Keeping Volunteers

A guide to retaining good people
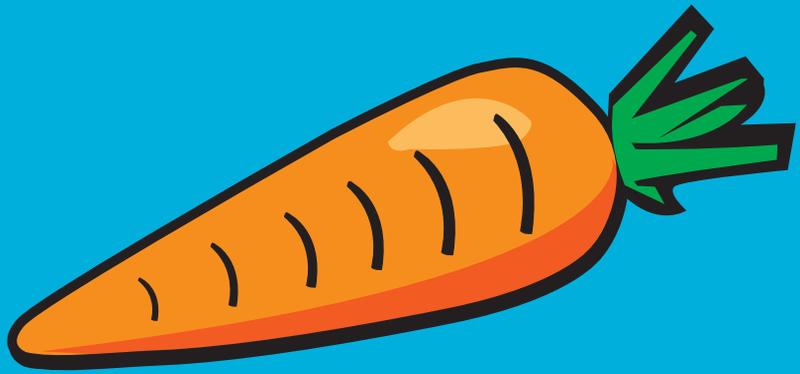
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CONTENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Steve McCurley

Steve McCurley is an internationally-known trainer and speaker in the field of effective volunteer involvement. He is currently a partner in VM Systems, a management consulting firm specialising in helping organisations improve their utilisation of volunteers. In the US Steve has worked with almost every national voluntary organisation, including groups such as the American Association of Retired Persons, Special Olympics International, the Nature Conservancy, the Points of Light Foundation and many others. He has been involved in most of the innovations in volunteering over the past 20 years, including workplace volunteering, online and family volunteering, and the development of the Volunteer Center network.

In the UK Steve has worked with the British Red Cross, Tearfund, VSO, Guide Dogs for the Blind, Community Service Volunteers, Volunteering England and others. On the international front, Steve has done work in Canada, Ireland, the Caribbean, France, Australia, Germany and Brazil.

He is the author of 15 books and more than 150 articles on volunteer involvement and co-author of *Essential Volunteer Management*, published by the Directory of Social Change. His writings have been translated into Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Romanian, Hebrew, Chinese and Korean, among other languages.

He is the co-editor with Susan Ellis of the *e-Volunteerism* online journal. He is one of the founding faculty of the Institute on Advanced Volunteer Management, held in the UK each year.

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Rick Lynch

Richard is a Seattle-based management consultant who specialises in issues relating to not-for-profit organisations. He has done volunteer management workshops in the US, Canada, Australia, Britain, Russia and Singapore. Each year, he speaks at approximately 100 workshops, conventions and conferences in North America and Europe on topics related to volunteer management and leadership effectiveness.

He is the author of the following books:
- *Lead!: How public and non-profit managers can bring out the best in themselves and their organizations.*
- *Getting Out of Your Own Way*
- *Precision Management*

He is also the co-author of *Secrets of Leadership* and *Volunteer Management*, the best-selling book in its field in the US, China and the Ukraine. The British version, *Essential Volunteer Management*, is the best-selling book in its field in the United Kingdom.

Before starting his own firm in 1977, Rick worked for five years as a project director and senior trainer for three management-consulting firms in New York and Washington DC. He holds a masters degree from the University of Iowa.

Rick's experience in the field of volunteer management includes work as a volunteer coordinator and as the training director for the Washington State Office of Voluntary Action, where he set up a unique system of delivering management training to volunteer directors through a network of volunteer training organisers. He has served on the boards of directors of a number of non-profit organisations, including a volunteer centre, a retired senior volunteer programme, a United Way, national and local literacy programmes, and National CASA, an organisation that ensures that abused children are placed in safe and permanent homes. He has been a featured speaker on volunteer management at international, national, international and state conferences since 1979.

At various times during his career, Rick has served as a reading teacher, a bass player in a blues band and chief of a volunteer fire department.

FOREWORD

Retaining volunteers is a critical focus of any effective volunteer programme. Much is written and debated about effective ways to recruit volunteers but, in the final analysis, if they don't stay with you when recruited your efforts have been in vain. Retention is, in some ways, the more important yet poorer cousin to the more glamorous topic of recruitment.

It is perhaps not surprising then that few volunteer management books have been devoted to retaining volunteers. Into this relative void comes this excellent new book from Steve McCurley and Rick Lynch, authors of the acclaimed *Essential Volunteer Management.*

The volume you hold in your hands takes a comprehensive look at retention, journeying from why it is a key issue in volunteer management to how to handle volunteer burnout. On your journey though this book you'll be challenged to think afresh about how to retain volunteers in the 21st century, especially with the advent of shorter-term volunteer assignments; how to make volunteers feel special; how to sustain retention along the volunteer life cycle and how to create meaningful roles for volunteers.

Keeping Volunteers has much to offer the field of volunteer management, whether in voluntary, community, public or private sector. Written in a straightforward way, it is practical, challenging and informative, whether you are new to the role of volunteer manager or a practitioner of long standing.

Steve McCurley and Rick Lynch have, once again, given the field what will become a standard text on a critical but oft-overlooked area of volunteerism.

Rob Jackson
Director of Volunteering Development and Grant Making
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chapter ①

THE EMERGING ISSUE OF RETAINING VOLUNTEERS

Most organisations seeking to involve volunteers focus on the act of recruitment. Programme managers worry about having enough volunteers, constantly engage in efforts to attract new volunteers and generally spend much time and effort attempting to replace volunteers they have lost.

Viewed rationally, this approach is costly and cumbersome. Recruiting new volunteers can be time-consuming and expensive. Interviewing and screening volunteers entails both financial and staff resources. Training volunteers – especially for more skilled volunteer positions – can be extremely expensive. Hollway (2002) reports that the average cost of recruiting and training a new volunteer at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney was AUD $700. And then, of course, there are the negative costs associated with poor volunteer retention – the loss of skilled workers and the possibility of bad community relations as disgruntled volunteers share their opinions with others. Fischer and Shaffer (1993) commented:

> ... volunteers who quit after a short time are costly. Typically, ex-volunteers or almost-volunteers take away their acquired learning and leave little behind ... Turnover, especially high turnover, can create havoc in the administration and management of volunteer programs. A vicious cycle may be set up: there may be no point in training or spending time with volunteers if most of them are going to quit shortly anyway. However, if volunteers are given no training or guidance, the quality of their work is not likely to be good. If their work is not good, they will feel incompetent and frustrated, and soon they will quit.

While the loss of volunteers is detrimental to all organisations, for some programmes it can have a devastating effect. Grossman and Furano (2002) noted the consequences of loss of volunteers whose role is forming relationships with some types of clients:

> Selecting a volunteer who can honor his time commitment is particularly important when the volunteer's job, whether primarily or secondarily, is to

form a relationship with others. Vulnerable individuals, such as the youth or the elderly, can be emotionally damaged when good-hearted volunteers who start befriending decide they really do not have the time to continue. Feelings of rejection and disappointment, on the part of the children in particular, may lead to a host of negative emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes.

Loss of volunteers can also affect charitable organisations in other ways. Zappala and Burrell (2002) noted the relationship between volunteering and contributing money at The Smith Family (TSF), a large charity in Australia:

> Our findings suggest that those volunteers that have been associated with TSF for longer periods of time were significantly more likely to make larger financial contributions compared to those that were relatively new to the organisation. Having loyal volunteers pays in more ways than one! The loss of long-serving volunteers may therefore have fundraising as well as human resource implications. Once again, this suggests that there are broader gains for nonprofit organisations in adopting a strategic approach to volunteer management. The costs of volunteer turnover, for instance, may be greater than those traditionally associated with employee turnover for organisations that rely on volunteers and for whom fundraising is a significant proportion of their income. At the very least, these findings suggest that fundraising and volunteer management personnel within nonprofit organisations have much to gain by working more closely together.

According to Penner (2002) '… it can be argued that if service organizations face a personnel problem, it is not a shortage of people who want to volunteer. Instead, it is an attrition among people in the early stages of their tenure with the organization.'

This simple point led the National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia to comment in 2003:

> Maintenance of a stable, long-term volunteer workforce should be a major goal of volunteer management to save time in recruiting and training and to retain the confidence of paid staff in the volunteers.

It is far better to focus on maintaining those volunteers who are already involved with the programme, avoiding the expense of interviewing and training new volunteers, and the productivity lost when inexperienced volunteers have to learn how best to approach their work.

Rising concern about retention

Volunteer retention is an area of increasing concern to voluntary organisations. In the Local Voluntary Action Surveys conducted by the Home Office in 1999, the majority of voluntary organisations in local UK communities reported increased difficulties with retention of volunteers, an indication of the growing difficulty some charities are having in maintaining their volunteer force. A 2001 study of fire brigade volunteers in New Zealand (UMR Research) found that 'More than half of all volunteers from composite brigades surveyed said they are concerned about volunteer turnover, and 41% of rural volunteers surveyed said they are concerned about turnover in their force.' Daly (1991) reported that high turnover of volunteers had become a problem for 56% of sporting organisations.

A 2003 Canadian survey of volunteer managers by Environics Research Group ranked 'retention' third in the challenges faced in programme management. Cuskelly and Boag (2001) reported that volunteer turnover is a problem for 56% of Australian sport organisations. A 2003 report on volunteering in sports programmes in the UK (Leisure Industries Research Centre) noted that: 'retaining volunteers is increasingly difficult, and currently there is one "lapsed" volunteer for every two active volunteers.' Elstad (2003), in a study of volunteers for a jazz festival in Norway, discovered that 30% of them had considered leaving.

A 2003 study of volunteers in social service agencies in Toronto (Toronto Community and Neighborhood Services 2004) found that 'Fifty-three percent of responding agencies said they were successful in retaining their volunteers. Forty percent said they were successful some of the time and seven per cent said they could not keep volunteers.' A 2004 report by Statistics Canada noted that 49% of organisations reported 'difficulty in retaining volunteers' as a problem.

Handy et al, in a 2004 examination of volunteers in Canadian hospitals, reported that the number of volunteers who remained involved for five years or longer had decreased at 80% of hospital sites.

Organisations are slowly beginning to realise that operating a revolving door volunteer programme is highly ineffective.

Why volunteers discontinue volunteering

Volunteers choose to stop volunteering for a number of reasons. Some of these reasons are beyond the control of an organisation or of the volunteer. Others are not. A study in the United States undertaken by the United Parcel Service

Foundation (1998) discovered that after 'conflicts with more pressing demands' (65%), poor volunteer management was the most frequent reason cited to explain why people stop volunteering:

	%
● Charity was not well managed	26
● Charity did not use volunteers' time well	23
● Charity did not use volunteers' talents well	18
● Volunteers' tasks were not clearly defined	16
● Volunteers were not thanked	9

Their conclusion was straightforward:

> Poor volunteer management practices result in more lost volunteers than people losing interest because of changing personal or family needs. The best way for volunteer organizations to receive more hours of volunteer service is to be careful managers of the time already being volunteered by people of all ages and from all strata of our volunteer society.

Although not having enough time is the usual answer that volunteers will give for leaving a programme, we suspect that this is often an excuse. When people really want to do something in their lives, they make the time.

A 2002 study of volunteers in Singapore (National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre) found the following reasons for discontinuing volunteering:

	%
● Too much responsibility	18
● Feeling burnt out	18
● Lack of advancement	17
● Feeling unappreciated	16

Princeton Survey Research Associates in a 1998 study of young US volunteers found that 'feeling that the group was disorganized or its expectations were unclear (24%) and that they themselves did not respect their supervisors or co-workers (19%) are the chief reasons given by young people who report having a bad experience with a community-based organization.'

Raskoff and Sundeen (1999) in a study of high school community service projects in Los Angeles found that students:

> … disliked being bored, not making a difference, not feeling appreciated or recognized, being required to serve, not receiving pay for their work, sensing a lack of commitment by others towards volunteerism, having to do too

much work, and doing specific types of work, such as cleaning up. Also, people who were annoying and the presence of people in need or suffering were a concern for some students.

In all, 80% of students reported at least one source of dissatisfaction.

Turnoffs to volunteering reported by 45 volunteers interviewed in Ottawa in 1992 (Ancans) included:

- disorganised management
- lack of board support
- staff indifference
- limited training and orientation
- lack of contact and support
- wrong assignment
- perks that are withdrawn
- insufficient funding.

In Australia, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1995) found the following sources of dissatisfaction among volunteers:

	%
● Relationships with paid staff	2.1
● Amount/adequacy of supervision	2.4
● Amount/adequacy of training	4.9
● Lack of recognition	5.7
● Insurance cover	5.9
● Risk of injury/health	6.1
● Costs	6.7
● Travel/distance/location	7.3
● Amount of time required	10.4
● Legal responsibility	10.5
● Lack of support	11.6
● No concerns	64.2

DeMarco (1998) found that '24% of Ontarians indicate that a major obstacle to volunteering is that volunteers are not treated well.' Lasby (2004) reported that eight per cent of Canadians indicated that a previous bad volunteer experience kept them from volunteering further. Guseh and Winders (2002) found in a North Carolina study of volunteerism that:

Bad experiences in the past discouraged 15 percent of non-volunteers from contributing any time, and 26 percent of volunteers would have contributed more time had they not been frustrated by such experiences.

The 1997 National Survey of Volunteering in the UK (Institute for Volunteering Research, 1997) uncovered similar responses. Here are the percentages of volunteers reporting on their perceptions of the drawbacks of volunteering:

	%
● Things could be better organised	71
● You sometimes get bored or lose interest	34
● You can't always cope with the things you are asked to do	30
● You don't get asked to do the things you'd like to do	20
● It takes up too much time	31
● Your help is not really wanted	5
● Your efforts aren't always appreciated	29
● Too much is expected of you	20
● The organisation isn't really going anywhere	16
● You find yourself out of pocket	29

Many of these reasons, you will note, hinge upon the type of working relationship established between the volunteer and the organisation – whether that relationship is meaningful, rewarding and productive. They are, accordingly, contingent upon the presence or absence of effective volunteer management. Organisations that work effectively at keeping volunteers are less likely to experience difficulties in retention.

The difficulty of measuring effective retention

Very little useful information exists on volunteer retention rates, especially if one is attempting to identify a numerical goal or standard that might be applicable to one's own volunteer programme. Fischer and Shaffer (1993), in studying programmes that involved older volunteers, found that only 30% of programmes gathered data on the numbers of volunteers who left the programme and most of this data was very limited in scope. It is difficult, therefore, to recommend a percentage or time goal that might be used as a standard for measuring the appropriateness or effectiveness of retention techniques. This is true for a number of reasons:

1. Volunteers move in to and out of volunteering

Studies of volunteer participation over time indicate that volunteers typically go through periods of volunteering and not volunteering. Segal (1993), for example, found that, while 20% of women in a US National Longitudinal Study were