

Episodic Volunteers . . . A Fleeting Species?

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Abstract

The episodic volunteer may be considered a "fleeting species," i.e., here today and gone tomorrow. This commentary suggests that more intentional management of episodic volunteers can pay benefits to the volunteer resource manager. The author explores three problem areas that hamper and impede the effective engagement of short-service episodic volunteers in some programs: 1. Resources; 2. Running parallel programs for episodic volunteers; and, 3. Applied research.

Key Words:

episodic volunteer, resource development, parallel programs, applied research

Introduction

The episodic volunteer is somewhat like the butterfly – fleeting. . . here today and gone tomorrow. There is a cosmic connection between the fleeting beauty and utility of the butterfly and the episodic volunteer. Butterflies come in more than 120,000 varieties and are intrinsic to our world, an often-overlooked fact (Butterfly and Moth World, 2008). The butterfly is a plant pollinator and food for other animals in the larger ecological chain (e.g., birds, mammals, spiders, and other insects). Perhaps one of their most important functions, however, is as an early detection system for changes in the surrounding environment, warning of unhealthy conditions.

Episodic volunteers fill similar functions. Their short-term service often "pollinates" others to engage in volunteering. One person shows up for a short service assignment and tells his/her friends. "Fruit", in the form of new volunteers, is created by that single episodic experience. The episodic volunteer is not

necessarily "food" for other volunteers (or professional staff!) but may often be the grist for a larger endeavor. Long-term service volunteers provide the stability for a program while episodic volunteers aid in ways that add to the "nourishment" of the client being served. Imagine a large fund raising event without scores of volunteers who contribute 4-hour shifts, but nothing else.

Episodic volunteers also bring in new ideas and opinions which, if listened to, may serve as a barometer of the holistic health of the sponsoring volunteer program or agency. This can be likened to an early warning system, again like the butterfly. A program that organizes strategically to engage short-term volunteers has likely learned how to be more effective in recruiting and managing both episodic and ongoing volunteers.

Butterfly experts and scientists, known as lepidopterists, know everything there is to know about the butterfly: what plants and flowers appeal to them, how they are nourished and grow, where they like to

live and work, and what discourages them from a particular plant, site, or environment. Lepidopterists do so by actively and aggressively seeking out and cultivating appropriate resources and opportunities for research involving observing, tracking, and monitoring butterflies, both as an overall insect order as well as for specific butterfly species.

Why is it then that managers of volunteer resources often seem to know so very little about their own “fleeting” population of episodic volunteers? More than one volunteer resource manager (VRM) has told me that s/he refuses to waste scarce organizational resources and time learning how to better attract volunteers who only want to volunteer for a few hours rather than on an ongoing basis.

Even if they wanted to nurture and attract episodic volunteers, managers of volunteer programs often cannot locate contemporary valid and reliable research on the topic of episodic volunteering. Empirical studies on episodic volunteering are few and far between. Two notable examples have been conducted, one in the 1990’s and another in 2003, conducted as part of a larger study for the Flemish Red Cross (Hustinix & Lammertyn, 2003; Weber, 2002).

Volunteer resource managers (VRM’s), like their professional Lepidopterist colleagues, need to know much more about the episodic volunteer “species” in the volunteer program’s immediate surroundings in order to more effectively recruit and engage them in meaningful volunteer service. But, what is it that keeps VRM’s from more effectively recruiting and engaging the “fleeting” episodic volunteer “species”? I would suggest that the answer is three fold: 1. Resources; 2. Running a parallel program; and 3. Research.

Resources

There are few resources available that describe how to create a structure for an episodic volunteer program. In *Episodic Volunteering: Organizing and Managing the Short-Term Volunteer* (Macduff, 2004), I first suggested the establishment of parallel programs for episodic and long-term service volunteers. This is by no means the only effective model available for engaging episodic volunteers. More recent publications such as *Boomer Volunteer Engagement: Collaborate Today, Thrive Tomorrow* (Friedman-Fixler & Eichberg, 2008) also suggest new language and strategies to attract baby boomers as volunteers, many of whom are interested in short (i.e., episodic) volunteer assignments. While the overall aim of the book is to engage baby boomers in long-term traditional service, and the authors plead for flexibility in scheduling, the recruiting and engagement suggestions are modern variations on what has been touted for decades as the most effective way to engage volunteers (i.e., written position descriptions, interviews, support, and retention).

Unfortunately, the hapless VRM is most often left to his/her own devices to figure out how to best organize for the short-service volunteer. Consistently, s/he finds herself/himself asking rhetoric questions: “Do I develop screening tools?” (i.e., Do we need to screen someone who only is there for 4- 8 hours of service?); “What would a training program look like?” (i.e., Does everyone need to attend the 4-hour orientation?); “What about awards and recognition?” (i.e., Let’s just give everyone certificates).

However, there are VRM’s who are creating new resources to recruit and engage episodic volunteers by adapting traditional volunteer programs or running a parallel program. As an example, the VRM for the

Paso Robles Library conducts routine assessments of staff for volunteer jobs or tasks that would require no more than 2-4 hours, with none lasting longer than one month (Robitaille, 2008). The VRM then posts those volunteer opportunities to a special page on the library web site devoted to “express” jobs available to people interested in short-term assignments. Thus, the recruitment for episodic volunteers operates as a parallel program that is integrated into that of the overall program of engaging volunteers in service to the library.

The Parallel Program

A 2004 report on volunteerism in the United States (Urban Institute, 2004) concluded that few VRM positions were full-time jobs, with only one in eight having such a full-time assignment. Thus, the notion of creating a separate yet parallel management infrastructure for episodic volunteers is fairly unlikely based on the availability of the VRM’s time. The 2004 study identified challenges of working with traditional long-service volunteers, and it is a daunting list including resistance on the part of paid staff or board members to involve volunteers; regulatory, legal, or liability constraints; absenteeism, unreliability, or poor work habits by volunteers; recruiting volunteers with the right skills or expertise; lack of paid staff time to train and supervise volunteers; recruiting sufficient numbers of volunteers, and lacking funds to support volunteers. If these are the litany of problems in running a single program for traditional volunteers, is it any wonder that VRM’s resist organizing and sustaining yet another parallel system for episodic volunteers. An effective parallel program for episodic volunteers would require establishing new record keeping systems, developing different recruiting tools and alternative screening policies, etc. All of this would have to be done for the

volunteer who stays for only a few hours or a few weeks, and it seems like simply too much work for too little return on investment.

Research

Given the lack of resources and time to establish a systematic program to engage episodic volunteers, it seems clear that conducting research is the furthest thing from the minds of most VRM’s. In most cases it is enough to know that 200 people provided some type of volunteer service during a year.

The problem with this thinking is that episodic volunteering is not going to go away; rather, it is a growing part of the contemporary volunteerism phenomenon. The more we know about episodic volunteerism, the more effective the resulting engagement will be on both sides of the partnership (i.e., the individual volunteer and the organization.) Perhaps a good experience by an episodic volunteer will result in a future long-term volunteer.

Some VRM’s are conducting research to get a better handle on this “fleeting” volunteer work force. Marie Tucker, a hospital-based Director of Volunteer Services, was interested in her attrition levels (Tucker, 2008). She questioned how many volunteers left the program in a year and why? In a flash of insight she realized that everyone (episodic volunteers, drop-ins, interns, community service volunteers, etc.) was being measured by the standard of the traditional long term volunteer. That method skewed the accuracy of her attrition numbers.

Tucker set out to create a new database to see if people completed their commitment, whether episodic or long term. If a community service volunteer (i.e., mandated volunteering, often by courts) agreed to 100 hours of service, did s/he complete the 100 hours? If s/he did, then

that meant 100% completion of agreed-upon time had been served. Her database is set up to monitor the agreed-upon time-to-serve for all volunteers, with the actual time served being recorded. The resulting attrition level is based on what the individual agreed to initially and is a more accurate reflection of the actual attrition rate. Another focus of her research was those who left before their service was complete. Now, exit interviews are helping her build a knowledge base to attract and retain all types of volunteers. This is just another example of a VRM inventing it as she goes, using applied yet empirical research to guide her policy and practice.

Another VRM tracked conversion rates from episodic volunteers to long term continuous service. Tim Deegan (2008), coordinator of volunteers at a large urban art museum, recruited episodic volunteers specifically for two events: 1) a special exhibit of great public interest and 2) the opening of a new wing of the museum. His conversion rates from episodic to long-term volunteers were 50% from the special exhibit, and 80% from the wing opening. These types of statistics in reports to administration can help the case for funding and resources allocation to develop the intentional program to engage the short-term volunteer. They also establish benchmarks against which future efforts can be measured.

In Closing

Returning to our butterfly metaphor, the world at large has done much to preserve butterfly habitats across the globe. People plant butterfly-friendly flowers and plants at their home and public gardens. Researchers follow the trajectory of migrating butterflies in ultralight aircraft. Habitat destruction has been reduced. Developing new resources, planning an intentional and conscientious conservation program, and conducting

applied empirical research have helped Lepidopterists and conservationists prevent many species of butterfly from becoming extinct.

Managers of volunteer resources, collectively, are not there yet. Some are tackling this new species of volunteer with inventiveness and creativity, while others are ignoring the episodic volunteer completely, hoping the desire to contribute service in this format will disappear and the days of traditional volunteering will return. Perhaps we need to take a cue from our professional colleagues in the world of butterflies and become more serious, intentional and dedicated in our recruitment and engagement of the “butterfly” species we call the episodic volunteer.

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About the Author

Nancy Macduff is a teacher, trainer, and consultant on the management of volunteers, with 20+ years experience managing volunteers prior to her teaching role. She is the author of *Episodic Volunteering: Organizing and Managing the Short-Term Volunteer Program*, and numerous other textbooks and journal articles, and teaches management of volunteer courses for Portland State University's Institute for Nonprofit Management. She is the co-chair of the Environmental Sustainability Committee for the Episcopal Diocese of Eastern Washington and Northern Idaho, and Program Chair of the Practicum section of the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA).