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ABSTRACT

This article makes the case that carefully designing written volunteer job descriptions is the most important task of the volunteer program manager. Job descriptions are the basis for success in every area of volunteer program administration. A carefully written job description—and the right volunteer placed in the right job—are the keys to avoiding and/or solving many commonly experienced program management problems.

Finding the Right Fit: Creating Successful Volunteer Job Descriptions

Carla Campbell Lehn

WHY HAVE WRITTEN JOB DESCRIPTIONS FOR VOLUNTEERS?

The volunteer program and the volunteer program manager are successful when, and only when, the volunteers are successful. Volunteers have the most chance for success when we place them in the right jobs—jobs that are carefully designed to be meaningful and productive, and which match the volunteers' motivations for volunteering.

The job description is the planning tool that helps the volunteer manager be successful. It's the basis for success in every area of volunteer program management. Carefully designed job descriptions (and the careful placement of volunteers in the right jobs) helps avoid and/or solve many commonly faced problems in volunteer administration.

So, if you've been putting off writing or revising job descriptions because it seems like too much work, here are some reasons not to procrastinate any longer.

Job Descriptions Clarify Roles

Roles between and among volunteers and staff are much easier to understand

when the relationships between their respective jobs are clear. If you let volunteers (or staff, for that matter) guess what their limits of authority and responsibility are, chances are high they will do something different from what you had in mind. If volunteers understand what the paid and volunteer workers around them do, they're more likely to see the big picture and work within the parameters you set.

Job Descriptions Serve as Your Principal Recruitment and Placement Tools

Once you spend the time to think through the position so you are ready to develop a job description, you have a good idea of what you need: qualifications, duties, and time requirements. When you've carefully considered the requirements of the job, if the right volunteer's name doesn't immediately come to mind, where to look for him or her may. Once you've located a potential volunteer for the position, reviewing the job description together will help the volunteer (and you) make an informed decision about whether this is the right assignment.

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Written Job Descriptions Can Help You Take a Marketing Approach to Recruitment

If writing job descriptions for volunteers is one of the most important things we do in a volunteer program, knowing the source of volunteer motivation is equally important to understand.

The volunteer program manager's job is to identify each individual's reasons for volunteering and match him or her to a carefully designed job description that's right for the volunteer, one that will satisfy his or her motivations and help your organization at the same time.

Motivation is not something we do to volunteers, it's something volunteers bring with them. Their motivation is the reason (or reasons) they volunteered. We must understand why people volunteer. Start by thinking about why you volunteer. Some of the most common volunteer motivations include:

- giving back to the community
- feeling needed
- sharing skills/keeping current
- meeting people
- making business contacts
- learning new skills
- keeping busy
- gaining experience/building resumé
- exploring a career
- feeling challenged
- commitment to the cause
- learning about a new community
- gaining status
- boss expects it
- testing new ideas
- because I was asked

The goal is for the relationship to be "mutually satisfying" (Stern, 1994). A mutually satisfying relationship is when something has been exchanged. Selling is when you try to convince potential volunteers to take the job you have available, selling them what you have "on the shelf," whether it's what they came for or not. Marketing, on the other hand, is when you identify the volunteer's reason for being here, and match him or her with

a job that meets that need. In other words, you make an exchange, giving something of value for something of value. When the person perceives the return to be of greater value than what was given up—in this case their time—receiving becomes the motivation for giving.

Job Descriptions Help You Design Appropriate Training

Here's a training design formula I'm familiar with and use: $A - B = C$. A represents what the person in the job needs to know; B what they already know; and C what's missing, or the training needed (Hook, 1971). Through careful job description design, you will know what the job entails (A) and what qualifications people placed in the job must have before you place them in it (B). This will determine the learning objectives (C) for the training you provide them.

Job Descriptions Are the Basis for Supervision

If the volunteer has accepted the assignment based on a written job description, and not just a verbal description, then performance concerns or questions are easier to address. If performance issues arise in the future, you can use the job description to reinforce your original agreement.

Writing volunteer job descriptions is your primary planning and implementation tool. Careful planning occurs through development of well thought out, clearly articulated, and realistic volunteer job descriptions. Knowing what you want volunteers to do will help you communicate your expectations to them.

Without written job descriptions you don't know who will do what to whom by when and for how long. With job descriptions you force yourself (and staff) to really think about where the job fits into the organization's structure, what kind of supervision will be required, and what kind of training is needed. Well-designed assignment descriptions also help you find the right volunteer for the assignment.

HOW TO DESIGN CLEAR, MEANINGFUL VOLUNTEER JOB DESCRIPTIONS

To help you learn how to write good volunteer job descriptions, let's review what goes in them and why by reviewing an actual example, a Volunteer Book Mender's job description from a public library in California (see Appendix A). Review it with me now section-by-section.

Title

Notice the title is not "volunteer." Volunteer is not a job title, but a salary classification, meaning unpaid. A job title describes the responsibility one has. Volunteers deserve a title. Consider a fun title like Volunteer Spinetangler when appropriate, but also give the job a serious title for those who hope to put their volunteer experience on their resumés (for example, Book Repair Technician).

Importance of the Position to the Organization

In this section, we're not describing what the volunteer does, but why the position is important. What purpose is that person fulfilling for the library? Not only do volunteer assignments need to be clearly thought out and articulated, but they must be meaningful. This means the volunteer must be able to see how the work s/he is doing is needed by the organization.

For the Spinetangler job we could have said the purpose is "to clean the grunge off books." But that doesn't sound very meaningful until we talk about why it really makes a difference to the library and its patrons: "To keep the best-loved books available for patron use." Kids who keep checking out *Where the Wild Things Are*, *Curious George*, and *Alice in Wonderland* will keep the Book Repair Technicians busy!

Qualifications

Define for yourself and for potential volunteers what is needed to do the job successfully: someone with good small motor skills and eyesight, good attention

to detail, and a willingness to work in a small group. These are important clues to potential recruits. If working alone quietly is a motivation for volunteering for the library or if the potential volunteer is not detail-oriented, this job probably will not make him or her happy.

Remember, volunteers want to be successful. So giving them a clear understanding of what's needed in the job ahead of time can help them (and you) make the placement decision that will be the best fit. To accomplish this, you must define in advance what's required.

Responsible To

Who's the boss? Who does the volunteer call when s/he is sick? Who does the volunteer talk to if there's a problem or if s/he doesn't understand something? Where does the volunteer "fit" in the organization?

Responsibilities

This section explains what the volunteer will be expected to do, how often, with whom, etc. Some think this section completes a job description, but it doesn't. This section is only part of what needs to be included.

Training Provided

How are you going to prepare volunteers for this assignment? In this section, you're telling them, "Don't worry—if you've got the qualifications, we'll teach you about the library and about book mending."

Benefits of Volunteering

This section is one of the most important and, unfortunately, one that I seldom see used. What will the volunteer gain from the experience? This is where you help match the reason (motivation) for volunteering with a job that will provide it. Maybe a benefit of the job is to meet new people. Maybe a benefit is learning a new skill. Maybe the benefit is the opportunity to work in a quiet place where the phone doesn't ring. Be creative here!

This is not just an exercise, but a really important piece of the job description you should sit down and think through carefully. Asking yourself what the potential volunteer will gain from the experience helps you define your recruitment approach. When you recruit, you'll know who you're looking for, and where to look. When you interview, you will not only help people understand the job, but what they'll gain by volunteering for your organization.

When you take a marketing approach to volunteer recruitment, you help to define what you have to exchange with the volunteer.

Time Commitment

Put right up front how many hours a week or month are required for the position. This allows potential recruits to make a conscious decision about whether or not they can realistically make the commitment required for this volunteer job.

Length of Commitment

Be clear about how long you want volunteers to stay. If you expect them to commit to a minimum of six months, be specific. The subtle message you convey with this statement is that this is a very important volunteer position. We only want people who are serious. We are going to invest resources in training you, and we want to be sure you can make that much of a commitment to us.

Another advantage of putting a time commitment on the job description is that it gives an end date so the volunteer won't feel guilty when the time is up and decides to move on; there's a graceful way out.

From the staff's perspective it's comforting too. What if the volunteer isn't doing a good job? You have six months to train and coach the volunteer and help him or her do a good job. At the end of six months you can say, "You know, we tried this, we spent a lot of time, but it doesn't seem to be meeting your goals, and (for whatever reason), it's not meeting our

needs. Let's find another assignment for you that will make you happier."

Grounds for Termination

This section is sometimes controversial and may not be necessary to include in every volunteer job description. But let's think for a minute about a couple of situations where it might be useful.

What if you have confidentiality requirements? If the volunteer is going to be handling confidential information, you can send a message right on the job description that confidentiality is so important to you that the volunteer will be terminated if it is broken. What if you have some very specific policies the volunteer needs to follow about appropriate interactions with clients or how to represent the organization in public? Disregarding those policies might be grounds for termination. Putting policies like these in the job description makes it clear how important they are.

Contact Person

This is the person the potential volunteer should call if interested in this position, with a phone number.

Date Revised

This information is important because you only want to keep the updated version on hand.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KEEP IN MIND WHEN WRITING VOLUNTEER JOB DESCRIPTIONS

Don't create job descriptions sitting alone in your office. Enlist the assistance of staff and volunteers who will be working in the position, or who do the job already. Their insights will be very important. Plus, involving them in the design will help ensure its acceptance by them.

Take a hard look at the job description when you've finished. Is it realistic? Have you designed a job for a full-time employee? Chances are you won't find someone to volunteer full time. If you do, you could become so dependent on the volun-

teer that you will inherit the work if s/he leaves with no realistic expectation of finding a successor.

If you find the job description you've written is for a full-time job, don't give up. Break it down into its component parts. Try designing a couple of jobs that, when fitted together, accomplish the whole task.

Make sure you have enough information to recruit the right person. Are the qualifications complete? Are there clearly spelled-out benefits for someone taking on this assignment? How much time will it take? Over what period of time?

Think "outside the box" about what kinds of volunteer jobs you need and who can fill them. Be creative. What do you need? Do you need someone to design a Web page? Do you need a speaker's bureau? Public relations help? Who could do this? Does it have to be an individual like it's always been? Or can the task be completed by a family, a couple, a Girl Scout Troop, or someone over the Internet?

Your role as volunteer program manager can be extended by delegating parts of your job to competent volunteers in carefully designed assignments. As your volunteer program grows, you can quickly be overwhelmed or even burn out. Consider delegating some of your tasks, or even some of the coordination responsibility, to qualified volunteers. Take a look at the Library's Senior Spinetinger job description (see Appendix B).

Remember, though, coordinator jobs require an added set of qualifications beyond those required by the positions they're coordinating. In this case, the Senior Spinetinger must also have organizational skills and be willing to coordinate activities. Not every Spinetinger is qualified to be a Senior.

Consider the team approach:

A 'team approach' means recruiting helpers to share the tasks of coordinating people, projects, and paper.... This certainly is not proposed as a

quick fix for the problem of too many responsibilities and not enough time. In fact, it will take time to plan for and build the best team structure for you. Once in place, however, a management team will indeed allow you to share the work, be in more than one place at once, and feel some relief from the burden of carrying the whole weight of the volunteer program alone.
(Campbell, Ellis, 1995).

HOW WRITTEN VOLUNTEER JOB DESCRIPTIONS CAN HELP YOU ADDRESS COMMONLY FACED PROBLEMS IN VOLUNTEER PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION

Below are some common problems experienced by volunteer program managers with some ideas about how using the techniques described in this article can help avoid or address them.

Volunteers don't show up when scheduled or disappear two weeks after you've trained them. Do they understand the importance of the job? That if they don't come, somebody else has to do their jobs for them? Do they know how their jobs fit into the big picture? In the job description, did you tell them the importance of their position is to "relieve staff of the duties of putting the books back on the shelves?" Or did you say it was to "keep the best loved books on the shelves where patrons can find them to check them out"? Although both are important, the volunteer may be more interested in and motivated by the needs of patrons than those of staff.

Are they happy in the job? Are their motivations for being there being met? Do they have the right qualifications? Did you make a good match?

Staff and volunteer relations are strained. Tensions often arise when staff feel volunteers are "going too far," or "not doing enough." Clearly articulated job descriptions will help the relationship between staff and volunteers.

If gaining staff "buy-in" has been a problem for you, getting staff involved in the process of developing volunteer job descriptions will be helpful. Ask staff to help you design the job and develop and present the training. This will increase staff support from the very beginning because they've had the chance to say how the program should work and increases the potential for their acceptance of both the volunteer position, and the volunteers in that position.

Our volunteers only want to do what THEY want to do. Exactly! They didn't come to do something they hate doing. If you're still selling potential volunteers what you have on the shelf instead of marketing your volunteer program—identifying what's in it for the volunteer and making a mutually satisfying exchange with them—then you need to go back and re-read the discussion on volunteer motivation and exchange theory.

Does this mean your "non-glamorous" volunteer jobs won't get filled? Of course not. Everybody has different needs and interests for volunteering. Some want the quiet, repetitive job. Some want a challenge. Your job is to make the right match for each volunteer.

TO SUM UP

"Failure to meet the mark is rarely the fault of the target." Although I don't know who said that, I try to remember it in many situations. It's not quoted here to make the point that we, the volunteer program managers, have to take the blame for absolutely everything that goes wrong in the volunteer program. But it does remind us that if there's a problem, we may not want to blame the volunteer immediately, but instead look a little deeper at the situation to see what we might have missed. I truly believe that people don't volunteer in order to make your life miserable. They volunteer because they want to help. If we're having a problem with a volunteer, s/he either doesn't understand the job, or we have

placed the volunteer in the wrong job.

Using the tools and strategies discussed in this article can help to prevent or solve some of the common frustrations we face in volunteer administration and help us meet the ultimate goal: to provide more and better service to our communities.

REFERENCES

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APPENDIX A
WOODLAND PUBLIC LIBRARY

Volunteer Spinetingler
(Book Repair Technician)

Job Description

Importance of Position to the Library: Assists the library by maintaining best-loved books and materials in good repair so they can be used by library visitors.

Qualifications:

- Good small motor skills and eyesight.
- Good attention to detail.
- Willingness to work with a small group.

Responsible To: Director of Volunteer Services.

Responsibilities:

1. Attend a three-hour training program provided by the library at no charge on book repair and cleaning.
2. Work with other Spinetinglers to set monthly book repair session dates.
3. Attend monthly book repair sessions or give supervisor sufficient notice if unable to attend.

Training Provided: Orientation to the library as well as a three-hour training program on skills and techniques for repairing, mending, and cleaning library books.

Benefits of Volunteering:

- Provide a much-needed service to the library and its customers by ensuring best-loved books are continually available.
- Gain skills in book mending and repair.
- Meet people who share similar interests.

Time Commitment: Three hours once a month.

Length of Commitment: Minimum six-month commitment requested.

Grounds for Termination: Failure to carry out assigned responsibilities.

Contact Person: Director of Volunteer Services at (telephone number).

Date revised:

APPENDIX B

WOODLAND PUBLIC LIBRARY

Senior Spinetingler (Volunteer Manager, Book Repair Program)

Job Description

Importance of Position to the Library: To assist with the management of the volunteer program that maintains best-loved books and materials in good repair so they can continue to be used by library visitors.

Qualifications:

- Must have been a Spinetingler for a minimum of one year.
- Good organizational and "people" skills.
- Willingness to work closely with the Director of Volunteer Services to ensure the success of the Spinetingler program.

Responsible To: Director of Volunteer Services.

Responsibilities:

Under the direction of the Director of Volunteer Services

1. Interviews potential Spinetinglers to assess appropriateness for the volunteer assignment and willingness to make the commitment required.
2. Assists in providing orientation to the library and Spinetingler training.
3. Schedules monthly book repair sessions based on availability of volunteers.
4. Ensures books needing repair and repair materials are available for monthly book repair sessions.
5. Attends and supervises monthly book repair sessions.
6. Makes monthly reports to Director of Volunteer Services.

Training Provided: Regular meetings with Director of Volunteer Services to plan activities, monitor progress, and provide problem-solving support.

Benefits of Volunteering:

- Provide a much-needed service to the library and its customers by monitoring the program to ensure that best-loved books are continually available.
- Utilize or gain skills in program management.
- Meet people who share similar interests.

Time Commitment: 8 - 10 hours per month.

Length of Commitment: Minimum six-month commitment requested.

Grounds for Termination:

- Failure to carry out assigned responsibilities.
- Misrepresenting the library or its policies.

Contact Person: Director of Volunteer Services at (telephone number).

Date Revised: