

Cost/Benefits of Managing a Small Voluntary Organisation

Ruth Gardner

There have been times when I have considered my paid position as manager of Volunteering Canterbury and wondered why I stay here. As the senior of three paid workers in an organisation with limited financial resources that has a wide range of operations, the amount of work for which I am responsible sometimes seems impossibly large. And yet, in my ninth year in the job, I still love it! Why?

Volunteering is about free will and having a choice. And I definitely chose this job. After 20 years in commercial administration I was thoroughly disillusioned with working in a culture where the dominant values were very different from my own. I had always been involved in voluntary work, mainly in child-related organisations and political activism, but until I moved to Christchurch in the late 1980s, I was not aware that there was such a thing as the voluntary sector.

After settling in here, I took a couple of University Feminist Studies papers, and as my disillusionment with the commercial sector grew, I decided to seek training that might enable me to gain employment in the not-for-profit sector. I vaguely thought this might be in the helping skills area, still not really aware that there were paid jobs available in voluntary organisation administration. The only training option seemed to be at Christchurch Polytech, and in 1993 I duly enrolled as a part-time student in the Certificate in Community and Social Services program. This was an extremely basic, non-assessed course, but I enjoyed the classes, found the assignments manageable in time and content, and soon felt ready for more.

The course required that I do some hours of supervised voluntary work, and I carefully considered where this might happen. My choice was the local Women's Centre, a femi-

nist organisation with a focus on domestic violence. My offer of help was accepted, and I commenced training as a volunteer support worker, a role that I found immensely satisfying. Later that year I was made redundant from my paid job and took on several part-time accounting contracts. The Women's Centre needed a finance worker, and that role became another part of my "portfolio." By now I was a member of the organising collective, an experience which provided both challenges and pleasure as we struggled to balance the task of managing the centre while caring for the wellbeing of clients and collective members.

During all this, my dream was to obtain a full-time, paid administrative position in a not-for-profit organisation. In late 1994 my dream came true. I became manager of Volunteering Canterbury, and I slowly discovered that my dream contained some nightmare elements. At times my learning curve seemed steeper than Mount Everest. My commercial management experience had gained me the job, but time and again it was my experience in the Women's Centre Collective, as the chairperson of a local residents' group, and as a Green Party activist that I called on for guidance.

I quickly discovered that the scope of the job was infinite, and I needed to put some very clear boundaries in place. I learned to prioritise (and re-prioritise as circumstances changed). I was obliged to abandon my perfectionist habits. Thoroughly completing any task seemed to be out of the question. Uninterrupted time became a scarce commodity.

The benefits derived from managing a small voluntary organisation mirror in many ways the benefits of being a volunteer. There is an element of free will, of giving service, especially when income is considered. In

Ruth Gardner has been manager of Volunteering Canterbury for the past eight and a half years. This organisation was the second volunteer centre to open in Aotearoa New Zealand and has been operating for 15 years. Gardner believes everyone benefits when there is open sharing of resources and experience.

most cases the salary received is less than the reward given for similar skills in other sectors. There are unlikely to be any extra benefits, such as superannuation or a "company" car, and job security tends to be minimal. But there are other less tangible benefits that are immensely rewarding. For me, the overwhelming benefit is to be working for an organisation whose values closely match my own. The vision of the organisation I work for is "Supportive communities where voluntary work is understood, recognised and valued." This is a vision I have consciously subscribed to since I joined the Green Party in the mid 1970s. While I continued through the '70s and '80s to work in the commercial sector, much of my energy and passion went into green politics. As it was 1996 before we saw the election of New Zealand's first Green M.P.'s, this work was often frustrating in terms of public success, yet always immensely rewarding in terms of friendship and personal growth, and a feeling that I was making a difference, however small. I find it fascinating to review how as my paid work moved into the voluntary sector in the early '90s, my active Green involvement diminished, a clear indication to me that those needs for "soul work" were now being met in my paid work.

While certainly true that deep friendships can and do emerge among colleagues working together in the commercial sector, it is my observation that they are likely to be more prevalent and of a deeper nature when nurtured in the voluntary sector.

The stresses of managing a small voluntary organisation can be overwhelming. I have witnessed "burnout" in a number of my colleagues and have at times been aware that my own limits were close to being reached. In a small voluntary organisation, the tasks available are often limitless, and even when clear boundaries have been set, unforeseen circumstances can breach those boundaries. The manager of a small voluntary organisation must be able to prioritise and re-prioritise, then re-prioritise again as circumstances

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change. Those of us who are perfectionists soon learn that there is rarely time to thoroughly complete any task. You learn to do the bare minimum and see any extra "frills" as an exotic luxury.

My personal values are honesty, openness, connection, and simplicity, and I see these personified around me every day.

As a manager, I have autonomy, can set my own agendas, and plan my own work schedule. I lead a team that shares my values and vision. Many of the team are people I have personally recruited, and we care for each other. While I am the "boss" and bear the final responsibility, the spirit of team cooperation is strong, and help and support are freely offered. I continually watch team members develop and blossom and often see them leave for new roles and careers. While they are missed, there is immense satisfaction in knowing I have helped them along their path.

In most small voluntary organisations, there are limited resources. Again, there is satisfaction in managing the budget wisely, occasional frustration over having to work with outdated equipment, and satisfaction in overcoming obstacles without spending money. Contacts and networking are invaluable, leading us to people who willingly give their expertise for free because they too are inspired by the vision.

All these benefits have a "shadow" side, a matching cost. The skill of managing a small voluntary organisation lies in keeping positive, developing the relationships that will help to promote the vision, and always keeping the vision firmly in view.

I am aware of a number of people managing small voluntary organisations in New Zealand whose experience is similar to mine. I wonder how my experience compares with people working in the voluntary sector in other countries and welcome feedback.