

Designing Volunteer Jobs for Results

By Richard Lynch

DESIGNING JOBS MAY SEEM like a pretty boring subject. The reason many of us respond in this way to this topic is that we feel most jobs in our society are boring. In fact, we face something of a national crisis in this area.

Work for most people is an unpleasant necessity. As Studs Terkel described it, work is "a violence to the spirit as well as the body." The boring, demeaning, destructive nature of most people's jobs saps productivity, burns people out, and leads to a general dissatisfaction with life.

When Edward Kennedy first ran for the Senate, his opponent accused him of being a man who "had never done an honest day's work in his life." A few days later, Kennedy was shaking hands at a factory and one of the workers leaned over to him and said, "You ain't missed a goddam thing."

Jobs don't have to be that way, however. They can be designed so they are exciting, challenging and rewarding.

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They can be something people look forward to and want to do. If we fail to give our volunteers such a job, we will be plagued by turnover, unreliability and low morale, because a job people want to do is the cornerstone of all successful volunteer programs.

This article may contradict some things you have read elsewhere on job design. This is because in our rush to "professionalize" the field of volunteerism in the '70s, we tended to adopt standard management practices from industry. We affected a sort of country bumpkin stance in relation to these "professional managers" and eagerly translated their practices into our terms. In doing this, we fell prey to the assumption that because they were paid so much and we were paid so little, they must be a lot better at managing people.

In fact, however, a case can be made that just the opposite is true. Take away all the inducements that professional managers have at their disposal, the salaries and benefits, and their people won't even come to work. They won't come to work because the job isn't something they want to do. Our people work because the job fulfills them in some way; it is something they want to do.

But although most volunteer administrators are demonstrably pretty good at managing people, we have to get better at it. This is because more and more of our volunteers will be people who also hold a paying job. And to get someone to volunteer in addition to holding a full-time job, we need to offer that person a

job that is much more fulfilling than the one he/she gets paid to do. And that's what this article is about.

IN MY WORK WITH AGENCIES IN designing jobs for volunteers and for paid people, I have found four elements to be most important in designing a rewarding job. At the same time, designing jobs to have these characteristics also promotes greater efficiency and requires less management effort.

The first of these factors is what I call "turf." By turf I mean that the volunteer has something that is his/hers to be responsible for. In the nonprofit world, the turf is most often a volunteer's own client or project. There are many such examples of a volunteer having such responsibility. Big brothers, phone workers in a crisis clinic, senior companions, and foster grandparents are all volunteers who have one or more clients for whom they are responsible.

There are also several examples of volunteers *not* having turf. Volunteers (or paid staff) in welfare offices who conduct eligibility interviews with many clients and pass them on to others who complete other parts of the process have no turf; they are merely responsible for one activity in a string of activities that finally ends in the client being served. Such volunteers tend to burn out much faster than those who have full responsibility for a client or project. Similarly, volunteers fixing up a school will tend to get more satisfaction if they do all the activities related to fixing up a

particular room than if they do one activity (such as painting or cleaning) in all the rooms. The first circumstance provides them with a sense of turf ("this is my room"); whereas in the second case, any sense of ownership and responsibility is diluted by the number of others involved. Even in so simple a case as a group of volunteers stuffing envelopes, we find that volunteers who do one activity (collating, stapling, folding, stuffing, stamping) for all envelopes get less satisfaction from the job itself (as opposed to satisfaction from the social aspects of being together as a group) than those who do all these activities for a portion of the envelopes.

The second key element in good job design is to make sure that the volunteer has the authority to think as well as do the job. By thinking, I mean specifically the planning, organizing, deciding and evaluating of what he or she does.

Many volunteer administrators have a built-in resistance to allowing volunteers this authority. For one thing, the volunteer may only serve once every couple of weeks and may have difficulty keeping up with what is going on. And for another, standard management practice holds that it is the supervisor's job to do the planning, organizing and deciding and the employee's job to carry out whatever the supervisor decides needs to be done.

Indeed, when a volunteer first comes on board, this may be the most comfortable way to proceed. As volunteers learn the job and figure out what is going on, however, the fact that they are only doing what someone else decides begins to sap their motivation and dilute their ownership of what they accomplish. They will tend either to resent being told what to do or to lose interest in the job, cease to show up very often, and finally drift away.

This does not mean we should abdicate our responsibility for insuring good results from volunteers. Obviously, we can't afford to have all our volunteers "doing their own thing." What we can do, however, is to involve them in the planning and deciding process so that they do feel ownership of their job.

One way to allow them some control and still retain some insurance that they will do the right thing is to ask them to recommend to us what they should do rather than telling them what to do. If the recommendation is unacceptable, you can explain why so they learn to make

better recommendations in the future. In this way, volunteers will always feel a sense of ownership in what they do, since they thought of it and recommended it. The fact that you may reject some of these ideas does not detract from this sense of ownership because the things you do approve and what the volunteers wind up doing are things they decided to recommend.

The third critical element in developing a work structure that encourages excellence is to make sure that volunteers are held responsible for achieving results rather than for performing a set of activities or "job duties." If they are responsible for results or outcomes, they are focused on the end-product of what they do, and they get the satisfaction of making progress toward an achievement. If, on the other hand, they are responsible only for the activities that may lead to some result, they are divorced from that satisfaction. A crime prevention volunteer for a police department, for example, will get a lot more satisfaction if he/she is responsible for reducing burglaries than for engraving social security numbers on people's belongings.

Most job descriptions for volunteers or for paid staff are not defined in terms of results, which, in fact, are never mentioned. Most often, the responsibility for a result is fragmented, with several people all having a few activities to perform if the result is to be achieved. In fact, the responsibility is usually so fragmented that the volunteer loses sight of the result. As a direct consequence of this, results are poorly and inefficiently obtained, and the volunteer gets bored.

Because most of us have little familiarity with jobs defined in terms of results, let's look at some examples. Below are five statements taken from volunteer job descriptions. For each, decide if the statement holds the volunteer responsible for achieving a result or for performing an activity.

1. Spend three hours per week in direct counseling of clients (job description for mental health volunteer).
2. People coming to or calling the office will view us as a competent, professional organization (receptionist).
3. Work with children on reading (classroom volunteer).
4. Girls will view themselves as valuable and competent (Girl Scout leader).
5. Speak to men's groups about the problem of rape in our community (rape

relief volunteer).

Once you have answered each of these, read the following discussion:

1. This is a statement of an activity to be performed. No result has been specified, and if this volunteer doesn't achieve much, we shouldn't be surprised. To define the result, we need to ask, What is the outcome of all this counseling? What do we want the volunteer to accomplish in these three hours per week? The answer might be something like, "Clients will return to independent living in the community" or "clients will feel able to cope with daily life without help" or whatever the focus of the counseling is. By defining this result for the volunteer, we offer challenging and worthwhile accomplishment to work toward.

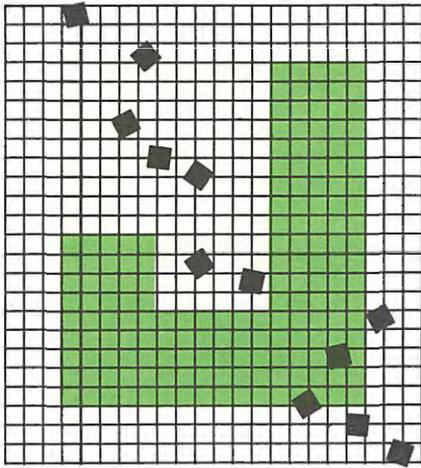
2. This is an excellent statement of a result for a receptionist. It states the outcome of activities such as answering the phone and greeting visitors.

3. Here again, the job is defined in terms of an activity. Anyone can fulfill this job description without even trying because no result has been specified. To make the job more rewarding, we need to define what is to be achieved. What are the children supposed to learn? A result might be "increase children's reading scores by one grade level."

4. This states a result of many activities a Girl Scout leader may engage in. By putting this in the job description, we keep the leader focused on this to increase the likelihood of such a result. This result is challenging and difficult to achieve, but it is precisely those qualities that make the job interesting, rewarding and motivating to the volunteer. Backing away from this because we fear it is too difficult only makes the job less interesting and does a disservice to the girls. It is more rewarding to be engaged in helping girls grow up with strong self-images than to be responsible only for leading them in various activities such as hiking or singing songs.

5. Again, no result is specified. What is the outcome of these speaking engagements? What will people know or do as a result of these talks? Unless we take the time to define that for the volunteer, it is unlikely that the volunteer will achieve whatever outcome we want. We should never be surprised at the lack of results we get from volunteers if we never give them results to achieve.

So, there are two primary benefits to defining volunteer jobs in terms of



results. The first is that it helps to meet people's need for a sense of achievement or accomplishment. It helps them to feel valuable and worthwhile in their volunteer activity. And the second is that it helps to make our program more effective because people are clear about what they are supposed to accomplish and therefore are more likely to do so.

The fourth critical element in good job design, is to decide how to measure whether the results are being achieved or not. If we don't do this, the statement of result will fail to have any motivating value, and it will be impossible for the volunteers' supervisor to know how well they are doing.

For some jobs, the measure is fairly obvious and easy to state. In the case of the crime prevention volunteer working with a police department, for example, the number of burglaries is a readily available, statistical measure. In other cases, however, we find it more difficult. In the case of the Girl Scout leader, whose result is to help her troop develop self-assurance, we need to do some hard work to figure out how we are going to measure her progress. We need to ask such questions as, How will we know if girls gain self-assurance? What will we see if they are and aren't self-assured? What questions could we ask them to determine their degree of self-confidence? and so on.

Many volunteer leaders don't want to do this much work, and so they take the easy course of holding the volunteer accountable only for performing a group of activities. By doing so, however, they deprive the volunteer of the ability to tell how well she is doing, since the quality of performance is related to the outcome. They also deprive her of a sense

of accomplishment. To use a metaphor of Scott Meyers at Texas Instruments, the person who has no clear measures of how he/she is doing is like a bowler with no pins at the end of the bowling alley. She may roll the ball down the alley as before, but she will never be able to know how well she performed this activity. And she will quickly get bored with this pursuit and stop bowling.

By taking the hour or so necessary to define how to measure performance, we don't have any clear way of knowing if our program is succeeding or not, and the volunteer is likely to lose interest and to drop out.

Let's look at some real examples of how these four principles can make a job more interesting. The first is of a volunteer program whose main purpose is to do household chores for handicapped and elderly people who might otherwise have to be institutionalized. Originally, the volunteer job description wasn't even in writing. Volunteers understood that they were to do whatever cleaning and home maintenance the paid social worker deemed necessary. The program was plagued with a high turnover rate, as volunteers often found the work more unpleasant than they had expected. In terms of our four criteria, the volunteers did have turf—they had clients who were their own and no one else's. They had no control over what to do, however, as they did only what the social worker told them to do. There was no clear end result they could see and they were measured only by whether they completed their assigned activities.

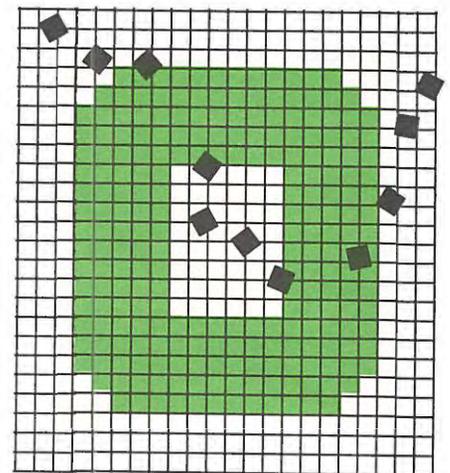
In redesigning the job, two results were identified. The first was that clients would be able to stay in their homes as long as they had no serious medical problems that made institutionalization a necessity. This result was easily measured by the number of non-medical institutionalizations. Such a result didn't seem to be enough for the volunteers involved, however, since they felt they could easily achieve it and still do a lousy job. They suggested that a second result be included, that client houses be

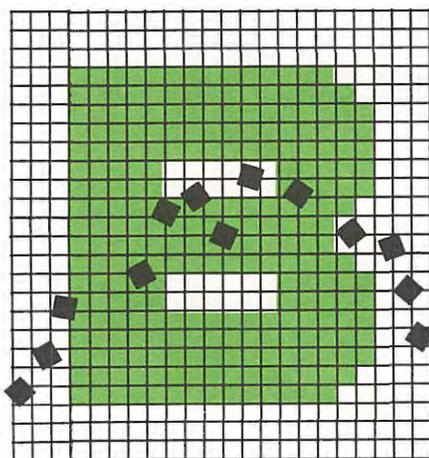
clean. This brought up the problem of how to measure whether a house was clean or not, since people have different standards of acceptable cleanliness. After much discussion, the group finally decided that the client should be the one to determine whether the house was acceptably clean or not. The final statement of this second result then was, "Clients will be satisfied with the cleanliness of their homes." This was easily measured by asking them. Volunteers could get immediate feedback on their performance at the completion of the job, just as a bowler does after rolling the ball down the alley.

Within the framework of these results, the volunteer was then given the authority to do the thinking necessary to achieve them. Instead of the social worker figuring out what needed to be done, the volunteer was given this responsibility. His or her success in fulfilling this responsibility was measured by the degree to which he/she achieved the results. Where volunteers were having difficulty achieving client satisfaction, they naturally turned to their supervisor for help and advice as to what they should do differently.

This change in the way the job was defined had a transforming effect on all concerned. The social worker was relieved of the enormous burden of determining what chores needed to be done and was able to concentrate on actually doing social work. This made her happier and also resulted in a reduction in the number of clients who were "chronic complainers," since their complaining was the only way they knew to cope with the problem of loneliness the social worker was now helping them solve in other ways.

The volunteers got greater satisfaction





from their work, as they were responsible not just for doing odious chores but for keeping their clients out of a nursing home—a much more rewarding role. They had the authority to devise ways of accomplishing this and of cleaning the homes to the clients' satisfaction. And they had clear measures of whether they were achieving their results or not. Because of all of this, volunteer turnover was greatly reduced, dropping almost to zero.

The volunteer coordinator's role also changed. Instead of being the person who assigned volunteers to clients and then tried desperately to keep them interested in doing the task (by recognition dinners, certificates, motivational talks and other standard, highly time-consuming practices), she was now a resource person volunteers sought out whenever they perceived they weren't achieving their results. The amount of time she spent recruiting was greatly reduced due to lack of turnover, and the amount of time she spent in "motivating" volunteers also dropped off, since the job structure took care of that.

Here is an excerpt from the final description:

Result:

Clients will be satisfied with the tidiness and cleanliness of their homes.

Suggested activities:

- Identify tasks clients can't do themselves and want done.
- Recommend tasks clients cannot do themselves and which are not already approved by the supervisor.
- Devise ways clients can do more for themselves.
- Complete approved household chores.

Measures:

- Client response to satisfaction on periodic client survey.
- Number of client complaints and compliments of periodic client survey.

You will notice that besides the result and the measures, the job description includes a list of suggested activities. They are included to give the volunteer some guidance as to what to do. They are activities the supervisor thinks will achieve the result. They are not requirements, however, for that would put the emphasis on the activities instead of on the results. The volunteer is held responsible for the results, and if the volunteer can figure out ways of achieving them by doing other activities, the volunteer will have succeeded. This allows the volunteer to keep the authority for doing the thinking required by the job.

Another example involves volunteers working with youth at a juvenile court. In this case, the volunteers were a board of community people who decided on alternatives to sentencing for youths who committed minor infractions of the law. The board met once each month, heard the cases brought before them, and assigned youth to alternative service such as a number of hours of "volunteering" for local agencies.

Unlike the previous example, the board did not exhibit the problems of turnover or absenteeism that would cause distress to a volunteer coordinator. They were interested in their job, and did it conscientiously. The problem in this case was that the volunteers felt frustrated because they felt there was more that needed to be done and more that they could do. After their brief contact with the kids, they never got any feedback on what happened to them. They were in the dark as to whether their "sentence" had any impact or what kinds of alternatives were the most effective.

In redefining this job, the first step was to give them each "turf." Accordingly, they split up the youths that came before them, so each had a number of kids who were "theirs." The board still reviewed each case as a whole board, but afterward each member had a group of kids to check on, to talk to about how things were going.

The authority to do the thinking required by the job became, in this case, the authority to recommend to the full board changes in a youth's alternative

sentencing if the result wasn't being achieved.

The result, as the group defined it, follows:

Result:

Youth assigned to the volunteer will exhibit increased self-respect, self-control and socially acceptable behavior.

Suggested Activities:

- Help youth develop personal goals.
- Encourage youth to get involved in "healthy" activities.
- Help youth see alternatives.
- Provide appropriate consequences if youth is not fulfilling diversion agreement.
- Recommend changes in diversion agreement to the full board.

Measures:

- Number of reoffenses as a juvenile.
- Involvement in new, healthy activities, such as school projects.
- Number of uncompleted diversion agreements.

There is, of course, more to developing volunteer jobs that bring out the best in people. Most particularly, there is the art of matching the volunteer with a job he or she truly *wants* to do. If that job is then structured so that it has the four characteristics discussed in this article, your problems of volunteer management will decrease. As stated before, such a job description increases the volunteer's motivation and makes the program coordinator's job easier. It also makes the program more effective because results are always more readily achieved when they are clearly defined and known to all. ♥

