



[Resources](#) » [A-Z Volunteer Management](#) » [A-Z Volunteer Management](#) » [Creative Volunteer Roles](#)

Creative Volunteer Roles

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As a rule, volunteer assignments are patterned along the job descriptions of paid staff. This is because volunteers are seen as helpers or assistants to employees. While there is nothing wrong with this frame of reference, it is also limiting. Why not try a more creative approach to designing ways volunteers can contribute?

Keep in mind that volunteers can be flexible, particularly in their schedules. It is safe to assume that the individual or community needs your organization is addressing exist around the clock. So focus on these needs without defining the "solution" within the confines of a Monday to Friday, 9 to 5 parameter.

Here are a few examples of actual volunteer roles that highlight what can be done at unusual hours:

- A family counseling agency recruited volunteers to telephone assigned families at 7:00 a.m. on school days to provide structure and offer friendly support as parents were preparing their children for school.
- A hospital was able to provide additional night services, including a crisis hot line, by recruiting a corps of insomniac volunteers referred by their psychologists (a win-win situation).
- A national labor union involved its members in a project studying how blue collar workers are portrayed on television by asking for volunteers to watch and report on shows aired throughout a particular period.
- A park started a weekend campground patrol program by recruiting families to volunteer at specific camp sites for 48-hour shifts. The multi-generational volunteers proved to be effective role models for the weekend campers.

There are other criteria that can be used to design creative volunteer roles, especially if you free yourself from the model of what the paid staff does. Consider these examples --again, all are real:

- A juvenile detention center recruited physically disabled volunteers because it found that people in wheelchairs were able to confront teenage lawbreakers about making choices in more positive ways.
- A nursing home opened an after-school homework center for latchkey children at a nearby elementary school. It was hard to determine which age group was the most "served" by the interaction.
- A hospital created a set of videotapes in which young patients shared their hospital experiences to be shown by close-circuit television to other children receiving similar treatment.
- A municipal streets department recruited volunteer block representatives to act as communication liaisons whenever roadwork was going to create temporary detours or other inconveniences.
- A professional association offered members the chance to barter special skills for reduced registration at their annual conference. The biggest hit was the member who volunteered to give neck and shoulder massages in the conference headquarters room to frazzled committee members.

What do all of these examples have in common? They demonstrate how volunteers can meet special needs--often quite targeted needs requiring very part-time or even "off- time" availability. In most cases, these are tasks that would never become full-time jobs. And in some cases, they would never be paid for despite how much they add to the success of a venture.

In addition, these volunteer job descriptions make use of the unique talents or traits of the people contributing their time. No matter how expert employees may be, they still have a finite set of skills. Employees also tend to be homogeneous in terms of educational background and age range. Volunteers therefore diversify what the paid staff can offer to the recipients of service. Make sure that volunteer assignments make use of younger and older people, distinct life experiences, different occupational skills, different languages, and new perspectives.

Finally, make use of the gift of volunteers to focus on one thing at a time. Employees must always divide their attention among a full client case load or to everyone requesting service. Volunteers, however, can be recruited specifically to spend all their hours on one child, one research project, one specialized task. This is a luxury with benefits to everyone.

When you let your creative juices flow beyond "staff assistant," you'll see the limitless possibilities for involving volunteers in meaningful work.

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