

JOB SHARING FOR VOLUNTEERS

Teaming up compatible volunteers enhances the success of jobs performed by people who work for free.

By Susan M. Chambré, Ph.D.

Two recent articles on job-sharing in VAL ("Job-Sharing: Improving the Paid Staff/Volunteer Relationship," fall 1986, and "One Job, Two Contented Workers," winter 1988-89), point out many positive aspects of job sharing for paid workers (volunteer administrators). This method can also be used successfully for volunteer jobs. Pairing up two people, especially a veteran with a novice who has not done the job before, solves many practical problems of volunteer administration but needs to be done carefully in a context that encourages the development of a partnership.

These observations synthesize the perspectives of a volunteer who is also a professional. As a volunteer, I have worked on two- and three-person teams on four different occasions over the past three years. All of the assignments involved planning and executing a once yearly event, either a dinner or a luncheon. In my paid work, I am a sociologist and do research, teach courses, conduct training and engage in consultation on issues related to volunteering and volunteer administration.

National surveys conducted over the

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past 30 years, beginning with the first "Americans Volunteer Survey" in 1965 (conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor) and most recently the "Giving and Volunteering in the U.S." study issued by INDEPENDENT SECTOR in 1988, indicate that our society includes many potential volunteers, people who are interested in doing volunteer work but are not actually involved in it. While a number of reasons for this have been considered, none of the large-scale surveys or other studies based on smaller samples mentions a reason for not volunteering that might be significant: People are probably reluctant to volunteer because it may involve unfamiliar tasks and subject them to the risk of failing at a new activity. When a novice is paired with someone who has done the job before, the apprenticeship and partnership that are created address this barrier. A recruit can be told, "You'll do this job along with _____ who has done it before."

The apprenticeship created by job sharing reduces the need for orientation and training, components that are often less than adequate. In many volunteer-run organizations, training can at best be described as informal and is often unsystematic, chaotic or nonexistent. Volunteers are sometimes left on their own to identify the nature of their job and the appropriate tasks.

Discussions in staff training at a large religious congregation revealed that

many of their volunteers function in a totally unsupervised manner and find themselves "reinventing the wheel" when they do a job for the first time. This organization, which has a substantial paid staff but no one with training in volunteer administration, has created a situation where volunteers may in some cases actually orient and train themselves: They need to identify the tasks to be done, the sources of goods and services, and the role of staff in providing support services.

Job sharing is an especially appropriate strategy in organizations that provide volunteers with little training or guidance.

Research on volunteerism and descriptions of volunteer programs identify many of the motivations that lead people to work for free, the ways these motivations change over time and effective methods for rewarding unpaid workers.

Jon Van Til points out that our culture provides for two motives that might superficially seem to be contradictory, a blend of altruism and self interest. Volunteering provides an opportunity to help others and at the same time to receive satisfaction and gratification. Studies of human service volunteers point out that the relative importance of different motivations varies over the course of a volunteer's career.

Altruistic interests are more important in recruitment than in retention. Experienced volunteers are particularly sensitive to the job-like aspects of their work; burnout becomes more likely when a volunteer job is

difficult or frustrating and when the physical and social aspects of the job are not satisfying including contact with paid staff and with other volunteers.

Job sharing addresses many needs that people bring to unpaid work. If done properly, it can increase the chances of gaining gratification from doing a job well, especially the first time around when an experienced volunteer is paired with a novice. The new recruit simultaneously serves as an apprentice and a partner for the more experienced worker. Many tasks that can be time-consuming and frustrating can be performed with greater ease because the seasoned member of a team is familiar with them: key telephone numbers, responsibilities and personalities of paid staff, where supplies are located, where to purchase needed items, how many people can be seated at a table, where to order flowers, and many other details that can become overwhelming. The more experienced member of a team serves as an important resource, having knowledge and skills that two novices will need to gain for themselves at considerably greater effort.

A less often discussed, but especially important need of volunteers is also built into the partnership concept, a desire to have "good times" while doing "good works," an idea developed in Arlene Kaplan Daniels' book *Invisible Careers*. People engage in communal service because of a desire to help others and to be involved in philanthropic enterprises. At the same time, people can make and solidify friendships, thereby having "good times." Like paid work, volunteer work enables people to perform tasks that vary from mundane to highly interesting. It also serves as a context for socializing. There may actually be an inverse relationship between the two: less interesting volunteer jobs may require greater rewards in other areas including positive social contact.

Teaming up compatible volunteers builds in several key elements that enhance the success of jobs performed by people who work for free: It facilitates recruitment, reduces the need for training, increases the probability of success in performing tasks since one member of the team is more experienced, and addresses a need for sociability.

The more experienced member of a team also derives some important benefits. Today's volunteers combine an interest in self-actualization with a desire to do socially useful tasks. Training another per-

son can be a growth experience.

Job sharing combined with a system of rotation means that the veteran is training his or her replacement. This alleviates a little-discussed but probably important fear of some volunteers—that they will become stuck in a job because there will be no one to replace them, a circumstance that could reduce the quality of their performance and morale.

While some volunteers might come to view themselves as irreplaceable because it makes them feel important to an organization, a system of rotating volunteers has several positive consequences. Organizations create more and more committees and positions, not because they are needed but because existing arrangements may not be functioning properly. It is easier to create a new committee than to replace the members of an ineffective committee. Since the fear of getting stuck in a job may be a barrier to volunteering, specifying a term of office is one way that organizations can simultaneous-

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ly address these fears and be able to replace rather than fire volunteers.

Some organizations combine job sharing with a rotation system. People who are new at a job make a two-time commitment, once as a novice and then as the more experienced member of a team. A system of job sharing combined with rotating jobs allows for promotion and circumvents the need to fire volunteers. If movement into and out of volunteer jobs is built into an organization's usual system of assigning tasks, then people who are inappropriate for particular jobs are less likely to get stuck in these assignments.

Partners need to share the same vision of how a job is to be done. The very same job can be performed quite differently depending upon the personality, needs and time constraints of the volunteer. One variable aspect of many volunteer jobs is that the amount of time they take can be expanded to fill the time a volunteer wants to devote to it. Often, particularly in volunteer-run organizations, job descriptions

are never formalized. People are familiar with the way jobs have been done in the past, tasks are described in an unsystematic or hurried fashion, or the volunteer is left to figure out how to do the job. Collaboration between two people is greatly enhanced when they share similar views about how much time and effort they want to devote to the tasks.

Greater autonomy also enhances the quality of a collaborative relationship. Overly close supervision might actually subvert the development of a true partnership between an experienced person and a novice, since the pair will not be fully able to develop a sense of defining what they wish to achieve and be free to collaborate on its completion.

Having a successful pair continue to work on a project year after year is also short-sighted. Rotation of team members in a veteran-novice type of partnership combines stability with innovation. The more experienced member of the team has knowledge of the ways tasks were done in the past while the newcomer can look at an event or project with a fresh viewpoint and help to reduce the tendency to duplicate past efforts, a fact that may, over time, lead to repetitive and uninteresting events.

Job sharing can only be successful with two people. The introduction of a third person complicates the relationship without necessarily reducing the burden. Two people can work as a team but coordination of three people's work is different; it becomes a committee, not a team. Research on groups and on organizations points out that there is a significant increase in the amount of effort required to coordinate the activities of each additional person. The nature of the social interaction becomes altered and the efforts needed to maintain clear communication are much greater. It is also possible that two people can form an alliance against a third and differences in workstyle can become intensified.

For volunteer administrators and for leaders of voluntary groups, pairing up volunteers and having them share a job has many positive virtues. It builds in features that address recruitment, training, motivation, supervision, retention and rotation issues. It is successful when two (not three) people with similar views are provided with an opportunity to work together effectively in a context where the expectations are clear and where supervision exists but their autonomy is not compromised. ■