

***A Review of Transforming Museum Volunteering:
A Practical Guide for Engaging 21st Century Volunteers***

By Ellen Hirzy (for the American Association for Museum Volunteers)

Author House, Bloomington, IN, 2007. 122 pages. \$35.

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Reviewed by Nancy Macduff

Ellen Hirzy's book is a practical guide to managing volunteers in the museum setting, and is perfect reading for professional volunteer resource managers, volunteers who lead other volunteers, and paid staff who work with volunteers. The aim of the author is to encourage new thinking about engaging volunteers while preserving traditional positions common in museums with large sophisticated programs and small all-volunteer operations.

The book begins with a quick but well referenced chapter on why include volunteers in museum programs, what those volunteers can expect, and how things are changing. There are statistics mixed with opinions from those who actually administer museums along with a brief review of things to do to organize volunteer engagement, i.e. planning, purpose statements, job descriptions, policy handbooks, etc.

At the end of this first (and all subsequent) chapter, the author includes a list of questions titled "Food for Thought." The questions are designed to have readers assess the elements of their museum volunteer programs that have been covered in the chapter. "Have we faced situations that a policy statement would have helped resolve?" is an example of one such question.

Succeeding chapters in the book outline the infrastructure essential to creating and maintaining volunteer programs in a museum setting. Readers are urged to create an infrastructure that includes planning, job design, volunteer policies and procedures, and how to create information

systems. There is an especially useful list of tips for establishing and maintaining a teen volunteer program in a museum (page 23).

For those building a case to hire a manager of volunteer programs in a museum setting, Chapter 3: Management Matters provides everything from statistics to roles and responsibilities of those who staff volunteer programs. There are strategies to engage other staff in supervising the work of volunteers and to transition from unpaid to paid leadership. One Food for Thought question is especially poignant: "What works best about volunteer-relationships? What needs improvement?"

Chapters 4 through 7 provide practical information on building an actual infrastructure for a successful museum volunteer program. These infrastructure chapters are full of helpful tips, hints, and resources for the reader just beginning a volunteer program or for the experienced reader. The "Food For Thought" questions at the end of each chapter could be used as the foundation of an evaluation of the volunteer program. Recruitment, screening (applications, background checks, interviewing), and placement strategies and approaches are outlined in Chapter 4, and there is short discussion on when it is appropriate to turn a volunteer away. Chapter 5 addresses training and covers fundamentals of adult learning and establishing an environment, and includes a section on how to train volunteers with a "visitor" centered message. Techniques for supporting, retaining, and recognizing volunteers are contained in a Chapter 6 titled

“Beyond Pins and Parties.” The author makes the point that recognition begins with knowing the volunteers name and moves from there to outlining informal and formal ways to acknowledge the work of volunteers. While an element of the successful volunteer program frequently omitted in practice is the evaluation, the author recommends and provides strategies for evaluating programs, volunteer performance and satisfaction, and what to do with the results (Chapter 7).

A short Chapter 8 on risk management provides definitions and how certain elements of the volunteer program are risk reducers. This chapter seems to be intended as an introduction to the concept of managing risk rather than a comprehensive guide to risk management. The final Chapter 9 gazes into the future and asks the reader to consider such things as the “revolution” in the retirement of the baby boom generation and what that means for volunteer program, the increasing desire of people for episodic volunteer tasks, and how organizations need to get better at asking volunteers what they

want to do, rather than dictating what they can do.

The final section of the book is 25 pages devoted to lists of resources and samples, and this section alone should make this book a must-read for anyone running a museum volunteer program. The “Toolkit” (p. 80) begins a series of practical documents and forms actually used by museums. There are position descriptions for actual volunteer positions in museums from Oregon to Boston and range from children’s museums to science museums. There are sample policies and procedures, application forms, and volunteer agreements, as well as contact information for the museums that so generously contributed materials.

This book is aimed directly at a niche area of the volunteer world - the museum. It delivers on the promise of providing a tool to help the manager of volunteer programs carry out his/her duties, whether volunteer or paid staff. I have it on my bookshelf, and you should, too.

About the Reviewer

Nancy Macduff is a trainer and consultant on volunteerism, based in Washington State. Her clients over the years have included several museums and arts organizations. She is the author of several books on volunteer management, the most recent being *Volunteer Training: A Short Course* (2009). Nancy is publisher/editor of *Volunteer Today*, the free online newsletter for volunteer managers, and teaches online classes on the management of volunteer programs for Portland State University in Portland, Oregon.