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Trap

Volunteer Managers and the Time Management Trap

By [Andy Fryar \(AU\)](#)

June

1999

This month we are pleased to offer a guest hot topic writer: Andy Fryar from Australia. Andy has been a responder to past hot topics and e-mailed me personally about his observations on how we manage our time in this field. I invited him to write up his thoughts and here they are. Thank you, Andy! --- Susan Ellis

Recently I was asked to chair a Volunteer Managers Network meeting in the absence of the regular chairperson. During the week prior to the meeting a number of members phoned to inform me that they were unable to attend. Spending a few minutes speaking to each I found the reason in every case to be the same - they were just too busy at present and simply could not spare the time.

Several days later I was in the office of a colleague at the time she was locking up for the day. After switching off the various electrical equipment and securing the windows, she proceeded to collect enough papers, files and folders from her desk to sink the Titanic - explaining as we walked to the front door that this was her daily homework in order to catch up before the next day!!!

I was left thinking about the factors which determine the need for some people to skip networking opportunities and home life simply to keep up with their workload, while managers of other (often much larger) volunteer programs seem to be able to breeze through their work with relative ease.

In addition, managers of other areas and departments often seem to absorb their extra work with an apparent lack of concern. We could hypothesize that this is due to these areas being product- (as opposed to people-) focused, that individuals working in these areas are better versed in time management practices or, quite simply, that other areas are better resourced, and therefore better able to cope with these added pressures.

While these may all be partially true, it is my opinion that the problem for many volunteer projects is that they still operate very much in a mode of crisis management.

This seems to be particularly true for successful small to middle sized volunteer programs, where the number of volunteers has grown slowly - due largely to the individual and personal attention which the volunteer manager has lavished upon each team member. The individual needs of volunteers often need to be met with immediacy, and often in the midst of a myriad of other activities.

As these programs expand (with their corresponding growth in both the legal requirements to operate a volunteer program and the reporting requirements of funding bodies), the Volunteer Administrator is left in a quandary. The practice of continuing a good, close knit relationship with each and every volunteer team member becomes more and more difficult - even impossible.

So where does time management come into all of this?

I believe that effective time management is the key to not only finding the successful blend between the needs of the volunteers and the volunteer program, but more importantly to avoiding burn out of volunteer program managers.

The first thing we all need to do is ask ourselves questions about where our priorities lie in relation to the effective management of our time. For example, do you drop everything every time a volunteer knocks on your door with a problem, or do you have no time for volunteers and their concerns at all? Perhaps you fit somewhere in between? Only an honest analysis of this situation will enable you to develop appropriate strategies to make your workplace a more effective and productive environment.

Secondly we need to develop ways in which we can manage our time effectively to achieve our organizational goals while at the same time meeting our own personal goals and the intrinsic needs of our volunteer workforce. A simple analysis of our work practices to determine what we spend the majority of our time doing, coupled with the question "Is this the best use of my time?", will help create a starting point for time management reform in your workplace.

There are many time management ideas and strategies that can easily be developed and implemented in volunteer programs of all shapes and sizes. While I use many of these myself I have resisted the temptation to publish a list at this point. Rather, I'd like to challenge you all to respond to this essay and share your own thoughts with the rest of us:

- Do you agree that time management is an issue? What other factors contribute to this being an issue?
- What practical time management tips and advice do you have to share?

I'm sure that we all have great ideas that will benefit others in the field. Finally let me leave you with a thought: We need to always be mindful that our performance will only ever be viewed as mediocre if we set mediocre standards - and the easiest way to set mediocre standards is to try and be everything for everyone.

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Submitted by Christine Corba, Consultant, Dayton, OH, USA

My situation is unique in that I contract from my home with several volunteer utilizing/supporting organizations to enhance (and in one case manage) their programs. I am the mother of two small children and do the majority of my work from home. I work 20 to 30 hours per week with my children in child care for 1 day (that one day is generally packed with meetings, volunteer interviews etc). Volunteers and staff have my home office phone number and e-mail address. The keys to time management for me are to create a REALISTIC list of the tasks that MUST be done that day, and then to do them; when I make phone calls, I make a list of the people I must call and then make sure that my conversations are "to the point" and brief; and when I sit down to work, (which is normally during mid-afternoon naps) I work from the list I created and mark tasks off as they are accomplished. Additionally, the people with whom I work understand and appreciate my decision to work from home. I have been able to establish my role within each organization and to maintain good boundaries with staff and volunteers. I get phone calls and e-mail throughout the day, but it's manageable (thank goodness for cordless phones!) It's understood that my role is to interview, place, orient and advocate for our volunteers, but staff are responsible for their ongoing supervision. I act as a consultant more than a manager. My days are full, as you can imagine, but spending this time with my kids is the most important thing to me at this point in my life. I have found that the most beneficial aspect to working from home and managing my time efficiently has been the elimination of unnecessary meetings and other activities that tend to "suck up" your time when working within an agency. I try to choose my activities and tasks carefully so that the organizations for which I work and my family receive the attention they deserve.

Submitted by Rob Jackson, Volunteer Development Officer, Royal National Institute for the Blind, London, England

A couple of thoughts on time management. First, I've always found it helpful to schedule my day to allow me time to deal with those tasks that have a habit of mounting up if not dealt with regularly. For example, the first hour of the day is given over to catching up on e-mail correspondence. I also know my energy levels drop after lunch so I schedule time first thing in the afternoon for catching up on a less energetic activity, usually reading. Use your natural rhythms during the day to best effect by scheduling appropriate tasks to match those rhythms. Second, one of the factors we may be so 'touchy' about time management is that we have an answer under our noses but so often do little about it - volunteers! It took five responses to this Hot Topic before Elizabeth Lowenger mentioned them. I remember a training course here in the UK last year where Susan reminded us that if we are so unconvinced about the value of volunteers that we do not have them working with us, why should we be surprised at other staff's resistance to involving volunteers. We should be quick to take a leaf out of our own books and look at our work, what we like and don't like doing, our wish lists etc. and

see where we could recruit volunteers to help out and/or make our dreams reality. A great resource for this is the '[Help I-Don't-Have-the-Time Guide to Volunteer Management](#)' by Susan and Katie Campbell

Submitted by Melody Jane Moore, Volunteer Coordinator United Way-Thomas Jefferson Area, Charlottesville, Virginia, USA

I worked for a year at READ-ALLOUD Delaware coordinating a county wide program with 40 different sites and a multitude of tasks to keep everything running. One of the very valuable tools I learned came from my job description, written by my Director, Mary Hirschbiel. "It is not your job to do everything; it is your job to find someone to do the job and support that volunteer with training, resources, supervision and motivation." I have this taped inside my day planner, next to the phone and near my computer. Reading this and putting it into action are two very different things, but I enjoy my work much more, and I think I am more productive and competent because of following this advice. My hat is off to Mary for writing this into my job description. Thanks!

Submitted by Sarah Elliston, Professional Development Associate, United Way Volunteer Resource Center, Cincinnati

Help - do you really have time to read what I have to say? (little joke there) I agree with what everybody has said so far, and emphasize that helping volunteers develop relationships with others and not depend on me for their strokes, is one critically important tool. It's the one I find the hardest to do because I usually like the volunteers but...that's the answer. That and delegating, which the VC Exec from Halifax described - and that's what I teach. I like the idea of coming to work at 5:30 on Saturday a.m. - unfortunately my building doesn't open till 8 a.m. but I am going to negotiate with the building manager - I have also started arriving an hour early for work one day a week and that has given me time for my work. Am late for a meeting now , tee hee - bye -

Submitted by Joshua Ramey-Renk, Volunteer Coordinator, National Steinbeck Center, CA, USA

I think we often create such enormous take-home loads all by ourselves . We have such a drive and desire to get it all done. The best time management skill I've acquired was simply this: If an extra hour of work can wrap up a project or resolve a blocked process, work an extra hour, but if an hour of extra work only skims off the top of a never ending work load-go home and have a beer. When I finally realized that I could work 75 hours a week and still not be "done" I said to myself every day at 5 "go home" and made myself do it. A tip for fixing the piles of filing and other routine administrative work that backs up: go into the office at 5:30 on Saturday morning and work 'til 9am. You'll get more accomplished in those 3 and 1/2 hours with no distractions than you ever thought possible, and you're done so early that you don't feel like you've lost your week-end. In fact, I actually feel like I've gotten more of one because I'm up and active and ready to go enjoy the day.

Submitted by Sue Kelley, Volunteer Coordinator, United Community Ministries, Alexandria, Va.

Since we are not all made out of the same stuff, we are just being too hard on ourselves if we try to live up to the standards set by others. Some are just naturally well organized and good time managers; others are not. We need to accept ourselves as who we are and move on. Don't get me wrong, though. That doesn't mean that we don't try to improve. And that's why I MAKE the time to attend networking sessions. I gain SO much from not only the networking and training, but getting out of my workplace, away from the constant demands. It's really worth the time in the end.

Submitted by Arlene Osborn, Chapter Manager, Thunder Basin Red Cross, Wyoming

Hi! I am the Chapter Manager for a very small Red Cross chapter in Wyoming, where as you probably know, we have lots of space and few people. I also am a community volunteer like most people, and work two part time jobs, which often seem like full time. So, I have learned to be careful about managing my time. I have finally learned that I can't do it all, and that I also need to depend upon other people to help get various tasks done . I think the biggest challenge for me, is not the space, or the tasks, but that of finding good volunteers who have the same dedication to quality service to our customers; whether they are students, volunteers, or clients. Sometimes it seems like it is a matter of percentages. There are a certain percentage of the people who can take a project and run with it. Then, it is up to those who can, to nurture others who may have the interest, but aren't too sure about their capabilities, time, etc. So, in my case, it is good that we don't usually have pressing needs. There is usually time to give good service and plan for the future. I think the most frustrating part, though, are the demands put upon us by the "Powers what be" who are looking at life in Wyoming from life elsewhere, and cannot understand why things are not working as they would expect. So we find ourselves trying to meet demands which are not really necessary in our situation, such as numbers, paperwork, etc. Thanks so much for the opportunity to "blow off steam"!

Submitted by Carol, Volunteer Coordinator, Appleton, WI

I have had a variety of jobs over the years. But Volunteer Management in a small not-for-profit agency is mind-bending. It seems to me that my major hurdle is handling the ever changing "what's today's priority". Basically, stretched too thin. The Volunteers are not my problem. They are my treasures. It is the staff and Board's priorities that become overwhelming for me. I have learned to say "no" and not to be the first to volunteer - which is difficult because it is all very important. What I know about time management and have exercised in the past, no longer works for me at my present job. I am very interested in what other volunteer managers have to say. Bring on those "tips"!

Submitted by Pam Simmons, Volunteer Coordinator, UPMC South Side, Pittsburgh, PA

I do feel that time management is important, however, not as important as having time for the volunteers when it is needed. Your statement of "crisis management" is soooo true! In fact, I started writing this opinion 1 1/2 hours ago & have had other pressing "crises". But.....I feel that is the most important aspect of my job (retention). I thoroughly enjoy these monthly topics. Thank You!

Submitted by Susana B. Dias, Community Liaison, Harmony Home Children's Advocacy Center, Texas, USA

This topic hit so close to home! I find time management to be such a struggle. Although I am proactive and I attempt to anticipate problems before they occur, I tend to "drop everything" for the volunteers. Our program is small enough that I have developed personal friendships with the majority of the volunteers. As a result, they often visit unexpectedly. In order to stem this behavior, I have recently begun to set firm time limits. I inform the visiting volunteer that I have only 5 or 10 minutes to spare. Once the time is up, I resume my former activity, and I accept telephone calls. Together, these visual and verbal cues usually do the trick.

Submitted by Lesley Dunn, Executive Director, Volunteer Resource Centre, Halifax, Nova Scotia

The greatest way to manage our time is to delegate our tasks. Encouraging others within our work environment to take on more responsibility can be both challenging and rewarding. Yet having achieved this goal, as managers and executive directors we now free up time for visioning and strategic planning. I have yet to find the perfect solution, and certainly haven't mastered the fine art of delegation, and I still seem to spend days in crisis management, but I am happy to report that they are becoming fewer and farther apart. Much to my delight, staff meetings require little planning on my behalf. Staff and volunteers determine the agenda items, they set a convenient date and time for everyone, as well as ensure all are notified. As Executive Director my role at the meeting is to provide information and to assist in problem solving if the group encounters difficulty. One of the greatest gifts I have given myself each day though is one hour of private work time each morning, and each afternoon, this has enabled me to deal effectively with the administrative duties of the organization, and to ensure all telephone calls are returned.

Submitted by Elizabeth Lowenger, Volunteer Services Coordinator, CLSC Ren-Cassin, Quebec, Canada

One way I am developing to deal with time management, since I doubled the number of volunteers at my organization, was to implement a Team Leader model. These high caliber volunteers either supervise and train a team of direct service volunteers and liaise with the staff they work for, or the team leaders work with me to coordinate our recruitment or new volunteer processing procedures. The training of these leaders is very time consuming at the beginning but well worth it down the road. Each volunteer needs individual attention but not necessarily from the volunteer manager. Organizational staff should also play a role and provide on-site supervision and recognition.

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