

Hire The Best

Finding a qualified director of volunteers

Every evaluation of effective volunteer efforts concludes the same thing: the stronger the leadership, the more likely the success. Organizations with competent, full-time volunteer program managers gain more productivity from volunteers than those without consistent, qualified staffing.

At the same time, volunteer administration has emerged as a career field, complete with professional publica-

tions, conferences and credentialing. Today, with comparatively little effort, it is possible to find job applicants with experience in this position.

So why do so many organizations still promote a secretary or a long-time volunteer, or hire someone without any practical knowledge, to fill the director of volunteers slot?

It is more important to seek someone who has demonstrated ability to

mobilize volunteers in any setting than to insist upon finding someone with a complete understanding of your type of facility. The setting can be learned more easily than the techniques of volunteer management.

Also, you have lots of in-house resources to train a newcomer about your setting. Who on staff can train the person in volunteerism? This is a specialty, and you need a specialist.

The best way to focus on the types of qualifications necessary is, of course, the job description you develop for the position. Think through exactly what level of performance

you want and therefore what the ideal candidate will bring to the job. Do you want someone who can build and manage a large corps of diverse volunteers doing important tasks? Will the volunteer office coordinate with your public relations and fundraising? This is not a clerical role.

If you find yourself defining the work in one or two sentences, you are probably oversimplifying the position. Here's a common prime example:

■ "Will recruit, screen, match and train volunteers."

These are actually four distinct work areas, requiring a wide range of sophisticated skills. If you are uncertain as to how to craft a job description for your volunteer program leader, do some research and find samples. Contact the Association for Volunteer Administration or your local Volunteer Center as a starting point.

When you take the time to formulate the strongest possible job description, aiming high for a qualified person, you are likelier to find that person. This process also ought to make you examine the salary level you will offer for this management position.

Apart from the specific skills of running a volunteer program, here are some competencies that the best volunteer program managers demonstrate:

■ Ability to articulate a positive vision about volunteers: why they are important; what their potential might be in your setting;

■ Understanding of the expanding scope of the field of volunteerism, including the many types of community resources that have emerged in the past decade that may use different terminology for their community service;

■ Strong coordinating skills. This is a left brain/right brain job with many details to juggle efficiently;

■ Warmth and a degree of charisma. Potential volunteers are encouraged to join your organization through the image portrayed by the director of volunteers, their first contact with you. The person must be able to convey friendliness and efficiency and must also be able to get to know each recruit well enough to make appropriate assignments;

■ Enthusiasm and energy. The director of volunteers creates an atmosphere for the volunteer program, and it must be a lively one;

■ Comfortable presentation style and public speaking ability. Remember that the demands of recruitment and training will put this person in the public eye and in front of groups often;

■ Familiarity with community resources for volunteer recruitment and collaboration partners on bigger projects.

It is helpful to ask job applicants what volunteering they themselves

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have done in the past or are currently doing. The way they answer this question — tone and enthusiasm as well as concrete details — should be a clue to their attitude about volunteerism.

However, be careful not to fall into the trap of assuming that experience as a volunteer automatically qualifies someone to direct a volunteer program. This line of reasoning is just as faulty as implying that any employee of an agency can also run that agency. Experience as a volunteer is useful background for understanding the value and potential of volunteers, but

skills such as recruiting, supervising, record keeping or evaluating are generally not gained by being a front-line volunteer.

Finally, don't hire someone whose only interest in volunteers is as a stepping stone to enter your organization and get a different job later. If the person is not enthusiastic about volunteers and this position, there will not be a creative, successful program.

Find a director of volunteers

Increasingly, it is possible to find people with experience in volunteer administration. Send a job opening an-

nouncement to any of the following resources, if they operate in your community:

- the Volunteer Center, many housed at a local United Way;
- the state Office of Volunteerism or Commission on Community Service;
- the "DOVIA" (Directors of Volunteers in Agencies) association;
- local members of the Association for Volunteer Administration;
- a college-based certificate program in volunteer management.

The Internet offers places to advertise job openings for any nonprofit

agency position. There are even several sites devoted solely to volunteer management, including the Job Bank at www.energizeinc.com.

Think about which facilities have large volunteer programs. If they are large enough to have several salaried staff members running the program, there might be someone in an assistant position who is ready to move up into a full directorship. This might also be true of some administrative volunteers who have been, in essence, apprenticing as leaders of other volunteers. So it is worth sending a job notice to such settings.

The skills of directing volunteers can be learned in nonagency environ-

ments, too. For example, anyone with background in organizing successful political campaigns (either for partisan candidates or for nonpartisan issues) knows a great deal about volunteers. So do special event organizers, alumni association staff and many fire chiefs. Former presidents of large, all-volunteer organizations also have experience in the nuances of organizing voluntary workers.

A growing number of people have the credential of "CVA"— Certified in Volunteer Administration. The CVA designation is awarded by the Association for Volunteer Administration, the field's international professional society. An expanding number of academic institutions have created certificate in volunteer management programs, which are not the same as certification.

A certificate is granted by the school at the completion of a certain number of courses or noncredit workshops but has no connection to any national standards. However, if a resume shows such coursework, it is a good indication that the applicant is serious about the field of volunteerism.

Specifically ask applicants what education they have had in volunteer management, apart from on-the-job experience. Have they ever attended a volunteerism conference locally, on the state level, or nationally? Do they subscribe to any of the journals in the field? The answers will show whether or not they are connected to the "field" of volunteerism.

Don't settle for an unqualified employee out of lack of knowledge or vision about who might be out there ready to galvanize volunteer involvement in your setting. Rather than paying the cost of underwriting the on-the-job education of an inexperienced director of volunteers (time, money, false starts), expect to spend more to get the most.

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