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Letting Volunteers into the Team's Locker Room

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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We say that our goal is teamwork among volunteers and paid staff, and we mirror employee personnel procedures to bring volunteers on board. But just as the game is about to start, we withhold some of the things volunteers need to help the team to victory. Let me demonstrate this sort of handicapping with a situation that occurred recently.

An organizational member of our [Everyone Ready®](#) online volunteer management training program wanted to give access to the library of resources to key volunteers. Fine with us, we said, your membership includes any authorized member of your network, volunteers as well as paid staff. Turns out that the problem was not a restriction on our part: the organization did not permit volunteers to log into *their own intranet* (private network), which was where paid staff gained access to training materials. Unfortunately this was not the first time we had to point out a self-inflicted dilemma.

The usual explanation for barring volunteers from an organization's intranet is some variation of "confidentiality." In other words, the intranet provides employees with information not meant to be publicly shared, especially client records, donor and other financial files, and organizational policies. On the surface, this seems reasonable. Until you examine the details. First, any competent IT person can set up an intranet in layers of access, segregating some files to certain categories of users. After all, not everyone on the payroll should be permitted to browse private data on every client or donor; they should only be able to use the specific information truly needed in their own area of responsibility. No one thinks twice about being restricted from areas of the intranet unconnected to their own work.

So what's the problem in allowing authorized volunteers to log into the organization's intranet to gain information *they* need in their work? Shouldn't volunteers have access to non-confidential but very useful materials such as organization-wide announcements and news, schedules, online handbooks and manuals, and (yes) training?

More Team Penalties

In many cases, the first requirement for accessing an intranet is an e-mail address using the *organization's domain name*. Ah ha! This bars entry to volunteers because they seldom are assigned an official e-mail address.



Notice, of course, that it is possible to program an intranet to deal with outside e-mails, or to use a “passkey” address such as volunteer @ ouragency.org with a set of discrete passwords. But this requires the will to do so and it’s rare to find an organization ready to direct the IT department to set it up. Just understand that this is a technical issue that *could* be resolved.

But let’s look at the e-mail question more closely.

Almost every new employee, at least those expected to communicate within the organization via e-mail, is routinely provided with an official domain e-mail immediately upon being hired. These days it comes with the phone extension, desk or work space, and other necessities of joining the staff. And, when that employment comes to an end, the e-mail account is de-activated just as routinely. So there is control over who receives or loses the right to represent the organization in online messages.

Further, there are policies explained to employees about the proper use of the official e-mail, especially when it is expected that messages include all the information of title, address, etc. (as well as the branded logo) and when something should be clearly identified as personal (and possibly then not sent from the organization’s computers). Rules need to be set about posting to social networks, clearly giving guidance about separating private remarks from those representing the organization. Such policies should also apply to volunteers.

When I ask why organizations do not give at least some key volunteers an official e-mail address, the first reaction is almost always surprise at the very idea. Which in turn surprises *me*. Wouldn’t it be incredibly useful to have board members send messages that represent the agency in a formal way? What about the chair of a major special event or fundraising drive? Think about the perspective of the recipient of the e-mail upon seeing a message from BigBucks.com or littleoldme @ yahoo.com with a subject about *your* organization. Who is this person I don’t recognize?

For communication between volunteers and one-to-one clients with whom they are matched, using personal e-mail addresses removes any boundaries between private messages and what the match is supposed to be about (see [last month's Hot Topic](#) on this very subject). And how do you close down contact, if necessary, if the volunteer has been using his or her own address to keep in touch? (This also opens the question of whether clients may benefit from a more controlled, identity-protecting way to interact online with your organization.)

Objections to giving e-mail addresses to volunteers are predictable. Consider whether these are valid or fall into the category of “we don’t want to do extra work for people who are not that

important to us.”

- It’s too much work because there are so many volunteers.
- It costs money to give out new e-mail names.
- We don’t want every volunteer to represent us officially.
- We won’t be able to control when they use our domain name.
- Then we’ll also need a system to terminate accounts when volunteers leave.

Are Volunteers Part of the Team or Not?

I understand that there are legitimate issues to discuss and work out so that the right people (volunteer or paid) are given organization resources such as an e-mail address or access to the intranet. But barring volunteers, as a group, from such tools has real consequences. We may be making it difficult for them to be as effective in their work for us as they could be. We may confuse those whom volunteers contact on our behalf. And we may be sending the message: you volunteers are not part of our core team.

So the leader of volunteers needs to open the conversation about how important it is to go beyond lip service to integrate volunteers formally into the work of the organization. At a minimum, start with those who legally carry important responsibility and authority: the members of the governing board, volunteers designated as major committee and project chair people, volunteers directly assisting senior managers. Then create a set of criteria for determining which volunteer roles are hampered without the same tools paid staff takes for granted and develop ways to provide those tools. And it is also appropriate to determine which volunteer positions are not harmed by the lack of those same tools.

The volunteer office will also need to have systems in place that ensure that e-mail addresses and intranet access are removed at the time a volunteer leaves the organization. If you can assure IT that these systems are in place, they will be more likely to support your effort to add these tools for volunteers.

E-mail addresses and intranet access are two clear ways volunteers are welcomed into the organization. But there are other indicators of acceptance that are missing in most organizations.

Business Cards

Again, depending on the needs of each volunteer position, it may be appropriate to order organizational business cards for some volunteers, showing the logo and the volunteer’s name *and title*.

Please note that the word “volunteer” does not need to appear! If the person is visiting potential employers to find jobs for clients, the card should properly designate the holder as “Jobs Developer” or some other explanatory title. This does *not* mislead anyone. Even though they are unpaid,

volunteers are your *agents*, working on tasks assigned to them by your staff, and (hopefully) selected and trained to do those activities well. They are handing the card to someone as a “Jobs Developer,” and being identified as a “volunteer,” unfortunately, can undercut the interaction. Note that employee business cards do not say “Jobs Developer (Paid).” You want to convey legitimacy, not income level!

It may be sufficient to print official business cards with blank spaces, into which a volunteer can write her or his name and title. This can work for short-term projects and the volunteer office can control the distribution of this sort of identification.

Mailing Lists

It used to cost money to print and circulate (even postal mail) official notices and memos sent routinely to paid staff. Today such mailings are almost always electronically created and delivered. So why not add volunteers to the distribution list – if not all of them, then at least those in leadership roles? Even if some of the topics are not immediately relevant to their areas of responsibility, being included in such communication keeps volunteers more informed about the work of the organization and possibly engages them in noticing and contributing suggestions for how things are being done. A communique to the entire staff is never going to be equally useful to every recipient; part of the point is to convey and emphasize that everyone on the team needs to be informed.

At a minimum, remind unit supervisors of the importance of adding the names of volunteers directly assigned to their work area to internal staff messages. If nothing else, this may save a volunteer from arriving at the office in a blizzard only to discover the paid staff had been notified that they could work from home!

Space to Store Work

Not every volunteer works on site or accumulates working documents and other materials from one shift to the next. But for those who do, is there a designated space in which to store such items? If staff does not carry work to and from the building every day, why should volunteers? Not to mention the fact that the content of such papers is the property of the organization and may even include confidential information.

What happens if a volunteer receives a letter or package when not on site? Does the mail room recognize where it should go? Where is it placed so that the volunteer sees it when resuming work?

Storage of work these days is no longer a matter of setting aside a drawer or file folder for a volunteer physically, but rather requires creating proper online storage. We may have circled back around to intranet access with this one. Does the organization have a protocol for storage of staff files? Can volunteers contribute to team document sharing and editing? Is their work protected and available to them when needed – including for review by their supervisors? And what about backing up the files created by volunteers?

So look around. Are volunteers out on the field with the rest of the team, but missing vital equipment to play the game?

- How do you handle intranet access and official e-mail addresses for volunteers?
- What advice can you give others still trying to integrate volunteers into the institutional structure?
- What other resources, tools and privileges demonstrate that volunteers are equal team members?

Related Topics: [Staff/Volunteer Relations](#) | [Preparing for Volunteers](#)

Comments from Readers

Submitted on July 7th, 2015

Marty O'Dell, CVA, Volunteer Program Manager, Goodwill Easter Seals Miami Valley, Dayton OH, USA

I love your comments and ideas about giving key volunteers their own email address and business cards. I finally managed to get IT to give our reoccurring administrative volunteer an email address so that she could work on things and send them back and forth to me. We actually kept the address generic so that more than one person could use it which was helpful because 3 people now share the position. Eventually I might like them to have their own, but this works. And sometimes baby steps are better than no steps.

Submitted on July 7th, 2015

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

Thanks for sharing your baby steps -- which show that some progress IS possible if we advocate properly. I'd just like to note, though, that this really shouldn't be the IT department's call. They are the ones to implement/provide the e-mail addresses, but who receives one should be made by...first choice: you, because you are the one responsible for volunteer involvement and should be permitted to ask for the right tools volunteers need...or...second choice: a senior manager who can set policy about this so that it is not a continuing struggle.

Bravo for getting this far!

Susan

Submitted on July 15th, 2015

Jayne Cravens, <http://www.coyotecom munications.com>, Portland, Oregon, United States

At an organization where I worked, all staff were invited to presentations by our field staff when they would visit headquarters. I instituted a policy in our department of inviting volunteers to the same presentations. Other departments got miffed because their volunteers found out and asked, "Why can't we go to?" They saw their volunteers as labor - and labor sitting around listening to presentations is, to them, "wasted." To me, inviting volunteers to staff meetings and program presentations, no matter what their role was, was a benefit of volunteering with us - getting to see "inside." Plus, it was energizing for the volunteers - when you spend days programming a database, it can just seem like work to do, but when you get to hear from staff in the field, living and working the mission of the organization, it's SO inspiring! Better than a coffee mug...

Submitted on July 16th, 2015

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

Great example, Jayne. It's so interesting that staff felt volunteers were "wasting time" at meetings designed to be informative -- and necessary -- for employees! Guess it says as much about their opinion of those meetings as about their attitudes towards volunteers.

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