

Pricing Volunteer Consultants: A Skillsbank Experience

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In early 1983 the Board of Directors of Volunteers in Action (VIA), the voluntary action center in Providence, Rhode Island, charged its Research and Evaluation Committee with responsibility for evaluating the work of VIA's Community Skillsbank. The Skillsbank is a special program that recruits volunteers to serve in consulting capacities to area non-profit agencies at their request. Board members had considerable data to show that the Skillsbank was working effectively; what we wanted to learn was the perceived dollar value of services contributed to the community by Skillsbank volunteers.

With the advent of President Reagan's exhortations of the voluntary sector to support human services and of his and David Stockman's successful efforts to reduce federal spending for these services has come a widespread surge of interest in measuring the quantity and quality of volunteer contributions. Trying to do this raises a host of problems, and there are few sources which are helpful. How do we measure the impact of volunteers on an agency, on agency consumers, or on the larger community?

Neil Karn has provided us guidance for valuing volunteer time using replacement costs of equivalent paid work as a basis.¹ Further, he has urged us to aggregate volunteer hours into full-time employee (FTE) equivalents and to calculate real fringe benefit costs. He has made an important contribution, but VIA faced problems which were different in two significant ways.

First, we were not concerned in this study with the value of volunteers at VIA. Rather, we were interested in determining the value of the efforts of volunteers VIA placed with its constituent agencies. So this was not an in-house job. Our second problem was even more difficult. Skillsbank volunteers serve in a consulting capacity in what Karn would call an "as needed" basis.² So their efforts cannot be treated as ordinary employee work. To do so would have undervalued their contributions. Before explaining what we did, a bit of background on the Skillsbank would be useful.

THE COMMUNITY SKILLSBANK

The VIA Skillsbank began operation as a program of Volunteers in

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Action in 1979. With a grant to VIA from the Rhode Island Foundation (our major local community foundation) in 1980, a Skillsbank Director was hired. Both "experts" and agencies-in-need were recruited. For better matching of expertise and need, work categories were created, for example, Personnel, Fund-raising, Statistical Analysis, Management Consulting, and Public Relations.

The process of making a match is a painstaking one. While copious marketing materials describing the Skillsbank are available throughout the community, agencies must contact the Skillsbank in order to receive an application. Once a completed application is received, a staff member arranges an interview with an agency representative to clarify the nature of the task requiring consultation. The bank of volunteers is then scoured for a suitable person. If such a person is found, s/he is phoned about the possible match. If interested s/he is instructed to contact the agency to arrange an interview. If both parties are satisfied, the match begins with a mutual signing of an agreement which describes the task to be done. The entire match is then documented by a checklist completed by the volunteer. Skillsbank staff members monitor the progress of each assignment and are available to both agency and volunteer throughout the implementation. The match ends with each party completing a confidential evaluation of the match.

METHODS

From its creation until March, 1984 when the study began, the Skillsbank had recorded a total of 449 requests from agencies, 127 of which had come during the previous ten months, the time of our study. Of these 127, some had been withdrawn, postponed, referred elsewhere or were inappropriate for Skillsbank volunteers. Still, a total of 55 matches of consultant and agency had been made and completed. We ignored

matches completed before May, 1983 because they were considered to be too old to recover; we were concerned that memories of the experience had faded. For purposes of this study, then, we found 41 matches which had been initiated and completed between May, 1983 and March, 1984 and for which all paperwork had been completed and was available.

Some of the matches involved more than one volunteer. The 41 matches provided us with 52 completed placements involving 54 volunteers. The quality of the data for the 52 matches varied. Results were complete for 22 matches and incomplete but useable for 18. In five matches, data were available only from the agency, and in four only from the volunteer. Two agencies and one volunteer either could not or would not provide requested data. Since we were concerned primarily with the agency's assessment of the value of the service, those matches for which agency-only data were available were included in the analysis but volunteer-only data were excluded. This left us 46 matches for which we had data.

The study began with our sending a letter to each Skillsbank volunteer and to that individual's agency contact for each Skillsbank match completed between May, 1983 and March, 1984. The letter briefly explained the study, informed the recipient that a phone call would be forthcoming and announced the question that the caller would ask. The volunteers were asked to estimate what they would charge the agency based on their actual time spent on the assigned task and the nature of the task. The agency was asked to estimate the cost, had it been necessary to budget for the help. Each was informed that the other was being called.

Next, the Skillsbank Director recruited seven volunteer telephoners. These people were required to attend a one and one-half hour training session. At this session the study was

explained and discussed; protocols for speaking with volunteers and agency representatives were distributed, and calls were rehearsed. Possible "difficult" responses were discussed and agreement was reached on how to respond to, and record, difficult responses. Through role playing, several phone calls were simulated. For example, the completed evaluation forms for each assignment in most cases stated the time that each party estimated the project had taken. The telephoners were told to confirm these estimates in the phone call and then use these to help respondents arrive at a value estimate. Each caller received a list of names and phone numbers of completed matches and was given two weeks in which to complete the calls. The data were tabulated manually. Summary statistics were prepared, and the Research and Evaluation Committee then attempted to explain the findings and discern meaning.

FINDINGS

The skills most frequently sought by agencies were public relations (16) followed by organizational planning (9) and personnel management (6). Each of the other skills had been requested only one or two times. Although time estimates were not essential for our analysis, we did compile them. The range of time reported for the consulting ranged from 15 minutes to 60 days, with roughly one-fourth under five hours, another fourth from six to ten hours, and another fourth from ten to thirty hours.

We had assumed that volunteer declarations of time on task would be most accurate since the volunteer was asked to keep track of time spent. Further, since much of the work was done away from the agency, agency representatives would not necessarily know how much time was used. We predicted that in cases where there was a difference, the report of hours from the volunteer would be higher than that of the

agency. In 23 cases, there were incomplete data, and in ten cases the agency and volunteer agreed on time spent. Volunteer estimates were higher in nine of the remaining 12 cases. The greater the number of hours reported, the greater the difference. The most dramatic disagreement involved an agency which estimated 36 days, but the volunteer reported 60 days.

Of the completed matches, agencies assigned a dollar value to 44 of them and volunteers to 39. The volunteer estimates ranged from \$15 to \$9,000 and the agency estimates from \$15 to \$10,800. Of the 39 matches for which we had both agency and volunteer values, there was exact agreement on only one. In 21 cases the agency made a higher estimate and in the others the volunteer estimate was higher.

What were the results? What did VIA learn from this? Briefly, the total estimated value of the matches as reported by the agencies was \$41,475, or about \$943 per match. To our surprise, the volunteer estimates averaged considerably lower at \$829 for a total of \$32,340. But what do we see in the data? There seem to be four kinds of responses.

1. "What We Hoped to Find." First, for a few matches, the volunteers were utilizing professional consulting skills and thus knew the market value of their time and the agency also used professional association guidelines for determining the rate. In these cases both the agency and the volunteer had taken the time to prepare a considered response to the phone call promised in our introductory letter. We believe that these estimates are good and useful, but only four of our matches are in this group.

2. "Not Since Shirt Pockets." Second, in a few cases the agency so loved the volunteer that its estimate of value either by the hour or in total was extraordinarily high. In one case, for example, the volunteer es-

timated the task as being worth \$300 while the agency estimated \$5,000. In another, the agency estimated an hourly rate of \$60 while the volunteer estimated \$6 or \$7. The opposite also occurred: maybe we should call these "Don't Call Us." In one case an agency was thoroughly dissatisfied because they felt the task had not been completed even though the agency and the volunteer agreed that 60 or more hours had been volunteered.

3. "I Don't Know Nuthin' 'Bout..." Both volunteers and agencies were guilty of this. Because many non-profit agencies have little or no experience in dealing with "experts," and because many salaries in non-profits are lower than in the private for-profit sector, agencies do not have the knowledge or experience on which to base an estimate. Whether or not volunteers could accurately give a rate depended on how close to their professional fields the consulting was done. If a volunteer did the task regularly, s/he was more likely to be accurate.

4. "I'm Just A Volunteer." This is a problem which is of the most concern. Some agencies put a low value on the service and then explained by saying, "if s/he had been a 'real' expert..." as if to suggest that "real" experts did not volunteer their time. Volunteers devalued their contributions, too, especially if the consulting task was outside the field of their work efforts. Our unspoken response to this, of course, is that people ought not volunteer their consulting skills if they do not consider themselves to be expert.

CONCLUSION: A NEW VALUATION TOOL

The study was valuable to VIA in a number of ways, and it produced immediate practical results in changing our communication with volunteers and agencies. We perceived the need to devise more imaginative strategies for impressing volunteers and agencies with the worth of volun-

teer time and the importance of consistent, conscientious recordkeeping in this respect. Second, we learned that it was not possible to arrive at a meaningful estimate of the dollar value of Skillsbank volunteer time through a study such as this one.

Therefore, the Research and Evaluation Committee determined to create a schedule of realistic consultant fees for each area of expertise in the Skillsbank, by getting the advice of local consultants. This was accomplished, and the Service Value Reference Sheet in Appendix A was the result. It contains such notations as: Public relations, \$30-\$50 per hour; group work consultation, \$25-\$40 per hour. At the time of the volunteer's final evaluation of the Skillsbank experience, a letter from VIA will request: "...estimate the dollar value of your contribution using the enclosed Service Value Reference Sheet, trying to keep your estimate within the range provided."

When the volunteer's estimate has been received, the customary wrap-up letter to the agency will now include a statement such as: "\$550.00 is the estimated value of the recent Skillsbank volunteer service to your agency. You may wish to use this figure when reporting in-kind donations to your program." When this system has been in effect for a year, the Committee will review the results and evaluate the process.

As a result of the study, we believe that the benefits from the Community Skillsbank work far exceed the costs of VIA. We want to strengthen our conviction. We encourage further research. Do volunteers undervalue as much as we believe? Do agencies overvalue volunteer consultant time? With time and experience will the range of these estimates narrow? What are the most effective methods for measuring the value of volunteers who work in consulting capacities?

For further specific information and samples of any of the instruments described in this article,

please contact Volunteers in Action, 229 Waterman Street, Providence, RI 02906.

FOOTNOTES

¹Neil Karn, "Money Talks: A Guide to Establishing the True Value of Volunteer Time," The Journal of Volunteer Administration, (Winter 1982-3 and Spring 1983).

²Neil Karn, "Addendum to 'Money Talks,'" The Journal of Volunteer Administration, (Fall 1984).

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Appendix A

VIA, Inc.
The Community Skillsbank
Service Value Reference Sheet

Please review the fees suggested for the services you provided in this particular assignment and, in the appropriate space on the evaluation form, give us your estimate of the value of your contribution. If possible, stay within the ranges provided. Thank you!

<u>Service</u>	<u>Service Value Range</u>
Research	\$35-\$40/hr.
Organizational Planning	\$30-\$40 except where noted
office management	
organizational planning	
program development	
board/organization development	
board/staff partnership	
record/information systems	
library development	\$35-\$50
grant writing/fund development	
insurance	\$75-\$100
other	-----

<u>Service</u>	<u>Service Value Range</u>
Fiscal Management	\$35-\$75
budgeting	
bookkeeping	
auditing	
accounting	
fiscal controls	
fiscal management	
purchasing	
other	

Program Evaluation	\$35-\$70
Legal	\$60-\$75
legal issues	
agency coalitions/agreements	
advocacy/legislation	
other	

Site Planning & Maintenance	\$35-\$60
building repairs/renovations	
energy conservation	
land/building use	
other	

Special Skills	
computer skills	\$30-\$75
translation/interpretation	\$15-\$25
inter-cultural sensitivity	\$25-\$30
planning education skills	\$25-\$40
casework management/interviewing	
other	

Personnel	\$50-\$75
personnel management	
recruiting	
supervision & evaluation of performance	
training/development/education program	
benefit plans	
grievance procedures	
affirmative action	
other	

Group Facilitation	\$25-\$35
conflict resolution	
conference planning	
effective meetings	
other	

Volunteer Program Development	\$25-\$35
recruitment/retention	
interviewing/placement	
supervision and evaluation	
job description	
training/development	
vol. reimbursement/benefits	
other	-----
Public Information-- PR	\$35-\$75
flyers/newsletters	
campaign development/advertising	
radio/TV/press relations	
audiovisual materials	
report preparation	
awards/recognition	
speakers' bureau	
other	-----
Arts (Music, Fine Art, Drama)	\$50-\$75
Recreation	\$30-\$40
Health	\$35-\$50
administration	
planning	
direct services	
other	-----

