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Universal Standards vs. Your Own Situation

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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I get lots of questions that start from the premise that there are uniform, universal facts about volunteer involvement. A good example is: "What are acceptable attrition rates for volunteers?" Well, obviously the answer is: It depends.

Studying attrition as a "thing" external to the settings in which volunteers work implies that it is a characteristic of the volunteers themselves (or something in the air that infects everyone). There may be commonalities among certain types of volunteers, but high attrition is also likely to be a reaction to something going on *in that institution*. In which case, inter-agency comparisons would be useless.

It makes much more sense to study attrition within your own facility, department to department or assignment to assignment. That has the potential to uncover which areas require re-design, re-training, or whatever. Further, you cannot study "attrition" until you identify:

1. what you expect as a minimum retention rate; and
2. what amount of time the volunteer promised to commit when interviewed.

In other words, if you plan (wish) for, say, five years of service and volunteers leave earlier, the problem isn't "attrition," it's unrealistic expectations! Or, if you never ask volunteers for an initial commitment of time (say, 1 year), then you have no idea if one person only intends to stay 6 weeks and another for 6 years.

This quest for "tell me what's standard for all volunteers" emerges over and over. Think how often someone posts these types of queries to a listserv: What should I put in a volunteer manual? What should I ask in a volunteer screening interview? Is there a standard volunteer satisfaction survey? A good test when formulating a question about volunteers is to substitute the word "employee" and consider if the same question would be asked in relation to paid staff.

Trying to draw universal conclusions about what's best for volunteers, who can be doing such wildly unrelated things as mountain rescue and collating papers, is as hopeless as expecting to treat nurses

and plumbers alike just because both get paychecks.

Finding Our Own Answers

Too often we look for easy, off-the-shelf solutions to tasks that need to be analyzed agency by agency. Worse is a lack of confidence in our ability to develop the best approach or materials for our setting, so we seek that external model to prove what we're doing what's "right." Yet so much of volunteer management is observation and analysis of what is going on around us and then responding appropriately.

The following recommendation surfaces often for various reasons, but this is yet another strong rationale for forming a volunteer program advisory body. If you are isolated in developing procedures or forms, it's easy to feel insecure. But if a group of people deliberates with you, then the resulting synergy will assure you develop a solid plan or product.

First look inside your organization:

- Are there units that seem to be more successful with volunteers than others? Study why.
- Do volunteers of certain ages or with certain backgrounds seem more successful in different assignments? Which and why?
- Compare data from this year to past years and analyze changes up or down.
- Compare what has *not* worked in the past year to what has been successful and try to find commonalities and differences in approach.
- Continuously find ways to get feedback from volunteers – newcomers, long-timers, from different backgrounds, etc.

Then look outside your organization for input, but be targeted for each item for which you'd like help:

- Is this something related to our specific *type of setting or service* (nursing home, school) and therefore might the experience of any organization doing the same work be helpful to us?
- Is this related to the *type of assignment* volunteers fulfill (newsletter editor, mentoring teenagers) and therefore might any organization, regardless of type, that asks volunteers to do similar assignments be helpful to us?
- Is this something that might be related to *our geographic location* (outbreak of an epidemic, local newspaper not covering volunteer issues) and therefore other organizations in our community might also have relevant experience with this?
- Is this related to the *types of volunteers* we have (university students, seniors over age 75, homemakers) and therefore we can learn something from any setting that utilizes these same populations?

Don't forget that sometimes you can learn more from a place that is totally different from you on the surface than from a "competitor" doing what you do. Because you are different, you will have less

preconceived notions about how things ought to be done and maybe pleasantly surprised at what you can adapt.

Please share your comments:

- What questions have you been asked by your boss (or the media or anyone else) that you are expected to answer with “standard volunteer” information?
- What “comparative data” have you found valuable or not, and why?
- How do you get information about what other volunteer programs do and how do you put it to use?

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Submitted on 13Nov2003 anonymously

How to get information about other volunteer programs: I've been in volunteer management for 8 years now, and maintain good relationships with other volunteer managers through a professional organization, Volunteer Coordinators Council. No one "owns" an agenda and everyone is willing to share, so if I need a piece of information or find something puzzling, I simply call a colleague and ask. Most people feel flattered and the information is forthcoming.

Submitted on 7Oct2003 by Cheryl Morehouse, Volunteer Manager, Creighton University Medical Center, Nebraska, USA

In answer to Susan's questions: What questions have you been asked by your boss (or the media or anyone else) that you are expected to answer with "standard volunteer" information?

Recently I had been asked by my boss to provide information about attrition of volunteers. We have a high degree of turnover, simply because a large number of our volunteers are students, and our minimum commitment is one semester. So short-term, episodic volunteering is a big part of the normal process at our facility. However, the actual percentage of volunteers leaving for reasons that we could effect is very small.

In answer to: What "comparative data" have you found valuable or not, and why? How do you get information about what other volunteer programs do and how do you put it to use?

I am fortunate to have a fabulous peer group of ladies from other local hospitals that I meet with on a monthly basis. Even in between our meetings, if one of us is in a bind, and/or needs some on-the-spot input, advice, or direction on how to handle certain situations, we email each other and are very quick to come to each other's aid. They are a tremendous resource, source of support, and I value them all as priceless treasures personally and professionally.

Submitted on 7Oct2003 by Aimee Hepler, Outreach/Volunteer Coordinator, South Dakota

Library volunteers are extremely and surprisingly varied. When I receive an application I take some time to review volunteer positions that are available and try to match the personality with the application. When I interview I often find out that the positions I suggest don't match the individuals goals. You can't tell a book by its cover! Trying to stereotype volunteers just doesn't work.

Overall we have a varied age group of volunteers, however the hardest demography to tap are those with full time jobs. We offer special projects or single time commitments to those individuals that we capture in this area. Better yet getting them involved with the Friends group. There is something for everyone.

Submitted on 06Oct2003 by Rob Kantenwein, Assistant to the Director, Princeton, New Jersey

Great analysis! I have always been wary of using the IS's "Value of a Volunteer Hour" figure in any funding proposal I have prepared. I have read the logic that they use to arrive at that number, but a one-size-fits-all value has very little meaning.

I also realize that just because a survey finds that 44% of Americans volunteer that does not mean that 44% of New Jerseyans volunteer. I have seen some organizations extrapolate data from a national study/survey for their own needs locally. The only way to capture locally relevant data is to collect it locally through a local study.

Submitted on 2Oct2003 by Andy Fryar, Director, www.ozvpm.com, Australia




I have to say my favorite question that I am expected to have a standard answer to is "Why are so few people wanting to volunteer these days?" or "Why is it so hard to find 'good' volunteers?" - in spite of the fact that statistics (at least here in Australia) show more people are volunteering than ever before!

A good example that I found recently was when my local newspaper (I live in a regional city) had a full page feature about how "so few young people are attracted to volunteering" - and yet the article referred only to very traditional volunteer groups and was surrounded by pictures of 70 + year old female volunteers.

...and they wonder why young people aren't attracted and why I don't have a standard answer! Yikes!

Great hot topic as always Susan

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