided on software brands, categories of software were identified. Most common (75%) was a word processing system of some sort, followed by some type of financial-oriented program (67%) and a program to handle records—personnel, client and/or member (25%). Only 17% have a data base management system. The remainder of the programs identified by less than 10% of the respondents included educational games, statistical and analysis, and referencing programs. The agencies appear to use a combination of customized and packaged programs.

**Does your national organization have a computer?** 14% yes; 32% no.

The limited response to this question might suggest that organizations not affiliated with a national group are the ones who responded to the questionnaire. Or, it might indicate that individuals who responded are not aware of services offered at the national level—e.g., national offices may have machines for their own use but have not progressed to the point of extending the service to their local groups. Of those groups whose national office has a computer, 75% indicated that they could access information from that system. There was no consistency as to the method by which the information could be accessed and no data was gathered as to what types of information were available.

**If you do not have a computer, do you have definite plans to get one?**

Twenty-five percent intend to get a machine within the next 6 months, and another 25% intend to get one within the next two years. The remaining organizations (38%) have no specified timeframe for machine acquisition. Interestingly, no one has two-to-five-year plans for machine acquisition.

**How do you intend to pay for the system?** A breadth of sources for funding a computer system was indicated. Groups with and without machines responded—21% indicated that dollars for a system had been included in their budget; 18%, equally divided between those with and without machines, intend to cover the cost of a system through donations; 18% also indicated that the money would come from a grant of some sort. Those who named sources indicated that these were private foundations and individuals. One agency has a machine that had been donated.

**Did you give or get computer advice from others?** Fifty-seven percent indicated they had received or given advice, while 25% had not. Of those who share information, 63% indicated that it had occurred within the past six months. Contact was most commonly made at a convention (31%); at a volunteer group or special meeting (19% each). This might suggest that advice-seeking/getting is a spontaneous occurrence that comes from volunteers joining together for other purposes.

**Has any of your staff had computer training?** Fifty-seven percent indicated that someone on staff had received training, while 39% have no one who has yet become involved. Either one or two persons received this training, and they are generally (75%) a staff person rather than a volunteer. In addition, 50% of the directors or administrators have participated in training. Of special concern are the few agencies who indicated that they have computers but have no one on staff who has received any computer training.

**Sources of training.** The educational resource was a college program (50%) or some type of agency-sponsored training session (38%). The content usually was an introduction to data processing or programming. A few agencies have instituted in-house programs to train staff and/or volunteers on "how to use our system." Generally, respondents indicated that a single course had been taken, although a few identified several college courses (in one instance, a certificate program). Those without machines tended to opt for introductory courses, while those with machines tended toward programming.

**Do you have volunteers who have computer experience?** 29% yes; 61% no. Those with machines were more likely to respond to this question; they indicated they have few volunteers with computer skills. The data may suggest that those agencies with computers are more sensitive to identifying individuals who have these skills. Because they have a machine, an agency may be aware of the computer skills needed and the lack of volunteers available to satisfy the need. The question might also be raised: What are agencies doing to encourage volunteers with computer expertise to participate?

**What type of assistance are volunteers giving?** The assistance most likely requires computer expertise and is in the form of advice, programming or work on special projects. These categories all suggest some degree of knowledge on the part of the one providing the assistance. This would indicate that agencies are able to tap into the professional data processing community, even though few groups indicated that they had volunteers with computer skills. The other type of assistance frequently provided by volunteers is data entry (63%).

**What do you use your computer for?** Response to this question indicated that agencies with machines are using them for multiple tasks. Most frequently (67%) they indicated that the machines are used for recordkeeping, financial assistance and mailings; 25% are also using their machines for tracking and special studies. Without knowing exactly how each agency interprets the tasks, it is difficult to categorize the responses. The significance of the data is that agencies are using the computers for multiple operations suggesting efficient utilization of equipment.

**Who is responsible for acquisition and utilization of machines?** Responses indicated that the executive director/administrator is most often responsible for acquiring the computer. Responsibility for operating and programming the equipment is the responsibility of either the executive director/administrator or staff. Clerical staff, volunteers and board members tend not to be involved with the agency computer. This would substantiate responses indicating that most organizations do not have volunteers who are knowledgeable in the field. Computers tend to be an in-house concern. A question might be raised concerning the across-the-board involvement of the executive director: Is this the best utilization of the individual's time, or should her/his involvement remain at the policy-making level? Only one group indicated a computer specialist had been involved in the decision-making process.

**Reasons for wanting a computer.** Respondents indicated the number one reason for wanting a computer is to handle some sort of recordkeeping activity, whether related to members or agency data. This interest would correspond with the reported current usage of machines by organizations indicating that recordkeeping and financial assistance are among the most prevalent applications. The second-ranked reason for wanting to acquire a computer is to make use of its word processing capabilities. The third-ranked response was quite varied; however, most responses could in some way be tied to manipulation of records and information about members, clients or finances. Agencies appear to be interested in computers as a way to handle their data efficiently.

gress in computerization; and

- each attendee's expectations of the group and the type of help needed.

Of the organizations represented, eight had machines and five did not. The common motivation for attending was an interest in learning about other groups' progress. Some came to get direction from those who already had machines; others, with highly developed systems, came in to share their good and bad experiences with hardware and software.

Participants tended to have specific questions. For example: Are there resource people available for consulting who are volunteer oriented and inexpensive? What software packages are appropriate for nonprofits? What are the names and features of good software packages? How do we begin to learn about computers? The backgrounds and needs of the group were extremely diverse.

Reaction to the initial meeting was positive enough for the group to arrange for another meeting two months later. It was held at one of the participant's facilities, which had three computers—a large mainframe, a micro system, and a word processing system. They chose this meeting site so they could see the different systems and discuss their operation and programs. Even those with computers had expressed interest in the proposed visit.

The share group was designed to be a "pay-as-you-go" operation. As printing, mailing and other costs were incurred, they were to be absorbed equally by group members. We hoped that the group would grow in size which would provide for greater input.

At this second meeting, however, the group decided that its experience base and need levels were too diverse to justify continued meeting at this time. We plan to conduct periodic follow-ups to see if this changes. To further stimulate interest, the Volunteer Center's newsletter has begun carrying a small section on volunteers and technology.

In conclusion, we feel that currently, volunteer groups are too new to the computer to justify coming together to share. It might be that right now the scale is tipped toward the need for information, which suggests that conferences, rather than sharing, is more appropriate. Perhaps an ongoing written communication, such as a section in a newsletter to keep the dialogue open, is all that is warranted and that as more agencies get machines, face-to-face interaction will be appropriate. ♥