

# USING VOLUNTEERS

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Interactive technology is a new field for volunteer involvement. It offers exciting and rewarding opportunities for volunteers but, because the idea – and even more so the actuality – is so far not widely known or demonstrable, there must be doubts about whether volunteers will be forthcoming. This leads to the temptation to go for a policy – if it can be dignified as such – of involving whoever comes along and deciding what they'll do when it is seen what they offer. This is a counsel of desperation and a recipe for disaster.

It has never been impossible to recruit volunteers, though obviously it may be harder for some tasks than others. And in a field where potential recruits are vague about the opportunities offered, it is important that those who do know are clear and explicit about what kind of volunteers they want to attract and what work the volunteers will be doing. So advance planning is essential – that is, a consideration of the questions that volunteers will raise and a preparation for their reception.

We assume that one person will take the lead on volunteer involvement: we will refer to him/her as the co-ordinator.

In preparation:

- Decide on the areas of work that volunteers will appropriately be involved in, and not just those which are hard to cover.
- Let the paid staff know that volunteers will be used and seek their agreement. Begin to work out relationships between paid and volunteer staff. Assure paid staff that volunteers are not going to take the interesting and

satisfying bits of anyone's job nor create unplanned extra work. There may need to be formal agreement with trades unions as well (4).

- Consider and commit the necessary resources: money for expenses and insurance, staff time for induction, management and training, space for volunteers to work and so on.

In such a new field there is little point in trying to list here all the tasks that volunteers might undertake. Some guidance does come from the survey of volunteers in museums and galleries that the Volunteer Centre undertook, sponsored by the Museums and Galleries Commission and the Office of Arts and Libraries (6). Types of work that volunteers were doing were categorised as: finds processing; excavation/field work; conservation/restoration; cataloguing/documentation; research; display/committees; running the museum; curatorial training. The circumstances of science and technology centres will suggest that a number of these activities have to be, or will most effectively be undertaken by volunteers; and doubtless the scope of available activities will be enlarged.

The crucial thing is to be clear about what the volunteers will be doing for the organisation's immediate purposes. It is worth while compiling job descriptions for volunteers with as much clarity and detail as for paid staff – this process is a useful discipline and will suggest to the co-ordinator and to potential volunteers what kind of people and qualifications are being sought. For instance, if volunteers are to be around to talk with visitors about the exhibits, they can be trained in the necessary information and understanding of the purpose etc of the exhibits but they need to be approachable, helpful and not bossy, particularly with children.

It's worth also thinking who would not be appropriate: for example, can volunteers with some physical disabilities be accommodated? What minimum time commitment is acceptable and at what times of the day? Will it be possible to reimburse travel expenses if necessary? Would young people be welcome?

This work forms the basis for recruitment – but it is wise to delay 'going public' until volunteers can be accepted to start work as far as possible immediately. Volunteers will drift away if kept on waiting lists.

## **Finding the right people**

Generally speaking, there are two maxims for planning recruitment publicity: attract the right people, and no more of them than can be coped with. To be successful it is vital to

remember that your appeal for volunteers should be limited by being *exact* about who is wanted. Having to turn down a lot of unsuitable applicants can make for bad publicity, besides causing unnecessary work, and is a disappointment to potential volunteers. Finally, always make sure that would-be volunteers are clearly told who they should contact and where.

Bearing the above in mind there are several potential sources of volunteers you could try:

- Volunteer Bureaux act as a volunteers' 'job shop' and if there is one locally it is worth meeting the organiser to explain the type of volunteer work being offered and to take his/her advice about such things as designing posters, what information they should carry and where they might be displayed, and the possible use of local newspaper and radio. The organiser will then suggest this kind of voluntary activity to people that he/she thinks may be suitable (5).
- Volunteer Bureaux are not universal; in their absence people may seek information about volunteer work from the local Citizens' Advice Bureau.
- Also it is worth thinking about the places that the kind of people envisaged are likely to be found, not necessarily as volunteers. So public libraries, adult education centres, clubs and societies with related interests are likely to be useful recruiting grounds, by means of posters, letters to secretaries, perhaps even an offer to speak, as appropriate.
- Local newspapers and radio will often take material in an interesting form.
- Word of mouth recruitment, of friends of staff or of existing volunteers, is probably the easiest and often most successful means of attracting recruits, but it may have its pitfalls. It is far harder to turn down volunteers introduced in this way; and they may, in fact, have less understanding of the work and objectives of the organisation than expected.

### **Selecting your volunteers**

All potential volunteers should fill in an application form and be interviewed, at least by the co-ordinator and the person who will be responsible for their work. Interviews should be seen as a means for each side to get to know the other and what is being offered. Whether the interview is based on a completed application form – as most paid job interviews are – or whether the form is filled in afterwards by the volunteer –

which provides him/her with one face-saving means of opting out – is a matter of choice.

The application form must obviously collect the necessary basic information – name, address, phone number, hours available, etc – needed for administrative records. It is strongly advised that references are sought and taken up, and the interviewer may need to give advice on appropriate referees, especially if the volunteer is unemployed (generally anyone over 18 and not immediate family is acceptable). Depending on what work the volunteer will be doing, there might be further questions and checks on health, driving record and/or criminal record. For more detailed advice on recruitment and selection see 'Take Care' (2).

It is worth noting that few genuine volunteers are put off by such procedures; on the contrary, they serve to reassure the volunteer that the work is worth while and the organisation cares about who does it and how well.

### **Your relationship with the volunteer**

To volunteers, as to paid workers, reassurance is at the root of job satisfaction. So support – which is to volunteers what management is to paid staff – should aim to keep the volunteers' motivation by demonstrating appreciation of the value of the work done, helping to overcome problems, while relating to the well-being and work of the individual and the objectives of the organisation.

Practical elements of support include:

- Provision for re-imburement of expenses, if at all possible. Why should the volunteer have to pay for helping the organisation unless he/she chooses?
- The organisation has obligations under Health and Safety laws which apply to volunteers as to paid staff. Adequate insurance is needed to protect the organisation from claims arising from the volunteers' activities and the volunteer from the consequences of accidents. See 'Protecting Volunteers' (3).
- If the volunteer is a driver using his/her own car, this must be within the terms of the existing car insurance – and it is wise to check with the insurer that this is so – or covered, including protection of no-claims bonuses, by insurance taken out by the organisation. See Information Sheet 10 (1).

Support should also be given in ways which are sensitive to the volunteer's motivation and circumstances:

- Some people take up volunteer work as a means of testing or gaining experience in fields of work in which they hope to get paid work or further training, so they will be among those looking for 'career development'. In contrast, other people look to their volunteer activity to provide a contrast with their other work, and so look for tasks which they enjoy doing without expecting or wanting wider experience which might seem to be consummate with their abilities. Some need encouragement to develop their potential – others may need to be restrained.
- People doing work, whether paid or voluntary, respond well to praise. But the individual has to feel that the praise and thanks are merited for it to be meaningful and that, if justified, constructive criticism would be made. Nothing is so demeaning as to be told, actually or by implication: 'It doesn't matter what you do because you are only a volunteer'.

Depending upon the size and structure of the organisation, support for volunteers may be part of the duties of the co-ordinator, or it may be handed over to the member of staff or head of department with which the volunteer will be working. The important thing is that it should be clear to all concerned who it is; and the individual should take responsibility for being available to sort out problems, listen to ideas and so on. Other than in exceptional circumstances, support does not always need to be one-to-one; group meetings with volunteers provide effective mutual support and also the necessary continuity of policy and working practice among volunteers whose work is in the same or similar areas, but at different times.

There is a growing trend for organisations involving volunteers to develop some form of written contract – see Information Sheet 22 (1). The aim is not to produce a legally binding agreement – rather it is to set out the expectations and obligations of each party. Thus the tasks and the way in which the volunteer will undertake them and the time commitment made will be balanced by the organisation's commitment to provide training, insurance, payment of expenses and appropriate environment and tools for the work.

Such a contract provides the basis for informal assessment of the volunteer's work (and for writing references if asked); and also, if it became necessary, for redeployment or dismissal. Sacking anyone is a disagreeable process: with a volunteer it may be particularly damaging. But the damage

may be mitigated by having a standard against which judgments can be accepted – for example, it is very hard to make unreliability sound like anything other than an excuse if it has never been clear exactly when the volunteer was expected to attend or what he/she should do if unavoidably prevented from doing so.

Training for volunteers may need to be no more than a short induction course – and all volunteers should receive an introduction to the people with whom they will be working, the geography of the place, information about health and safety, how to claim expenses, whom to contact in case of difficulties and so on. It should have been explained to the volunteer if training is needed before starting work – and particularly if initial training is regarded as part of the selection process. It is generally true that volunteers are anxious to get involved – for this reason at least, training should relate to experience ‘on the job’ as much as possible.

If the volunteer’s involvement is simply as a fund raiser, much of the foregoing, obviously, will not apply – except insofar as responsibility for cash indicates that care should be taken. Some people are volunteers as members of the management committee. In that case, they are correctly the employers of paid staff and responsible for the direction of the organisation. However, working relationships can become blurred if, as often happens, management volunteers are also actively involved (as volunteers) in the work of the organisation. No solution has yet been found to the embarrassing situations that might arise as a result of this kind of dual relationship – but having thought-out policies as regards management of volunteers, including contracts, is the best form of insurance against them.

Involvement of volunteers is an aspect of public relations for any organisation. People talk about their voluntary work – especially if they find it rewarding and worth while. For organisations offering – as Interactive Technology Centres do – opportunities for volunteers to become active in a non-traditional field this is particularly the case. So the aim behind this advice and guidance, which is presumably the same aim of the organisation concerned, is that volunteers should enjoy their experience, and the organisation should benefit from their involvement.

### **Further information**

The Volunteer Centre, the national agency for volunteering and community involvement, offers advice, information and training for people working with volunteers. They are happy

to answer individual queries by letter or phone and also have a wide range of publications about working with volunteers. Those listed below enlarge on points made in this article. The first six are available from The Volunteer Centre, 29 Lower King's Road, Berkhamstead, Herts HP4 2AB. Tel: (04427) 73311. The first four can be obtained free on receipt of a stamped addressed (A5) envelope.

#### References

- 1 *Information Sheets 10 & 22*
  - 2 *Take Care*
  - 3 *Protecting Volunteers*
  - 4 *Guidelines for Relationships between Volunteers and Paid Workers*
  - 5 *Volunteer Bureaux Directory*, £2.50 from the VB unit at the Volunteer Centre
  - 6 *Volunteers in Museums and Galleries*, Jenny Mattingley £3.95
  - 7 *Working with Volunteers:*
    - 1 *Support*, Jill Pitkeathley £2.50
    - 2 *Training*, Graham Murphy £1.00
    - 3 *Recruitment and Selection*, Donna Johnston £1.00
- Available from The Winslow Press, 23 Horn Street, Winslow, Bucks MK18 3AP.