

# Association for Volunteer Administration Survey on Employer Recognition *A Report to the Membership*

Joanne Holbrook Patton

An important relatively recent development in the field of volunteerism is the concept of the administration of volunteers and service programs as an emerging profession, not a part-time peripheral activity.

—Harriet Naylor, 1973<sup>1</sup>

Q: Do you consider you belong to a true profession, as a volunteer administrator?

A: Absolutely! Does the administration of the institution for which I work? By no means.

—Non-CVA AVA Member, 1989  
(responding to AVA Survey on Employer Recognition)

## BACKGROUND

In recent years, the last ten in particular, the Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA) has come to recognize itself as more than just a member organization of volunteer administrators. Concurrently with the growing sophistication of job challenge its members have been compelled to meet in today's turbulent times, has come their realization that they are engaged in a complicated, demanding career which requires more from its parent organization than simply camaraderie. The practitioners who serve in this role have created a field in what most certainly is a growing profession. The Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA), their focus association, has undertaken to assist its members in developing into well-grounded career professionals.

Webster's definitions of "profession" as "a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive (academic) preparation," and of "professional" as "characterized by or conforming to the technical or ethical standards of a profession"<sup>2</sup> are pat descriptions. Far more articulate in chronicling the growth of professional attitudes, performance and ambitions within the volunteer administration community have been the field's own distinguished spokespersons. Beginning with the late Harriet Naylor, these have included Ivan Scheier, Eva Schindler-Rainman, Winifred Brown, and Sarah Jane Rehnborg, the designer of the performance-based certification program which AVA now offers to members of the field who believe they measure up to its criteria, or who aspire to do so. Excellent member-trainers, such as Marlene Wilson, Sue Vineyard and Susan Ellis, have "mentored" the practitioners into sound and creative performance standards. In recent years, AVA's Task Force on Higher Education has identified a host of colleges and universities in the United States and Canada which have given evidence of their willingness to nurture the profession's academic needs. Discussions of national training institutes and other "polishers of the jewels" currently abound, as the term "volunteer management" begins to make its way into the national and international vernacular.

While appreciating the promise of such exciting developments leading us into the decade of the 1990s, some who had been engaged in earlier AVA Task

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Force work decided that there was one aspect critical to the recognition and development of the volunteer administrator as a professional person which had not yet been explored. This was the area of the workplace, as it relates to employer-employee attitudes and understanding. What did or would the person a volunteer administrator considered "the Boss" think of that employee's ambitions toward professional development? If the employee sought to improve his or her skills or knowledge in such relevant topics as "Communications" or "Volunteer Management," or to attend an AVA International Conference, seek a degree in a related discipline or undertake AVA Certification, would the employer care? If the employer was supportive, how was this demonstrated? If not, what did the employee wish could be done about it? Although some believed that employer support would be vital to full fruition of the field, it was important to test the climate as it exists today.

#### DESIGNING THE SURVEY

In early 1989, with AVA's approval, a small group of AVA members and professional colleagues including both CVAs (those who have been Certified in Volunteer Administration) and non-CVAs with a variety of experience and academic credentials, formed a Subcommittee on Employer Recognition. The subcommittee agreed to undertake an informal survey, not presuming to accomplish a thorough research project, but to address a broad sampling of contemporary working volunteer administrators, "taking the pulse" of our colleague community.

The survey was divided into four sections:

The first would be sent exclusively to CVAs, all those listed on AVA's rolls as of May 1, 1989. They would be asked questions relating to their employers' support (or lack of it) at the time of their entering the Certification process, and would be given the opportunity to name "supportive" employers, whom AVA might later involve as a resource group. The CVAs also would be encouraged to name "non-supportive" employers, if they wished them to receive further information from

AVA on volunteer administration as a growing profession.

The second survey increment would be sent to the employers named by the CVAs as "supportive," and would be designed to find out why each had chosen to encourage a volunteer administrator in career development and/or AVA's credentialing process, and what had been the results for their organizations. This, it was hoped, would identify a core group of employers who could give testimony to others on the "positives" of encouraging professionalism in their volunteer managers.

The third group to be surveyed was perhaps the most important. By surveying volunteer administrators who had taken no identifiable steps toward AVA Certification, the subcommittee sought to discover if they had other paths they were pursuing toward professional development, or just what their views of themselves as professionals might be, especially as reflected in the opinion of their employer. The largest manageable cross-section of non-CVA AVA members was selected, drawing from a fair mix of type and size of employing organizations from every state and province in which AVA members resided. Two U.S. military overseas areas also were included. Hospitals represented the largest agency segment, but a full variety of categories was represented in the sampling.

While recognizing the validity of many paths toward professionalism, AVA needed to find out why this member segment had not "come aboard" AVA's Certification process, since none had taken even the first step, according to AVA records, of purchasing a Certification packet. If employer attitude was a key factor here, it was important to determine that.

Finally, it was decided to take a slight diversion in order to get a perspective on a category of volunteer administrator which seemed to have eluded us in previous surveys of our field. This was the segment of our colleagues who are employed in a counterpart role in the corporate world. Members of the national Corporate Volunteer Council cooperated by giving the subcommittee names with

which to compile a list of geographically scattered mixed-type company representatives of this population who would be asked substantially the same questions as the third group, the non-CVA AVA members. Few of this corporate group were members of AVA.

## PROCESSING THE SURVEY

Although the survey questions were developed by a knowledgeable subcommittee, it recognized its practical limitations and accepted in advance that this would not be a scientific research piece, but more of an "indicator," or a springboard, toward further AVA research and exploration. Even so, the committee was conscientious in its process and therefore gratified, as the separate sections were successively mailed out, to receive a very respectable number of returns:

- *Survey I*, to CVAs, was mailed to the 64 who had been awarded the credential as of April 1989. A two-week suspense deadline produced a 61% return.
- *Survey II*, mailed to the 22 employers of responding CVAs who named them as "supportive," brought a 50% return after two weeks.
- *Survey III*, to 225 non-CVA AVA members had 96 completed surveys returned, a 42.6% rate.
- *Survey IV*, to 50 corporate volunteer administrators brought a 36% return.

Combining all four parts, of 361 questionnaires mailed out, 164 (45.4%) were returned completed.

## SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS AND STATISTICS

### *The Job Title*

Among CVAs responding to our survey, the most common job title was "Director of Volunteer Services" (or a title with both "Director" and "Volunteer" in it). Non-CVAs reported an equivalent number of "Coordinators of Volunteer Services," while the corporate group seldom used the word "Volunteer" or the designation "Director" in their titles. More prevalent with this group was "Community," as an identifier, with "Manager" and "Coordinator" the common power terms accompanying it.

### *Job Tenure*

For all categories of respondents, the decade of the 80s was one of change. Most CVAs had attained their current positions within that time-frame, along with their CVA credential. Thirty-one percent had experienced a job change since receiving the CVA (as had their employers, by some coincidence). Non-CVAs also indicated job turbulence, with 75% reporting they had held their current positions for less than three years. Most corporate volunteer administrators were in their initial employment in that role, and had spent less than two years in the job at the time of the survey.

### *Employer attitudes*

Of the CVA respondents, 82% (n = 32) indicated that they had informed their employers when they undertook the CVA process. Less than half of those reported that their employers were "lukewarm" or not interested in the undertaking. An equal number said that their employers had provided some financial support for the process. All but a few indicated that they received recognition from their employers for achieving CVA, mostly in some form of public notice, but generally publicity was kept within the organization. (One fortunate CVA reported an immediate cash bonus of \$350!)

Most CVAs (67%) acknowledged a positive impact on their employment resulting from their achievement of the credential. This included raise in pay, job promotion, increase in status, responsibilities, and/or improved ratings. Only five of the CVA respondents claimed no recognition had been received and saw no impact from the award on their employment status. Three of these had chosen not to share with their employers the fact that they were undertaking AVA Certification. Presumably the first those employers heard of it was when AVA wrote them, informing them of the honor their employees had earned.

Most CVAs reported continuing personal involvement with professional development after receiving AVA's credential. Almost all regularly attend professional seminars and some have sought and received additional certifica-

tion and advanced degrees. Sixty percent of the CVAs reported that improved performance appraisals have accompanied these professional development initiatives, and 64% indicated that some form of funding was provided, at least for workshop and seminar attendance, by the employer.

Of 22 CVAs identifying their employers as "supportive" to their professional development, 14 specifically nominated theirs to become spokesperson "champions" for AVA Certification and/or professional development, 14 specifically nominated theirs to become spokesperson "champions" for AVA Certification and/or the professional development of a volunteer administrator, should AVA wish to utilize them.

In our small sampling of employers, 45% (5 of 11 who responded), declined to accept the credit their employees had given them as mentors to the process. These indicated that the CVA recipients in their employ deserved full credit for personal initiatives in pursuing Certification on their own, even before receiving encouragement from the employer. Eighty-one percent endorsed the professional skills of the CVA as benefits to the organization, while 73% said the credential "CVA" either would or might be listed as "preferred," in future job descriptions for the position of volunteer administrator within their organizations. Eighty-one percent said they would expect the person with a CVA to bring experience, knowledge of the field, and full expertise in operating volunteer programs to their roles. Forty-five percent said they thought their organizations should maximize the skills of the incumbent CVA by extending that person's responsibilities throughout the organization, and to the outside community, beyond the volunteer program. Forty-five percent recommended the Master's degree level of education, for maximum benefit to the volunteer manager position.

Over half of the responding "supportive" employers said that they felt an explanation of the CVA process, written especially for their counterparts, would be helpful to them. These explanations should include expectations of both the

employer and candidate during the process, the AVA standards for CVA achievement, and the possible benefits to the employer or the organization of having a volunteer administrator seek this designation. Forty-five percent of the responding employers forthrightly declared their willingness to endorse AVA's Certification process for other CEOs.

Eighty-one percent of the responding employers of CVAs said their organizations would provide full or partial tuition reimbursement to their volunteer administrators for job-related training or workshops, and even more would allow time off from the job for attendance at professional development training or instruction. However, when asked specifically whether AVA educational endorsement would influence them toward approving a professional learning or training experience for their employees, only one answered in the affirmative.

Of the 96 non-CVA respondents, only nine declared that they would not pursue the Certification process in the future. Seventeen (18%) were undecided. Of those two groups combined, 42% said the reason was that the credential or the process was not recognized or valued by the employer/organization. At the same time, 96% of all the non-CVA respondents said they had taken workshops or courses during company time. Although 56% have attended AVA conferences, more (60%) have attended conferences under other sponsorship such as DOVIAs, Governors' Conferences on Volunteerism, University of Colorado workshops, and conferences sponsored by VOLUNTEER: the National Center.

The non-CVA respondents showed a strong emphasis on formal learning, with 17% attending graduate school, 10% attending undergraduate courses, 13.5% completing baccalaureate degrees, and 24% reporting completion of graduate degrees in a variety of disciplines *since* becoming volunteer administrators. However, of all learning experiences they listed, the ones they considered most useful for the job were workshops taken under various auspices, including those sponsored by academic institutions. Thirty-eight percent of the respondents

said they had informed their employers of their professional learning pursuits and only 5% said that their employers or organizations paid *none* of the costs for the workshops or courses they took. The highest dollar support reported by an individual was \$2000 a year for a college course.

In contrast, another 38% of the responding non-CVA AVA members said their employers were unaware of AVA's Certification Program. Ten percent said they did not know whether the employers knew about it or not, and only 5% said their employers did not think it valuable to pursue.

Of the 36 respondents from this group who said their employers were not informed on Certification, 23 said they wished the employer would take an interest in it, while only five said they would rather they not do so. Twenty-four percent of non-CVA respondents said they would be encouraged to seek CVA if their employers took an interest in it. Over half of the total non-CVA respondent group said that financial help from their employing organizations would improve their ability to seek Certification or professional development, but there is little evidence that they have sought it, since such a large percentage of the employer group is declared by their volunteer administrators to be "uninformed" on CVA.

Of the corporate respondents, almost a quarter were unfamiliar with AVA's Certification Program, although 33% had attended AVA conferences (but only once!). Sixty-seven percent said they had shared their professional development steps with their employers and 89% said their organizations paid for their learning opportunities or contributed toward them. Fourteen (78%) said their employers were unaware of AVA Certification, "probably not" aware of it, or the respondent didn't know. However, 72% said they would have undertaken it, had that been specified as a condition of their present employment.

#### PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONALISM

The subcommittee believed it could be taken for granted that CVAs considered

themselves professionals. Presumably their "supportive" employers agreed. Therefore, "supportive" employers were asked for advice to potential CVAs on how to persuade their employers to endorse their professional development initiatives. Of the employers, 36% advised that the volunteer administrators demonstrate their own initiative and motivation to their employers by their resolve to become professional, with or without employer support. They suggested having their employers talk with others who had CVAs working for them (such as our respondent group) and have them point out to the inquirers the benefits to an organization.

Of the non-CVA group, 78% said they considered themselves to be members of a "true profession," as volunteer administrators, while fewer (53%) believed their employers considered them to be that. The most frequently cited indicator given by the non-CVAs as evidence of having achieved professional status was "inclusion in the management team," *i.e.*, being accepted for full participation in meetings, conferences, budgeting and decision-making on a par with other managers in the organization.

Of the corporate respondents, seven said they considered themselves to be part of a "true profession" as volunteer administrators. Seven others said they were professionalized by other parts of their job, such as communications or public relations. Sixty-one percent said they believed their employers considered them to be professional as volunteer administrators. Indicators cited by this group of their having achieved professional status were, or would be, change of job title, upgrade of position, and evidence of AVA's responsiveness to corporate business needs.

#### IDENTIFICATION VS. ANONYMITY

Perhaps some useful impressions may be gleaned from whether the separate groups of survey respondents chose to identify themselves and/or their employers by name, or not.

Of the CVAs:

- 34 (87%) identified themselves by

- name
- 22 (56%) identified a supportive employer
- None identified a non-supportive employer
- 5 (13%) responses were returned anonymously

Of the non-CVAs:

- 63 (66%) identified themselves by name
- 31 (32%) identified a supportive employer
- 8 (8%) identified a non-supportive employer
- 33 (34%) were returned anonymously

Of the corporate volunteer administrators:

- 13 (72%) identified themselves by name
- 8 (44%) identified a supportive employer
- 1 (5.5%) identified a non-supportive employer
- 5 (28%) were returned anonymously

The foregoing statistical picture is far from complete, even as an excerpted display from the study. In the interests of focusing this article, the bulk of the survey data necessarily has been omitted. Much of what does not appear here is interesting, especially to persons concerned with the differences (real or perceived) between the four groups surveyed. Therefore, serious explorers are encouraged to read the more complete study, which combines numerical data and narrative evaluation in greater detail.

Nevertheless, we feel that *The Journal* readers deserve to share the conclusions and impressions the researchers drew from the complete survey. These are summarized informally and should provoke serious thinking on the part of the AVA leadership and its membership about future directions and actions which might be taken in support of professionalism in volunteer administration. It is hoped especially that these additional comments will provoke thought on how to involve the employers of the practitioners in the field as approvers, advocates, and, most of all, participants in the growth of the profession.

## SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS

First, there is reason for celebration by the field of volunteer administration because its members finally are beginning to see themselves as professionals! Certainly, this is strongest in those who have put themselves to the test, either in undertaking CVA or in embarking on an independent effort to build their professional credentials. Unfortunately, many feel that their employers do not agree with them. Still, an important finding is that when the volunteer managers take their determination out of the closet and give evidence that they are willing to be responsible for their own initiatives in professionalization, the employers sit up and take notice and frequently surprise the managers with supports.

The opinion of the employer is very important to timid volunteer administrators, who too often are leaving the employer in the dark about their professional ambitions. When they do not bother to find out what the employer thinks about Certification or professional development, volunteer administrators cannot expect that employer to value their efforts. Neither can they be perceived as professional persons if they do not act as though they believe themselves to be!

There is strong evidence of the interest by the volunteer administrators in higher education, but as much in other specialties and disciplines as in volunteer administration. The latter appears to be well-covered by the popular workshops and conferences (some sponsored by academic institutions) which nearly all attend and for which employer support seems easier to obtain. Some of the breadth of academic subject interest must evolve from the healthy desire of the practitioners to stretch their horizons beyond a strict professional specialty. However, the pragmatic probability is that they want to insure their marketability by diversifying their knowledge and capabilities, "just in case."

There is certainly an invitation here to AVA to improve its marketing of Certification and professional development. The respondents are open to persuasion, in most cases, to the worth of both and want help in educating their employers

to their benefits.

The corporate respondents, especially, seem to feel alienated, not only from Certification marketing but from the mainstream of volunteer administration. They appear to be asking AVA to court them into participation in conferences, to show how they fit into the general field, before they espouse it.

The corporate group certainly is unseasoned in volunteer administration. However, the majority of the nonprofit respondents in Survey III also are short-timers in their jobs. There is plenty of evidence of today's mobile society throughout the full survey, with the employers as well as the volunteer managers. All the more reason these respondents are shoring up their transferable skills by undertaking to acquire academic degrees in a variety of disciplines.

The corporate respondents are concerned that their volunteer-related roles within their conglomerate jobs don't offer the clout of the other "hats" they wear. Nonetheless, they do not have the air of second-class citizens, which the volunteer administrators from the nonprofit sector frequently display. These administrators hope wistfully for "inclusion" in management teams and authority groups—to "belong." "I know I'm professional, but the boss doesn't," is frequently heard. That in itself bespeaks shaky self-confidence, but the evidence is that, *sub rosa*, the field is identifying itself and looking for networking strengths to help it become "upwardly mobile."

Funds, while not plentiful, are available for a number of professional supports, particularly workshops. Furthermore, the number of degrees collected and embarked on by this group, while they are actively employed as volunteer administrators, shows that they are somehow financing their education.

The number of "supportive employers" who have emerged, by name, from this survey constitutes a fine resource bank upon which to build enlightenment of others. Certainly, AVA should begin to make strong connections with these persons who can advocate in our behalf. There should be opportunities at both

Regional and International Conferences to create working seminars between employers and practitioners from the field, to help point to next steps for both.

Finally, there is reinforcement for the sentiment most individual practitioners often express: they love their work, they are committed to working with volunteers and, all else being equal, all necessary supports in place, they would stay with the field of volunteer administration as a career. "All necessary supports," of course, is the critical piece.

The AVA Employer Recognition Survey presents ample evidence that the time is ripe for enlightenment. The opportunity to gather employers of volunteer administrators into the movement forward toward professionalism is here, right now. Waste no time in getting started!

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## FOOTNOTES

1. Naylor, Harriet. *Volunteers Today*. Dryden, NY: Dryden Associates, 1973. p. 189.
2. Misch, F.C., Ed. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1983. p. 939.

For information on obtaining the complete report of the AVA Employer Recognition Survey, write: AVA, P.O. Box 4584, Boulder, CO 80306.

APPENDIX A  
A SAMPLING OF RESPONSES FROM THE SURVEY

*from CVAs . . .*

Q. Was your employer supportive of your involvement with the CVA process?

A. He was not. The CVA process was, in his opinion, solely my concern and was not important to my role as Director. None of the work was accomplished during working hours. It was prepared on weekends at home, and secretarial help was paid for by me. I do not regret this.

Q. If your employer was supportive, what form did that support take?

A. He was almost in awe of the kinds and amount of work I turned out. His word to me in our first supervisory session was, "Just keep doing what you have been doing and let me know if I can help!"

*from Employers of CVAs . . .*

Q. What led you to encourage your volunteer administrator to embark on professional development and credentialing?

A. She provided the leadership. She stated clearly what she wanted and needed. I supported her goals and plans.

Q. What value have you found in being supportive to your volunteer administrator's professional development?

A. People do a better job when they feel good about themselves. She returns from

AVA Conferences with new ideas and renewed enthusiasm and sometimes new or improved skills.

*from Non-CVA AVA Members . . .*

Q. If you do not intend to seek CVA, why not?

A. I do not feel it would further my status in my present job as no one at (my agency) knows what CVA stands for.

Q. Of steps you have taken as a volunteer administrator toward professionalizing your role, which were the most beneficial?

A. Most beneficial have been AVA Conferences, then workshops and other professional conferences . . . Also, it's an excellent opportunity to communicate with a peer group outside of (my specialty) as well as within it.

*from Corporate Volunteer Administrators . . .*

Q. If you do not intend to seek CVA, why not?

A. AVA has not provided information/support for *corporate* volunteer coordinators.

Q. Does your employer consider you a professional, as a volunteer administrator?

A. A professional, yes; a professional volunteer administrator, no.