Volunteers! More Workforce? Or More Work?

Volunteers in your library can be a great asset - or - they can feel like just more work and responsibility. How this asset is managed can make all the difference. If you have a good plan for managing your community volunteer resource, the possibilities are limitless!

Volunteers are not free, but they can cost-effectively extend library services. Before you begin using volunteers, several areas should be addressed.

- Staff acceptance and involvement: This is crucial to effective use and retention of volunteers. If staff does not feel comfortable and appreciative of volunteers, the volunteers know it and will not stay. Sometimes staff will view volunteers as competition for their jobs. NEVER place a volunteer in a position that replaces or could be seen as replacement of paid staff, especially where customer privacy is an issue. Volunteers are for assistance with and expansion of your programs, not to replace paid staff.

- Supervision and scheduling, who and how—have a plan! Identify a staff member or members who will be assigned the responsibility for recruiting, screening, and assigning volunteers. This person need not be the person who trains and directly supervises volunteers. The staff member responsible for the area where the volunteer works would be best suited for training and direct supervision. Don’t have a staff member who can or will do this job? Consider recruiting a volunteer, volunteer manager.

- What can volunteers do? Identify needs or wants to supplement and assist the work of staff. Don’t be afraid to dream big, there are very talented and skilled people in your community that are just waiting to share their time and knowledge.

- Develop position descriptions for routine volunteer positions, but stay open to those volunteers who wish to share special skills that you hadn’t even thought of. How about asking a local software developer to teach a basic code class?

- Create a formal application form; there are many examples out there. Be sure to request references and inform the potential volunteer that you may conduct a background check. Even people you may have known for years should fill out application forms.

- Volunteer policies or guidelines: Know the law, insurance, grievance, background checks, termination and volunteer rights.

- A volunteer handbook can be useful. Include things like your mission, vision and value statements. Safety policies, position descriptions, contact information, map of emergency exits, library parking and of course a welcome letter or statement.

- Volunteer management training. There are many free and well done on-line sources to answer most any volunteer management training needs. Also, local volunteer managers groups can get you in touch with experienced people in the field.
Volunteers: Or, Who Can Help?

- Recruiting volunteers is easier than ever! With the on-line tools available, new volunteer recruits find you! Of course, word of mouth from existing volunteers is still a great source. Also, community service groups such as RSVP and the Telephone Pioneers and even local businesses have been a source for reliable and knowledgeable volunteers. Remember, if you get too many applicants, you don’t have to say yes to them all!

- Orientation, Interview and placement. All volunteers should go through this process, just like new staff. Always ask for a minimum commitment. This may vary from position to position. Make it very clear that you expect a certain level of quality and workplace behavior, and just what that standard is.

- Retention/Recognition: The longer you can retain your volunteers, the less training and supervision for staff. And retention is much easier than constant training.

- Evaluation: As you would evaluate any program or employee, volunteers and your volunteer program should go through periodic evaluation. Volunteers, just like staff, can be “let go” if they are not working up to the standards they agreed to during orientation.

There are many great reasons to use volunteers at your library. One of the most important is: If you have an interested, engaged, and appreciated volunteer group, you have the best library advocates you could ever wish for. If volunteers love their volunteer job, they are going to talk about it to anyone in their community who will listen.

Resource List

Recruiting

- VolunteerMatch. <http://www.volunteermatch.org/> Volunteer matching website sponsored by Points of Light. List your organization’s needs to be connected with people in your community who wish to volunteer. This site also has many useful volunteer management training tools. Very powerful resource.


Appreciation


- **Volunteer Gifts.com.** [http://www.volunteergifts.com](http://www.volunteergifts.com) And, more gifts!

Associations and Professional Development


- **Points of Light Foundation.** [http://www.pointsoflight.org/](http://www.pointsoflight.org/) Points of Light Foundation is created as an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization to encourage and empower the spirit of service


- **Application form examples.**
  - [http://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/volunteer_application_0.pdf](http://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/volunteer_application_0.pdf)
  - [http://www.acpl.lib.in.us/volunteer/index.html](http://www.acpl.lib.in.us/volunteer/index.html)

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**ICfL Resources**

- Volunteer Engagement Resources: [http://libraries.idaho.gov/page/volunteer-engagement-resources](http://libraries.idaho.gov/page/volunteer-engagement-resources)
