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### ABSTRACT

*Matching strategies can be implemented to help older individuals identify the most appropriate volunteer assignments that are particularly productive for organizations. This article describes an approach that can be replicated and utilized by organizations working with volunteers of all ages.*

## **Making Magic by Maximizing the Potential of Older Volunteers: The Transferable Skills Approach Utilized by RSVP in New York City**

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### INTRODUCTION

The Community Service Society of New York City's Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP/NYC) is a nationally acclaimed program that enlists older adults and retirees age 55 and older to serve as volunteers in their communities. As the largest older adult volunteer program in the nation, RSVP/NYC has 10,000 volunteers who contribute more than 2 million hours of service annually working in 600 organizations throughout the five boroughs of New York City. The program aims to enrich the lives of older persons by enabling them to help others through community service and to assist public and non-profit agencies in addressing urgent social needs in New York City. RSVP/NYC offers a wealth of volunteer opportunities to retirees.

One of the major functions and greatest challenges for RSVP/NYC staff is to match the right volunteer with the most appropriate volunteer assignment. Many retirees come to RSVP/NYC unsure of what they would like to do and how they can contribute. They do not need to have specific career experiences to carry out a

volunteer assignment effectively. For example, a retired librarian is not the only person qualified for volunteer opportunities in a library. Depending on the assignment, perhaps an organized person who enjoys books might be better suited for a volunteer position there.

There are many skilled older adults who want to contribute to the community by drawing from their career experiences. A retired teacher may want to mentor or tutor a child, a librarian may want to continue to volunteer at the local library, or an accountant may find providing free income tax preparation assistance to the elderly particularly rewarding. However, more often than not, older adults may prefer to do something entirely unrelated to their work experience. Some find it difficult to pinpoint the skills they have to contribute. The challenge is to help the retiree—as one would with any volunteer applicant—identify the personal experiences and skills that can be applied to a volunteer assignment and, at the same time, ensure that s/he is matched with a rewarding and successful volunteer placement.

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## THE TRANSFERABLE SKILLS CONCEPT

The matching process utilized by RSVP/NYC to place older adults in volunteer assignments was adapted from the transferable skills interview process first introduced to the field of volunteer management by Henry G. Pearson in an article titled "Interviewing Volunteer Applicants for Skills" (*Voluntary Action Leadership*, Summer 1986). Pearson extends the strategy utilized in the work arena as an aid to matching volunteers to volunteer assignments. Transferable skills were defined by Pearson in his article as "...traits, characteristics, abilities and competencies that individuals carry with them all their lives and use effectively in a wide range of activities, whether at work or at play." For the purpose of the volunteer match, he suggests that those transferable skills that are particularly enjoyable to the person are the most important for the volunteer matching process.

RSVP/NYC has adapted Pearson's technique to provide an actual framework that enables staff to work with older potential volunteers to narrow their many life experiences and focus on activities they enjoy and skills they have. Staff are able to tap the lifetime experiences of retirees that can be transferred to a suitable volunteer position that meets the volunteers' needs and offers them the opportunity to try something new. Although this process can be applied to match a volunteer of any age, the transferable skills matching process is a particularly relevant technique when working with older adults who have had many years of work, personal, and volunteer experiences and therefore a wealth of "transferable skills."

Simplified, the matching process is divided into two parts. The first includes well thought out volunteer assignment descriptions that list the transferable skills needed to successfully fulfill the expectations of the position. The second part is a screening interview to assist potential volunteers identify the personal transferable skills they possess and like. Finally, based

on a match between the potential volunteer's transferable skills and those needed to complete the volunteer assignment competently, an appropriate assessment and match are made. RSVP/NYC has found that older volunteers placed on the basis of their transferable skills are more satisfied with their volunteer assignments, do better at them, and stay longer than those matched using only past career skills.

## DEVELOPING THE ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTION

To illustrate how volunteer assignment descriptions can be developed utilizing transferable skills, consider the following volunteer opportunity RSVP/NYC was asked to fill:

*Volunteers act as advocates for children going through the foster care system whose cases are being decided upon by a judge. Intensive training is provided. Judges identify children who need advocates. Once matched with a youth in the foster care system, volunteers are to write a report based on the child's circumstances after gathering information from multiple sources such as social workers, lawyers, parents, and the children themselves. They then present the information to the judge.*

At first glance one might think the most appropriate person to fill this position is a retired attorney, paralegal, or social worker. However, the volunteer director is limiting him/herself by restricting the potential volunteer pool to these professionals. The volunteer assignment description should be analyzed for the transferable skills, rather than the career skills, needed to competently carry out the assignment.

The volunteer assignment is first broken down into tasks, in this case gathering information, writing reports, and presenting to the judge. The Transkills Finder (Pearson, 1986) shown in Appendix A can be used as a guide to help identify the corresponding transferable skills needed to

successfully gather information such as interviewing, being thorough/careful, investigating/researching, persisting, analyzing. Using the same list, the essential skills needed to carry out the task of writing include good writing ability, being neat/orderly, following directions, recalling, and analyzing. And, finally, the skills needed to adequately fulfill the task of presenting to a judge include speaking and being accurate/exact. It is important to select skills that are particularly relevant to success in the position. (This volunteer assignment is illustrated on the Volunteer Assignment Description Worksheet as Appendix B.)

### THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

The next part of the process entails screening potential volunteers utilizing a one-on-one interview. The role of the interviewer is to assist the potential volunteer identify the transferable skills s/he has and can bring to a volunteer position. The interview should be conducted in a manner that gathers information which will enable the interviewer to adequately assess the individual's ability to both successfully complete and enjoy the volunteer assignment. The Transkills Finder (see Appendix A) is once again utilized as an interactive tool. The interviewer marks off the skills s/he has noted and confirms them by reviewing the list with the interviewee.

To initiate the discussion, the interviewer may start out by asking the interviewee, "What have you really enjoyed doing over your lifetime?" This focuses the interview on aspects other than solely work and educational experiences and should put the interviewee at ease by focusing on tasks the individual likes to do. Other questions can include, "Why do you like doing this activity?" or "What do you enjoy about it?" The interviewer learns the specific tasks the activity required by asking, "What is involved in doing the activity?" or "Tell me what the activity entails." It is necessary to pinpoint the skills the potential volunteer

draws on for the activity, isolating those at which s/he is good and enjoys. Questions that include, "What skills do you need to do this activity well?" and "Why do you need to have these skills?" may help guide such an exploration. As each activity is clarified, corresponding tasks are outlined and the skills involved in the task identified. The result is to isolate those tasks and skills the potential volunteer likes to do and does well. The skills are the foundation upon which a match should be considered.

### INTERVIEWING AN OLDER ADULT

The Transferable Skills Interview Worksheet (see Appendix C) charts an interview with a 72-year-old volunteer, Ms. Jones. The worksheet elaborates upon the activities Ms. Jones most enjoyed and at which she excelled. During the interview she reveals she is a mother who was very involved in the school Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) and also active with the Girl Scouts as a Brownie leader. She has a degree in journalism, but has limited experience writing professionally, although it is something she really enjoys doing. As part of the PTA she was involved in organizing sales to raise money and advocated on behalf of her children's educational needs. She particularly enjoyed advocating where she had the opportunity to collect information about the issues, write reports to distribute to parents and school administrators, and present to the board of education in order to influence change.

From this interview the interviewer identified a number of transferable skills: investigating/researching, writing, influencing, persuading, and speaking publicly. The interviewer was careful to isolate those skills Ms. Jones particularly liked to do and did well. The interviewer verified her assessment by reviewing the list of skills she had identified with Ms. Jones. The interviewer learned that although Ms. Jones wanted to work on behalf of children, she did not want to work one-on-one with them as a tutor or mentor.

## MAKING A MATCH

Based on the information collected from Ms. Jones, and by comparing her skills to those needed for the volunteer advocate assignment, RSVP/NYC seemed to have a candidate with the potential for a good match. In fact, this volunteer has since found the work of advocate for children to be a very rewarding volunteer experience.

Volunteer administrators must remember to provide volunteers with training specific to their assignments, a step crucial to the management of any good volunteer program. In this case, although Ms. Jones had the skills necessary for advocating for children, she also needed in-depth training on the court system and the manner by which she was to conduct interviews and write reports.

## CONCLUSION

The higher levels of satisfaction experienced by RSVP/NYC volunteers since the introduction of this technique emphasizes the importance of the transferable skills matching process in the field of volunteer management and its relevance for volunteer directors trying to match older individuals. It capitalizes on the lifetime of experiences, knowledge, and skills senior citizens have to offer to the community and, by extension, to volunteer programs. The process enables a placement in which older volunteers—or volunteers of any age—will be competent and will like doing the volunteer tasks they are assigned. The interview and matching procedures can be easily incorporated into a volunteer program's existing screening and matching process. When volunteer administrators make matches based on the transferable skills interview process, they are well on the way to building a committed force of volunteers, increasing retention and improving volunteer program outcomes.

## REFERENCES

Pearson, H. G. (Summer 1986). Interviewing volunteer applicants for skills. *Voluntary Action Leadership*, 15-18.

## APPENDIX A

### THE TRANSKILLS FINDER

#### WORDS

Reading  
Writing  
Conversing  
Interviewing

#### NUMBERS

Calculating  
Working with figures  
Estimating  
Handling money  
Buying/shopping

#### ARTISTIC ABILITIES

Using artistic talents  
Being creative  
Sensing beauty through eyes/ears  
Interpreting feelings, ideas, sights, sounds

#### MECHANICAL/ TECHNICAL ABILITIES

Making machines and mechanical things work  
Applying knowledge to technical things

#### THE BODY

Coordinating eyes/body  
Being physically active  
Applying strength  
Moving around  
Coordinating eyes/hands  
Using hands  
Operating things/ tools  
Using fingers  
Building/making  
Repairing/fixing

#### THE SENSES

Observing  
Examining  
Inspecting  
Visualizing  
Listening/hearing  
Touching/feeling

#### THE MIND

**Original Thinking**  
Coming up with ideas  
Using imagination  
Improvising/ inventing

#### Intuitive Thinking

Sizing up  
Having insight

#### Gaining Knowledge

Learning  
Investigating/ researching  
Memorizing  
Recalling  
Analyzing

#### Thinking Ahead

Planning/ goal setting  
Using foresight  
Being logical/ reasoning  
Problem solving/ decision making  
Involving: people information things ideas

#### BEING ORGANIZED

**Organizing**  
Starting things up  
Scheduling  
Following up

Persisting  
Getting result(s)  
Meeting demands

#### Attending to Detail

Being thorough/ careful  
Being accurate/exact  
Using system  
Being neat/orderly  
Using clerical skills  
Keeping records  
Maintaining routines

#### SELF-DIRECTING

Asserting self  
Taking risks  
Taking responsibility  
Being independent  
Being self-disciplined  
Keeping cool

#### RELATIONS WITH OUTDOOR & NATURAL WORLD

Taking care of living things  
Raising/training living things  
Dealing with elements/nature

#### RELATIONS WITH OTHERS

**Persuading**  
Influencing  
Selling  
Promoting  
Negotiating  
Bargaining

#### Performing for Others

Entertaining  
Speaking  
Using showmanship  
Demonstrating

#### Helping Others

Being of service  
Serving  
Volunteering  
Doing favors  
Meeting others' physical needs  
Being sensitive  
Guiding/advising  
Encouraging  
Being patient

#### Taking Direction

Getting and delivering things  
Adapting to others  
Following directions

#### Instructing

Training/coaching  
Teaching  
Explaining  
Informing

#### Leading

Directing others  
Managing  
Motivating  
Being responsible for others' actions

#### Associating

Cooperating  
Sharing  
Contacting  
Consulting with  
Being tactful  
Socializing  
Being friendly  
Making joint effort

#### Being Competitive

Winning  
Contending

From "Interviewing Volunteer Applicants for Skills" by Henry G. Pearson in *Voluntary Action Leadership*, Summer 1986.

APPENDIX B

VOLUNTEER ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTION WORKSHEET

Job Title: Advocate Supervisor: Special Advocate

Day/Hours Needed: 3 hours/week Short Term: 6 months

Purpose: To ensure that children are placed with appropriate caregivers.

Tasks	Transferable Skills Needed	Training Provided	Successful Outcomes
Gather Information	Interviewing Being thorough/ careful Investigating/ Researching Persisting Analyzing	Four-week intensive training as well as ongoing support.	Contact all individuals assigned to be interviewed.
Write Report	Writing Being neat/ Orderly Following directions Recalling Analyzing		Prepare a written report in triplicate and submit to special advocate and judge by specified date.
Present to Judge	Speaking Being accurate/ exact		Appear on time at court appointed date.  Present report to the judge.

Benefits: Transportation reimbursement, learn about the court system, specialized training.

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APPENDIX C

**TRANSFERABLE SKILLS INTERVIEW WORKSHEET**  
 Previous Activities of a Potential Volunteer

Life Activities	Tasks Involved in Activities	Skills Needed to Perform Tasks
*Bachelor of Arts in Journalism	Investigating Writing	Investigating/Researching Writing
PTA/Organizing sales		
*PTA/ Advocating for educational needs	Collecting information Writing reports Presenting to board of education Influencing change	Investigating/Researching Writing Speaking Influencing
Brownie Leader		

\*Activities with related tasks and skills that Ms. Jones enjoyed and at which she excelled.

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