

## **Making the Case for Volunteer Resource Management: Strategies for Professional Advocacy**

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### **Abstract**

*Of all the standard professional roles and responsibilities in the world of doing good, one of the least valued and understood is that of volunteer resource management (VRM). Often considered a task both easy and quick, the reality is that volunteer resource management is a highly skilled, time and resource intensive profession that is genuinely fundamental to the success of volunteer programs. The author outlines five key strategies for volunteer resource managers to engage in as routine methods of professional advocacy.*

### **Keywords:**

advocacy, volunteer resource management, volunteer resource managers, professionalism

### **Introduction**

Of all of the standard professional roles and responsibilities in the world of doing good, one of the least valued and understood is that of volunteer resource management (VRM). Reinforced by such pervasive myths as “volunteers will just show up” and “volunteers can manage themselves,” volunteer resource management is often considered to be a task that is both easy and quick, something that can be done in addition to one’s already busy professional agenda. In turn, this misconception spawns yet another set of myths specific to the field itself, including “anyone can manage volunteers,” and, perhaps most detrimental of all, “hiring staff to do volunteer management is a luxury we just can’t afford.”

In reality, volunteer resource management is a highly skilled, time and resource intensive profession that is genuinely fundamental to the success of a volunteer program. Where volunteer

resource management is lacking, volunteers often fall between the cracks of already busy organizations and are either left to fend for themselves or forgotten altogether. And a volunteer who doesn’t feel valued or engaged is a volunteer who is most likely to leave, taking with them the energy and time they had intended to contribute towards the organization’s mission as well as, potentially, ill will, the equivalent of negative public relations.

While this has been an understood reality of practitioners in the field for many years, it is only relatively recently that research has emerged to support these claims. For example, a 1998 study by the United Parcel Service (UPS) found that 40% of respondents stopped volunteering at an organization due to poor volunteer management. More recently, the Urban Institute (2004) found that utilizing volunteer resource management best practices, including committing resources to paid volunteer management staff positions,

was positively related to the organization's capacity to engage more volunteers and, in fact, led to a positive reciprocal relationship between investing in volunteer resource management and deriving benefits from a healthy volunteer program. Given that volunteer resource management is so pivotal to the success of a volunteer program, and so many organizations rely on volunteers to make progress toward their missions (the Urban Institute [2004] found that four out of five charities sought and engaged volunteers in 2000), the lack of recognition and investment in the profession is counterintuitive.

While there are myriad existing organizational and professional association efforts to raise visibility and shepherd a greater understanding of the impact of volunteer resource management as a field, one of the key strategies is for individual volunteer resource managers to engage in regular methods of professional advocacy. I propose five critical strategies that all volunteer resource managers should adopt and practice routinely so as to better educate both organizational peers and administrators, as well as the general public and volunteers, regarding the critical importance of our roles and profession.

### **Self Education**

The first, and perhaps easiest to access, professional advocacy strategy is self-education, where volunteer resource managers actively seek and engage in professional development opportunities, both to further develop their expertise as well as to strengthen the reputation of the holistic profession by demonstrating to peers and decision-makers that volunteer resource management is a profession that, like any other, takes skill development seriously.

Fortunately, there are a number of educational channels available to modern volunteer resource managers, ranging from

workshops and trainings offered by national conferences and local professional associations (e.g. Directors of Volunteers in Agencies, or DOVIAs) to university degree and certificate programs. For those looking for greater schedule flexibility or independent learning structures, as well as those lacking the budget needed to travel and/or attend on-the-ground trainings, there is an increasingly diverse pool of affordable and free training resources available online, including both web-based trainings (i.e., webinars) and a number of field texts, journals, and websites focusing upon emerging research, new resources and tools, and best practices.

Finally, another way to demonstrate skill development is to earn the CVA, or Certified Volunteer Administration, credential. Not only does a CVA further establish the expertise of the volunteer resource manager but, according to the Council for Certification in Volunteer Administration (2008), it also provides concrete benefits to the manager's total organization, including an enhancement of credibility via their demonstrated investment in professional volunteer management.

### **Communication with Decision-Makers**

A second strategy for professional advocacy is to ensure regular communications with organizational supervisors and decision-makers. Going beyond simple progress reports, these communications – whether delivered through face-to-face meetings or in written formats like newsletters or email updates – should include an overview of the successes and challenges of both the volunteer program and the position of volunteer resource manager. Similarly, regular reports of volunteer program successes and impact should be distributed to staff peers and board members; the latter group is especially important given that they too are volunteers.

Helping staff, board members, and supervisors see the day-to-day impact of volunteers at the organization, as well as the role of the volunteer management staff person in facilitating these opportunities, is vital to increasing in-house recognition and understanding of the field (Safrit & Merrill, 1998).

At the same time, it is important to recognize that different audiences respond to different results and the definition of impact can vary wildly. As such, volunteer resource managers should practice the art of translation when communicating volunteer program impacts in order to effectively reach different decision-making audiences. For example, some individuals respond most strongly to personal stories and anecdotes, relating best to the human element inherent to community engagement. Others seek more quantifiable results and would view impact more clearly were it delivered to them in terms of economics, whether it be the percentage of volunteers who have also become donors or a straightforward calculation of the financial value of a volunteer hour (Independent Sector, 2008), preferably personalized to the specific roles volunteers fill at their organization (Hawthorne, 2004). Still others view credible impact as statistical data (e.g. number of meals served) or public visibility (e.g. press clippings) while those who are more visual in nature might respond most strongly to a map of the neighborhoods and locations where volunteers live, work, go to school and worship, and volunteer with additional organizations, demonstrating the sheer scope of community impact their organization's volunteers represent.

### **Celebrating Successes**

Volunteer recognition is a standard volunteer management best practice (Safrit & Schmiesing, 2004) but recognition of volunteer resource management can be

ironically absent from our celebrations. Volunteer resource managers should not only share the success stories of individual volunteers but also the impact successes of the overall volunteer program itself, including positive feedback garnered from evaluation discussions with current and former volunteers and clientele. It is also vital that volunteer resource managers invite peers, supervisors, and board members to volunteer recognition events, an exceptional opportunity for face-to-face interactions with valued volunteers that further strengthen positive, synergistic volunteer-staff relationships. Finally, volunteer resource managers should take advantage of public events like International Volunteer Manager Appreciation Day ([www.ivmaday.org](http://www.ivmaday.org)) to help educate colleagues regarding the profession in its global context.

### **Networking**

The work of professional advocacy can be done on an individual level but, like most change efforts, is most effective when conducted via collective action. For volunteer resource managers, this means actively networking with their peers toward a shared vision (Safrit & Merrill, 1999). Not only does this provide individuals with the opportunity to exchange ideas and innovations but, in a field that is often isolated and undervalued, it also creates a professional community of support to address shared challenges and leverage collective knowledge. Similarly, professional associations at the national and international levels often provide leadership to advocacy and policy work yet, as is true of most associations, are only as powerful as their individual members.

At the same time, volunteer resource managers should consider networking outside of their peer circles, connecting and collaborating with other organizations and

professionals by serving on boards, attending local meetings, convening roundtables, and playing an active role in community initiatives. This will not only broaden professional networks but also further demonstrate to supervisors and decision-makers the individual's leadership potential and commitment to greater community visibility for the organization and its volunteer program.

### **Expanding – and Accepting – Roles**

The final strategic area for professional advocacy involves the volunteer resource manager stepping outside of the traditional volunteer management role and taking on broader responsibilities within their organization. For example, while it is a standard activity for volunteer resource managers to explore areas within the organization where volunteers can get involved, it is a larger task for them to engage in personal and professional development in order to more fully understand those areas of work; one example might be the volunteer resource manager who learns more about fundraising and marketing in order to more effectively and innovatively understand how volunteers might be engaged in these efforts. This not only creates more diverse options for volunteers to help further the organization's mission, but also provides the volunteer resource manager with the tools and knowledge needed to play a larger role in organizational decision-making.

Indeed, armed with a greater understanding of how the organization engages in such activities as marketing, public relations, and development, the volunteer resource manager will be better prepared to seek presence at the larger management table, playing a more significant role in the total resource management of the organization (as demonstrated in Stallings, 2005).

And while the greatest thrust of increasing recognition of volunteer resource management as a profession tends to focus on educating peers and decision-makers, there is also greater articulation required within the field. Specifically, while some volunteer resource managers may shy away from the title, it is important that all who engage in the work of managing volunteer programs accept and embrace the title of "expert", because those who do the work of volunteer resource management are truly *the* volunteer engagement experts in their organization. Demonstrating this expertise by offering in-house workshops and trainings for staff colleagues, or calling attention to interesting and relevant research and best practices, further establishes the value volunteer resource managers bring to the organization as a whole as well as provides both a leadership opportunity for the manager of volunteers and a professional development opportunity for their peers (Cravens & Cowlings, 2007).

Finally, Cravens and Cowlings recommended that volunteer resource managers play a role in *all* levels of volunteer engagement in their organization, from board recruitment to student internships, to individuals or organizations engaged in pro bono and skilled projects. While it may not be appropriate for the volunteer resource manager to oversee every volunteer's position – nor should they necessarily attempt to wrest management away from their colleagues – it is vital that volunteer resource managers be involved in some way, whether it be as basic as tracking volunteer information and statistics or a more dynamic partnership of shared best practices and story collection. One wouldn't expect that hiring would take place without human resources staff involvement; the same should be true of volunteer engagement.

## Conclusion

As all who choose the work of doing good in the world know, change takes time. The myths of volunteer management – “volunteers can manage themselves,” “anyone can manage volunteers” – are widespread and have a decades-long stronghold on popular perception. However, as demonstrated by recent research by the likes of the Urban Institute (2004) and Stallings (2005), the tides of recognition are slowly shifting. By proactively accepting responsibility for daily acts of professional advocacy, volunteer resource managers can slowly but surely demonstrate to others what the field has long known: the work of engaging volunteers is challenging, highly skilled, time intensive, and, finally, infinitely rewarding.

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**About the Author**

Erin Barnhart is the Manager of Volunteerism Initiatives at Action Without Borders/Idealist.org, providing advocacy and support to volunteer management professionals worldwide and facilitating access to and awareness of global volunteer opportunities. An AmeriCorps\*NCCC alum, Ms. Barnhart earned an MPA in Public Policy and a Graduate Certificate in Not-for-Profit Management from the University of Oregon in 2004. She then studied volunteer centers in British Columbia and the Yukon on a Fulbright Scholarship to Canada. In 2005, Ms Barnhart began work on a Ph.D. in Urban Studies at Portland State University, joining Idealist.org in 2006. This Commentary expands greatly upon original ideas developed by the author and first published on her organization's web page.