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Replacing Volunteers with Paid Staff

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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There is endless talk about making sure volunteers do not displace paid staff. This is a legitimate topic, though one based more on fear than reality. But what about the opposite issue? When and how is it legitimate to place employees into roles traditionally held by volunteers? This is an emerging trend that deserves attention.

On the macro level, of course, this is exactly what history teaches us about the formation of all organizations and institutions. A small group of visionary, maverick volunteers sees an unmet need, gets together, and works hard to start a service or facility. As the volunteers evolve their program, inevitably at some point money is raised and staff hired – specifically to do more intensive work than the volunteers want or can continue to do. See my *NonProfit Times* article on [“The History of Volunteer Involvement in Seven Stages”](#) for more.

But the issue I’m concerned with here is different. More and more I’m hearing of paid workers being assigned, too often thoughtlessly, to roles that were always considered the domain of volunteers. In many cases, volunteers are still doing the same work, possibly on a different schedule than employees but also side-by-side. It’s no surprise to those of us in volunteer management that tension frequently results.

Perhaps the most common example of this volunteer role substitution by paid staff occurs when staffing reception or information desks, and also on-site gift shops. Hospitals and museums lead the list of settings making this change. There are other examples, but let’s examine these to analyze what is going on.

Many institutions have asked volunteers to handle these functions for as far back as memory allows. No one today may even know why this tradition started. It probably was connected to limited funds that had to be expended on other priorities and the feeling that spots such as an information station or gift shop were excellent opportunities to set a welcoming tone by neighbor-to-neighbor interaction. Regardless of its roots, the volunteers who gladly accepted the responsibility when asked have developed a sense of ownership and pride for it.

Now add in a few other key factors:

- Aging-in-place of long-time volunteers who may no longer be able to handle the required duties as well as they used to, or who no longer represent the institution's desired face to the public.
- Resistance by new volunteers to committing to a fixed schedule over a long period – exactly what a front desk or shop assignment requires. These locations *have* to be covered, no matter what.
- Introduction of computers, complicated phone systems, electronic cash registers, and other technology – plus all sorts of new privacy regulations – which make the work much more complicated than being friendly to visitors.

From the perspective of consistent service to consumers through assured, constant, competent presence at a location operating many hours and possibly all week, employees may actually be better suited to these types of roles, despite the tradition of assigning volunteers there. When you pay someone a salary, you can require attendance at hours you set. There is no question that paying one to three employees to permanently work the desk or the store is the *easiest* way to go. And if money is available to pay such staff, it's legitimate to do so.

So What's the Problem?

The problem is *how* the transition from volunteer to employee is handled.

If management decides outright to replace all volunteers in a certain activity with paid staff, the change should never be a surprise. In fairness, and to show respect for past efforts, the volunteers involved should be told in advance of the plan – but not as a simple announcement. The change-over should include:

- Public thanks to those currently filling the volunteer role and recognition of all the volunteers from the past. Acknowledgement is critical and only fair.
- Asking for input and advice from volunteers about what should be included in the new staff's job descriptions. Who is in a better position to know what this work really entails?
- Asking for ideas as to how, possibly, volunteers might still be involved in the service provided, but in new ways that expand/enhance the primary work of the new paid staff.
- Offering reassignment to those who wish to remain as volunteers in support of the facility. The alternative opportunities should be attractive and not seen as "demotions."
- Explanation of the timeline and, if the full transition to paid staff will occur over several months, clarification of how volunteers will function during the changeover.

Do not take volunteers for granted and assume that, because they give their time willingly, they will blindly support any management decision. Even more serious is the potential for conflict between the new hires and the volunteers still on board – tension that may well be conveyed in service delivery.

But few organizations replace volunteers wholesale. Instead, they inch their way into displacement, sometimes without any plan at all. It starts with filling schedule gaps, perhaps by sending an employee in another job over to the desk or store for a few hours if volunteers cannot come in. Or one staff member is hired to cover evenings or weekends. Suddenly the situation evolves in which employees and volunteers are doing the same work at different times, and sometimes side-by-side. *That's* when the real trouble begins.

The absolute worst thing to do is ignore the dynamics of this situation and let the employees and volunteers “work it out.” They can't. It isn't their job to answer such central questions as:

- Who's in charge? If there is a difference of opinion, whose prevails?
- If both an employee and volunteer are on duty together, who responds first to the client/visitor/customer? (Why?) What does the other person do while that is happening?
- Since an employee will be working more hours than most volunteers, what's the employee's job description as compared to that of the volunteer? What else will the paid staff member be expected to do when things are slow at the desk or shop? Which activities take priority?
- Who sets standards for service delivery?
- Do the volunteers and employees report to the same supervisor?

None of these questions are necessarily hard to answer, but answered they must be – and by someone in authority. Left invisible, resentments will fester. Don't victimize either the paid or the unpaid staff by dropping them into an unclear work environment.

These sorts of issues arise every time an organization changes its direction in when and how to deploy volunteers and employees to fulfill certain roles. The advice stays the same: articulate why you are making the change; speak openly with everyone involved; and clarify expectations on all sides. Such respect and recognition will win long-term loyalty.

Have you experienced this sort of displacement of volunteers? How did the transition go? Do you have any advice for other readers?

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Submitted on 5 September 2008 by Liz Mirzaian, Glendale Adventist Medical Center, Director of Volunteer Resources, Glendale, CA USA

Volunteer relationships are defined by law, not by intent, wish, or desire. California law limits volunteers to non-profit organizations only. Volunteers may not do the same thing as employees. The US Department of Labor holds that if you have paid employees in the Gift Shop who perform the

same job as your volunteers, you may not have volunteers. For example, if you cannot maintain volunteers during the evening or weekend hours to keep your Gift Shop open, you may not hire a paid employee to work those days/hours, you must be closed if you cannot staff it with volunteers.

Otherwise, all of your volunteers are considered to be employees. It's not a favorite opinion, but it's the rule. The same thing applies to volunteers who perform the same duties as employees at the Information Desks.

Response from Susan Ellis:

Thank you for reminding us of the legal implications related to this topic. The problem is that nothing is clear-cut, even in California. First, I need to challenge the assertion that "volunteers are limited to non-profit organizations only," since even in California volunteers are deeply engaged in all sorts of government agencies (from schools to fire departments). In the same vein, for-profits also have "legal" volunteers, even if they refer to them as student interns. The important issue in your response is the phrase "perform the same job as." This phrase is very unclear as to what it means. It does not simply mean to "work in the same location as." It refers to activities performed and responsibilities held. So everything gets muddled when certain tasks overlap, but not the full job. It's always a matter of interpretation and the ability to articulate a defense of a position.

Also, it's important to note that the Department of Labor and Industry does not universally prohibit having volunteers do work simply because "someone could be employed in the same capacity." In fact, when it comes to public agencies, the Department of Labor actually states (http://www.dol.gov/dol/allcfr/Title_29/Part_553/29CFR553.104.htm): "There are no limitations or restrictions imposed by the FLSA on the types of services which private individuals may volunteer to perform for public agencies."

Plus, there are *unique* issues in California! Just last week the following story hit the news – again. It revolves around the ruling forbidding conservation organizations from engaging volunteers on any public lands project. It's all based on labor union opposition. See the article at <http://www.sacbee.com/110/story/1188226.html>. I predict some strong fighting in your legislature.

All this confirms the point of my Hot Topic that we need to be discussing this. Thanks again for giving us more food for thought.

***Submitted on 2 September 2008 by Denise Steffich, United Hospital Center, CDVS
Clarksburg, WV USA***

Our admission desk volunteers were replaced early this summer with paid 'greeters' for the morning shift 6 a.m. - 2:30 p.m. We were having difficulty covering these early morning hours, especially during winter months. Originally the shift started at 8 a.m., but the department wanted it to be covered much earlier.

The volunteers that were serving that desk seemed to take it much better than volunteers that worked elsewhere in the hospital. Now, when the greeters are not readily available, these other volunteers complain about them. Even though we handled the actual department volunteers well (they were assimilated into other positions), we didn't see the hard feelings the volunteers from other departments would have. So if this happens in your facility, don't just address those it is happening to, but the whole volunteer membership so everyone understands and doesn't feel they will be next.

***Submitted on 2 September 2008 by Becky Goodman, Transitional Housing BARN, Inc
Community Resources Coordinator, Bristow, VA USA***

First, a volunteer should be notified as soon as possible. They must know that they are not being replaced, however the program or project has grown and you need to staff this department. From that point on you treat them as a staff person. Include the volunteer by asking them to write up a job description and possibly asking them to help train your new employee. There are many different volunteer positions. However, if this person was doing administrative work, ask them if they are interested in staying on as the assistant. You can not let a volunteer go without an exit interview, so if you are willing to let this person go, then be prepared to listen and thank them for all they have done for you.

Submitted on 2 September 2008 by Deirdre Araujo, Exploratorium, Manager Volunteer Services, San Francisco, CA

I have these conversations periodically with staff supervisors, and usually have to review California labor law with them. Having volunteers in a gift shop became problematic a few years ago with a new labor law. Also, once a staff member has filled a formerly volunteer position, our union agreement precludes being able to return to the volunteer staffing option should the position come open again. For me, it rankles when the only issue is 'quality control'

Submitted on 1 September 2008 by H. Roberts, PLNJ, Inc., Pres., Keyport/NJ USA

Susan knows her subject well! This month's hot topic examines an industry threshold, a clear line in the sand for every individual working in this profession.

If the inclusion of volunteers is removed from nonprofit organizations, there is no need to hire volunteer leadership. We might as well start job hunting.

It is not enough to remember how your agency began: with volunteer visionaries who saw a societal issue and took action with none of the trappings today's nonprofits enjoy. The time is now to revision your volunteer plan. To place the WORD volunteer in your mission statement. Here's an example:
"Volunteers' demonstrate that our agency has a heartbeat."

PRIVACY STATEMENT

