

Challenges in Volunteer Resource Management

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Abstract

Volunteers represent both an invaluable resource and a unique set of challenges to nonprofit organizations large and small. The study reported here was designed to investigate the top challenges in volunteer resource management as identified by a variety of stakeholders at diverse nonprofit organizations. Identifying meaningful volunteer roles, recruiting a sufficient number of volunteers, and recruiting volunteers with particular skill sets were reported as the three top challenges. Some differences between larger and smaller organizations in terms of both recruitment and management challenges were indicated. In addition, identified challenges varied based on the organizational role of the respondent.

Key Words: volunteer resource management, executive directors, nonprofit staff, nonprofit management

Introduction

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012) more than 64 million Americans volunteered with a wide variety of educational, religious, environmental, health, arts, and human service, and public-society benefit organizations (Blackwood, Roeger, & Pettijohn, 2012). Given the sheer number of volunteers, the diversity of the roles they fill, the plethora of causes served, and the variety in terms of size, budget, and service delivery models of nonprofit organizations, it is difficult to define one clear set of volunteer engagement challenges faced by all nonprofits. Broadly speaking, the most common issues are often described as being related to volunteer recruitment and management. In their analysis of nearly

3,000 nonprofit organizations, Hager and Brudney (2004) found that recruiting a sufficient quantity of volunteers was an issue for almost 70% of all nonprofit respondents, while the lack of funding available to support the administration of volunteer programs was the challenge most commonly listed as a “big problem” by the respondents. This study also found that organizations investing in their volunteer programs were likely to see higher levels of net benefit from these programs.

However, a more nuanced understanding about the specific ways in which volunteer recruitment and management present challenges to different types of nonprofits could help to identify

ways to address and overcome typical barriers.

A number of studies look at volunteer motivation as a key consideration for recruitment. Clary et al. (1998) identified six motivators for volunteering: expressing personal values, learning and practicing new skills, connecting with others, advancing in one's career, guarding one's self-image, and enhancing one's happiness. In a study of credit union volunteers, Ward and McKillop (2011) noted that altruism was the strongest motivator, followed by interest in the work, enjoyment of the experience, and social contact. However, as Yanay and Yanay (2008) suggest, the motivations that drive a volunteer to begin volunteering can differ from those required to sustain continued volunteering, and an organization with successful recruiting techniques may still be stymied by low volunteer retention rates.

Despite a hypothesis that recruitment would be a smaller issue for larger organizations, Hager and Brudney (2004) demonstrated that organizational size was in fact veiling other factors that explained differences in recruiting challenges. In their final model, they found that organizational size did not affect volunteer recruitment. Differences were instead explained by the volunteer intensiveness (defined as the volunteer experience in terms of number of hours expected of a given volunteer as well as the number of volunteers involved overall) and diversity of volunteer opportunities. Interestingly, higher volunteer intensiveness and lower diversity of volunteer opportunities both correlated with lower levels of recruitment challenge.

The research also suggests that volunteer management challenges shift over the life cycle of a volunteer's engagement with an organization, and too much focus on recruitment and not enough on retention may mask inadequacies in volunteer management (Brudney & Meijs, 2009). As

areas of nonprofit function that are inherently interrelated, what might be seen generally as a recruitment challenge may in fact be a volunteer management issue and vice versa. In some ways, then, volunteer recruitment and volunteer management can be seen as flip sides of the same coin.

Given the diversity of the volunteer corps and the organizations they serve, recruiting and managing volunteers and volunteer programs requires creativity (Ellis, 1999). Previous studies on volunteer recruitment and management challenges have been limited to a given mission realm, such as mental health services (Gidron, 1979) or ecological issues (Leslie, Velez, & Bonar, 2004), or a specific demographic group such as volunteer executives (Fenn Jr, 1971) or volunteers over the age of 75 (Shmotkin, Blumstein, & Modan, 2003). While their findings prove interesting, their narrow focus limits applicability.

This study sought to capture information from a diverse set of stakeholders about the issues facing professionals working with volunteers in organizations of varying size. Our three basic research questions were:

- What are the most prevalent challenges in volunteer resource management?
- Does the list of top challenges change with the size of the organization?
- Does the list of top challenges change based on the primary position of the respondent?

This paper focuses primarily on the first two research questions, with some suggestions for additional areas of future research that address the broader overall goals of the study.

Methodology

Over a six-month period in 2010, a convenience sample of 1,265 unique

respondents completed a brief survey designed to identify critical challenges in volunteer engagement. Survey respondents were motivated to complete the survey by the opportunity to download a complimentary copy of a report entitled *Strategic volunteer engagement: A guide for nonprofit and public sector leaders* (Rehnborg, Bailey, Moore, & Sinatra, 2009), which summarized findings from a UPS Foundation Volunteer Impact Fund study examining nonprofit executive leadership support of volunteer engagement. The availability of the free download was promoted widely through a variety of web resources, including EnergizeInc.com, VolunteerToday.com, the OneStar Foundation, the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service, and others.

Potential downloaders were asked to complete a ten-question survey which included basic demographic information about organizational size as measured by budget, number of full-time employees or equivalents (FTEs), and number of volunteers engaged. Information on the mission focus of the nonprofit organizations was not collected. To complete the survey, respondents identified their top three volunteer management challenges from a 15-item list.

Analysis

Participants

E-mail addresses provided by respondents were used as unique identifiers. The original data set of 1,307 responses was reduced to 1,265 by this process. Respondents were then grouped according to their affiliation of primary position: nonprofit staff, educator, student, or volunteer. For respondents who selected more than one role, their affiliation was included with the first category indicated aligned with the above order. Thus, a

respondent who indicated that s/he was nonprofit staff as well as an educator was included in the nonprofit staff group, while a respondent who indicated that s/he was both an educator and a volunteer would be considered an educator. Roughly 20% of the respondents selected more than one designation. Using this method, of the 1,265 respondents, 952 identified themselves as nonprofit staff and professionals. The remainder consisted of educators (168), students (61), and volunteers (67).

Organizational size characteristics

Of the 1,265 unique respondents, 884 completed all of the survey questions regarding the three measures of organizational size used in this study: annual budget, number of paid FTEs, and number of volunteers engaged by the organization.

Of the 1,136 respondents who provided a budget size for their organization, 46% indicated an annual budget of over \$750,000. A reasonably even distribution of respondents populated the remaining four budget categories. The number of FTEs scale captured at least 8% of the respondents in each category, with 27% of the respondents in the largest category of more than 51 FTEs. The volunteer count scale was the smoothest distribution, with at least 11 percent of the respondents selecting each of the six categories, and 19% of the responses in the top category of over 500 volunteers engaged.

There was a very strong correlation between number of employees and budget of organization, as well as between number of volunteers and budget of organization. Neither of these relationships is surprising: one would assume that larger organizations would have larger numbers of staff on payroll and, possibly, utilize larger numbers of volunteers.

In accordance with our assumptions, we also found that larger organizations

engaged more volunteers, with a statistically significant Pearson's Chi-Square result of 199.262. While we were testing at $p \leq 0.05$,

our results were significant at a $p < 0.001$ level.

Table 1. Number of Volunteers Engaged By Annual Budget

Number of volunteers used by the organization (respondents in category)	Budget under \$50,000	\$50,000 - \$149,999	\$150,000 - \$299,999	\$300,000 - \$749,999	Budget over \$750,000
0-25 vols (162)	38%	15%	14%	16%	18%
26-50 vols (114)	25%	17%	13%	12%	33%
51-100 vols (104)	16%	14%	9%	23%	38%
101-250 vols (160)	6%	12%	15%	18%	50%
251-500 (119)	11%	7%	13%	16%	54%
Over 500 vols (225)	3%	7%	6%	10%	74%
COUNT (884)	135	101	98	134	416
% of total	15%	11%	11%	15%	47%

As can be seen in Table 2, most respondents were affiliated with organizations engaging over 500 volunteers and over 50 salaried FTEs. The responses from smaller organizations were well-distributed across the smaller categories.

This suggests that the segmentation cutoffs selected divided the respondents from smaller organizations well, and indicates a need for more categories on the larger end of the scale in future studies.

Table 2. Number of Volunteers Engaged by Number of Salaried FTEs

	Number of Salaried FTEs					
	0	1-3	4-10	11-20	21-50	Over 50
0-25 vols	29%	31%	16%	9%	7%	9%
26-50 vols	18%	26%	20%	9%	13%	15%
51-100 vols	7%	25%	22%	12%	13%	21%
101-250 vols	5%	20%	23%	12%	16%	25%
251-500 vols	8%	19%	18%	11%	12%	33%
Over 500 vols	2%	9%	16%	4%	12%	58%
Total	11%	20%	19%	9%	12%	30%

Challenges overall

The core of the survey focused on the central challenges experienced in volunteer resource management. As indicated in the table that follows, a broad array of potential responses was offered. The issues included both recruitment- and retention-focused questions to gain a sense of the weighting of issues in these two areas in practice. Respondents were asked to select up to three of the challenges listed.

Table 3. Top 3 Identified Challenges Overall

What are your greatest challenges in working with volunteers? (Select up to three):

1	Developing a wide range of meaningful roles for volunteers with limited schedules
2	Interviewing and screening volunteers
3	Finding good service opportunities for the volunteers we have
4	Recruiting a sufficient number of qualified volunteers
5	Recruiting a diverse volunteer corps
6	Managing more volunteers than we know what to do with
7	Finding volunteers with the 'right' skills and talents for our organization
8	Training and supervising volunteers
9	Performing criminal reference or other background checks on prospective volunteers
10	Managing volunteers/staff relations issues
11	Securing reliable participation from volunteers
12	Dealing with low or poor volunteer performance

13 Collecting data to demonstrate the value of our volunteer initiatives

14 Training our staff to work effectively with volunteers

15 Funding our volunteer program

Some respondents selected fewer or more than three challenges. The results below include all of the respondents' selections weighted equally, regardless of the number of challenges the respondent selected. The three most common responses to the question, "What are your greatest challenges in working with volunteers?" are provided in Table 4.

Table 4. Top 3 Identified Challenges

What are your greatest challenges in working with volunteers?

Developing a wide range of meaningful roles for volunteers with limited schedules	38%
Recruiting a sufficient number of volunteers	34%
Finding volunteers with the right skills for our organization	32%

These findings indicate that volunteer resource management issues focus on both supply and demand—finding and matching volunteers with meaningful opportunities that suit their schedules and skillsets present ongoing challenges.

Challenges by organizational size and respondent group

As previously discussed, we measured "size" through three different scoping variables: number of FTEs, total budget, and total number of volunteers engaged. We then analyzed the responses about key volunteer management challenges

through independent t-tests, comparing those respondents who identified a given issue as a key challenge against the

remainder of the respondents. These findings are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Top Challenges by Organizational Size as Measured by Budget, Number of FTEs, and Number of Volunteers Engaged			
	Budget	FTEs	Vols
Training our staff to work effectively with volunteers	***	***	***
Recruiting a sufficient number of volunteers	***	***	***
Managing volunteers/staff relations issues	**	***	**
Recruiting a diverse volunteer corps	**	**	***

This analysis indicated that training staff to work effectively with volunteers is a significant challenge to larger organizations, as measured by all three metrics (number of FTEs, organizational budget, and number of volunteers engaged). The difference is most pronounced when measuring organizational size by number of employees, although it is statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level (***) for all three scoping metrics.

Recruiting a sufficient number of qualified volunteers is a bigger challenge for smaller organizations, as measured by all three scoping metrics, than for their larger counterparts. The gap is largest when measuring organization size by the number of volunteers engaged, though the finding is statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level (***) for all three scoping metrics.

Managing volunteer / staff relations is a greater challenge for larger organizations. This result is significant at the $p < 0.01$ (**) level for all three scoping metrics and is most pronounced when measuring organizations by number of FTEs by which metric it is significant at the $p < 0.001$ (***) level.

Recruiting a diverse volunteer corps is a greater challenge for larger organizations by all three scoping metrics at the $p < 0.01$ level (**), though the difference is most pronounced for organizations engaging more volunteers; for this scoping metric, the finding was significant at the $p < 0.001$ (***) level.

We also conducted a preliminary analysis to see whether the list of top challenges was different by respondent group (nonprofit staff, educators, students, volunteers). Due to the lack of previous applicable studies, we operated from a hypothesis that there would be no differences between these groups. Overall, we discovered that nonprofit staff members have different views from educators and students and that volunteers agree with each group on some challenges. Nonprofit staff focused on challenges around recruitment, retention, and support of volunteer programs. Volunteers were interested in working with a sufficient number of reliable fellow volunteers. The numbers of responses from educators (168) and students

(61) were smaller and will be examined in future research.

Discussion

Determining how to sculpt an experience that will be meaningful both for the volunteer and the organization within the constraints of the nonprofit's schedule and the volunteer's schedule represents a critical challenge to nonprofit organizations of all sizes and has implications for both recruitment and retention. While recruiting a sufficient quantity of volunteers was a higher priority for smaller organizations, it was still a key challenge for more than a third of the respondents. Regardless of size, finding enough volunteers is an issue for most nonprofit organizations. Skill-specific recruiting is a more central issue for smaller organizations, but nearly one out of every three respondents viewed this as a critical challenge: our findings show that this is a key issue even at larger nonprofit organizations.

Two of our four findings around organizational size involved the relationship between volunteers and paid staff. The challenge upon which large and small organizations differed most was the challenge of training staff to work with volunteers effectively. For larger organizations, especially as measured by number of employees, this training is a vital issue. The importance of training is echoed by a third finding focused on the challenge of managing relationships between paid staff and volunteers. Large organizations may be able to mitigate the challenge of managing these relationships by addressing the need for training for both volunteers and paid staff.

Our other two differences in challenges based on organizational size involve recruitment. The findings suggest that smaller organizations focus on quantity, while larger organizations focus on

diversity. This seems a logical progression: as an organization gains the ability to recruit and retain a sufficient number of volunteers, the next challenge is to target the specific traits they seek when searching for volunteers. Recruitment of volunteers with specific skills was also a more important challenge for smaller organizations as measured by budget and by number of paid staff, though the finding was not as statistically significant as the results summarized above. This also seems logical: in an organization using a handful of volunteers, the loss of a single volunteer would diminish the volunteer workforce by a far greater fraction than in an organization with hundreds of engaged volunteers. Recruiting a diverse volunteer corps was a bigger challenge for to organizations using larger numbers of volunteers than to smaller organizations. We posit that larger organizations may have a greater capacity to target certain groups, while smaller organizations may be less adept at this form of recruitment. These findings suggest that volunteer recruitment may follow a hierarchy of need reminiscent of Maslow (1943): first, we find enough volunteers, then we worry about finding the right volunteers.

Finally, though we were pleased to see that larger organizations engage more volunteers, we recognize that these larger organizations were more likely to utilize a sufficiently large volunteer population to cause volunteer resource management to be a relevant concern for one or more staff members. As a result, larger organizations were more likely to have staff engaged enough in volunteer resource management to be actively seeking resources such as the complimentary copy of the volunteer management guide to support their work. As a result, we are hesitant to assume that our findings are reflective of the industry as a

whole; rather, this may be an example of the bias of our sample.

Limitations and Areas for Future Study

In a future study, we would include additional larger categories for the number of volunteers, the number of FTE staff, and organization budget. Almost half of our respondents worked for organizations with annual budgets over \$750,000, our highest delimiter, and most worked in organizations with more than 50 staff and more than 500 volunteers. As a result, we lost some granularity in our analysis. The break points for number of FTEs and number of volunteers engaged, however, yielded much smoother distributions of respondents.

When examining the relationship between number of volunteers and number of FTEs, we found that organizations utilizing volunteers seem to have between 5-10 volunteers per FTE on average. This is a very rough approximation, but appears to be supported by our data. This is another area in which further research would be appropriate and welcomed. We also suggest that further testing on the overall correlation of budget size relative to number of volunteers utilized would be an intriguing addition to the field.

Given that the selection of respondents was based on the promotion of the *Strategic Volunteer Engagement Guide*, there was likely a bias towards people who were already interested in volunteer resource management issues or who were connected to someone with an interest in volunteer resource management who shared the link with them.

For all three scoping metrics (budget, number of FTEs, and number of volunteers engaged) the assumption of equal variance was violated for respondents who stated that “finding good opportunities for our current volunteers” was a key challenge. This suggests that the respondents who see this as

a key challenge are different from the bulk of the respondents in some statistically recognizable way. Identifying this difference is left to future research projects.

Conclusion

In this study, we sought to identify key challenges in volunteer resource management across a spectrum of nonprofit organizations. Additionally, we took a preliminary look at how challenges vary across nonprofit organizations of different sizes that work with varying numbers of volunteers. This information will serve to inform the work of volunteer resource managers, support the efforts of intermediaries such as nonprofit capacity building and volunteer resource organizations, aid researchers exploring volunteer engagement, and help funders and grantmakers better understand some of the challenges faced by grantee organizations.

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Margaret Moore has balanced an interest in social benefit with a passion for rapidly evolving organizations throughout her career. After graduating from Harvard-Radcliffe College, she began her career at Trilogy Software in Austin, where she caught start-up fever. Moore has co-founded four firms and has advised several others through both the start-up and acquisition processes. She received her MBA from the McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. within the School of Social Work at the University of Texas at Austin.

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nonprofit organizations; explored capacity building issues, and other programs germane to volunteerism and the nonprofit sector. Rehnborg is also an experienced practitioner in the field of volunteerism having initiated a volunteer services and community education program in a health care facility. She also served as President of the Association for Volunteer Administration. Rehnborg received her undergraduate degree from Denison University and her Masters and Ph.D. from the University of Pittsburgh.