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## Common Sense and Volunteer Involvement

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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I get a lot of e-mails and phone calls from people in search of a way to answer an unexpected question from their executive or some specialist in the law, human resources, or accounting. Here are four actual examples to demonstrate the range:

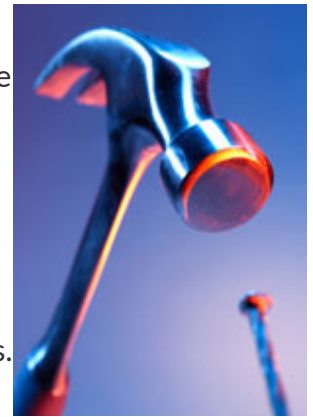
- What are valid tasks for a volunteer to do?
- How do we make sure a volunteer does not get romantically entangled with a client?
- What are acceptable retention rates for volunteers?
- How can we prove that recordkeeping software will make our volunteer management system more effective?

The attitude underlying all the questions is that there is something so very special or unusual about volunteers that there must be an answer to de-mystify the situation. The first advice I almost always give is to try substituting the word "employee" for the word "volunteer" in the question and see if this alters the premise of the query:

- What are valid tasks for an employee to do?
- How do we make sure an employee does not get romantically entangled with a client?
- What are acceptable retention rates for employees?
- How can we prove that recordkeeping software will make our employee management system more effective?

All of a sudden the perspective changes. In some cases, we realize that we would never expect to draw a conclusion about all employees as we often do about all volunteers. We need to focus on specific volunteer assignments. For example, we would not ask what any person on our payroll could be asked to do. Instead, we might narrow it to what should be the scope of work for social workers in our family counseling unit or for carpenters in our maintenance department – clearly coming up with very different task lists. In the same vein, very few paid staff earn a gold watch after 25 years on the job anymore. Retention of employees, while important, is hardly the first question on everyone's mind. What makes this such a hot button when it comes to volunteers?

In other cases, as with the possibility of finding love, the question turns out not to be about volunteers or about employees, but rather about human beings. We would understand that an organization needs to maintain propriety and protect vulnerable people, but cannot prevent emotions. So the issue becomes one of policies regarding how any representative of the organization should *behave* (not feel).



Finally, some questions would never be raised at all in the context of employees. When a department or unit manager asks for something, be it computer software, time to attend a conference, or anything else he or she has identified as professionally necessary, the main question that might be raised is whether the cost is covered in the budget. Most managers do not expect to be challenged on the legitimacy of their requests. Yet, over and over, those with responsibility for volunteers must justify their expenses, not on grounds of cost but on "is this really worth it?" The old myth "volunteers are free" rears its ugly head whenever *any* money needs to be spent.

## Overreaction

Another situation I hear about all the time is applying consequences to all volunteers for the negative actions of a single individual. Just last week I heard about a tutoring program in which one volunteer was accused of unwelcome advances toward a student. Naturally this is serious and, until the facts were determined, that volunteer should have been asked to stay home. But what happened? All the volunteers were barred from doing any tutoring! Can you imagine a school furloughing all teachers if one was accused? Or a church closing its doors to all its clergy? Absurd.

I've often reflected that volunteers are not just held *accountable*; too often they are asked to *justify* their very existence. It's a fair-weather friend philosophy: we like you as long as nothing goes wrong. Did the children no longer need tutoring? Was the possible misbehavior of one volunteer really enough to taint every other one?

Overreaction is akin to worst-case scenario planning. That's when an organization is so afraid of any risk, no matter how slight, it simply decides not to engage volunteers at all in an activity. So because someone *might* get hurt or do something wrong, a potentially great service needed by clients or the public is stopped before it starts. Risk *assessment* is always valid, as an organization should want to keep all participants safe. Risk assessment leads to appropriate volunteer assignments, identification of the necessary qualifications to fill those roles, targeted recruitment for those skills, proper screening, solid orientation and training, and then monitoring. In other words, the risk is *managed* and minimized. Unfortunately, however, some executives automatically say "no" and practice risk *avoidance* – just because *volunteers* are involved (though, in most cases, the same risks apply to paid staff).

Let's hear it for common sense. That means focusing on any *probable* situation, not digging for every *possible* problem. What is most *likely* to occur?

## Second-class Citizens

Let me share just one more pet peeve of mine: illogical policies that interfere with volunteers being effective in the work we've just assigned to them and thus treating volunteers as second-class citizens.

I am particularly concerned when an organization simply does not think through the ramifications of its rules. A great example – and I am currently dealing with this very issue with no less than three major clients – is putting key information onto an intranet with no system for giving volunteers access to it. In one case, an online discussion forum (which was fully open to the volunteers) was closed down in favor of a wiki that lives on an intranet to which only paid staff are given passwords. This may indicate thoughtlessness (cluelessness?) of the IT staff, but the outcome is both offensive to volunteers and an obstacle to accomplishing projects.

Similarly, although we encourage inviting leadership volunteers to participate in *Everyone Ready*®, our online volunteer management training program, several times we've discovered organizational members who want to do this but "can't" because of the same policy of denying access to the official intranet to anyone who is not on the paid staff. (I do wonder whether this also means that volunteers on the board of directors can't get in either.) I can understand wanting to avoid automatic access to the intranet by just anyone (one assumes that carpenter already mentioned would also not be able to log in), but being *unwilling* to establish a policy permitting volunteers who are directly involved as partners to employees in accomplishing work is quite a different matter.

Other "second-class" treatment examples are:

- Making volunteers hunt for an open work space somewhere instead of setting aside specific desks, computers, and other needed tools specifically for use by volunteers
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- Not providing an official e-mail address (or letterhead stationery) to a volunteer who is doing research or outreach specifically as a representative of the organization
- Not providing a secure storage area where volunteers can leave purses, briefcases, and other personal items while on duty in the facility
- Not inviting volunteers engaged in a project to planning or reporting meetings about that project

What's especially onerous about all this is the very negative message such actions convey to volunteers about the degree of value placed on their service by the organization – whose decision makers seem oblivious as to what is going on and how comparatively simple it is to correct it.

OK, your turn. I am very interested in what you have to share as your examples of lack of common sense when it comes to decisions affecting volunteers. What are your examples of nonsensical policies or actions taken against volunteers that demonstrate a basic misunderstanding of what is or is not "different" about unpaid workers? How can we prevent these situations from happening?

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**Submitted on 02 May 2012 by Bob Horton, CEO, TREES-Trinity River Environmental Education Society, DFW Metro, TX, USA**

I like Jayne's response to the question about court-ordered volunteers with one exception: all court-ordered volunteers are not the same. I always got a one or two word description of my COV's violation and if, for example, their charge was shoplifting, they were not left alone to do work in the office. Our experience taught us that it is unfair to all parties to put a COV in a situation that has proven difficult for them to handle for any reason.

**Submitted on 24 April 2012 by Jayne Cravens, Portland, Oregon, USA**

Just today I got asked:

"What kinds of volunteering activities do you give to people who have been assigned court-ordered community service?"

Um... the same as I give to anyone else? Unless the volunteers at my organization work with vulnerable populations or credit card information, why would it be any different? I ask them what they are interested in and what they can do, and I give them a list of activities and ask which they fancy most – just like anyone.

Every month, I get asked "What volunteering activities can volunteers with disabilities do?"

See same answer above...

**Submitted on 04 April 2012 by Volunteer – Volunteer Coordinator, AmeriCorps VISTA, Poverty in my community, USA**

This is a no brainer I have to remind staff about ALL the time. Don't expect someone to do something you would not do yourself!!!

I am unsure how to sugar coat this one so I guess I won't.

I deal with unreasonable amounts of requests for "support volunteers" from paid staff daily with no desire from paid staff to even think about staying late or going above and beyond what's required to

help support those you may think you “need”?

**Submitted on 04 April 2012 by Frank Hrabe, Database & Compliance Coordinator, Children's of Alabama, Birmingham, AL, USA**

Not inviting volunteers to participate in events for all employees – open houses, grand openings, family days.

I am fortunate in the fact that our volunteers are always included in these events. It is our view that volunteers are employees and entitled to the same rights, benefits and corrective actions if needed. The only difference is compensation. Volunteers get their rewards in a different way.

**Submitted on 03 April 2012 by Volunteer Coordinator, Oakland, CA, USA**

One problem can be the LACK of a policy or appropriate staff training about (a) why people choose to volunteer for an organization (vs. seeking a paid position) or (b) why staff interaction with volunteers is as important as it is with other colleagues (and reportable if not conducted respectfully and appropriately).

**Submitted on 03 April 2012 by Beckie Galvin, Director, Volunteer Services, American Lung Association, Cleveland, Ohio, USA**

Many good points. Staff training is important in many volunteer areas to incorporate a volunteer culture which addresses common sense and volunteer involvement issues, in addition to many other topics/issues.

**Submitted on 02 April 2012 by Volunteer, Bristol, Indiana, USA**

Another priceless example is changing policies--or “delisting” policies that have been published to volunteers without letting them know--especially when their work depends on understanding these policies! It's a bit like they “forget” that the volunteers are out there relying on some consistency, since they aren't in the office to see what's happening all the time.

**Submitted on 02 April 2012 Hospital Volunteer Coordinator, Valencia, CA, USA**

Susan, good job. I forwarded this throughout my organization. Let's see if I get feedback.

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