Volunteer management practices and retention of volunteers

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Executive Summary

This report is the second in a series of briefs reporting on findings from a 2003 survey of volunteer management capacity among charities and congregations. The findings in this report are based on conversations with a systematic sample of charities about their practices, challenges, and aspirations for their volunteer programs.

We focus on charities’ adoption of nine recommended practices for volunteer management. Further, we explore the relationship between adoption of these practices, other organizational characteristics, and the retention of volunteers. The practices under study are supervision and communication with volunteers, liability coverage for volunteers, screening and matching volunteers to jobs, and communication with volunteers.

The findings provide new insight into volunteer management capacity and retention:

Adoption of Volunteer Management Practices Not Widespread. Of the nine practices, only regular supervision and communication with volunteers have been adopted to a large degree by a majority of charities. We were surprised to learn, for example, that only one-third of charities have adopted to a large degree the practice of publicly recognizing the work of their volunteers. Over 60 percent have adopted each of the practices to at least some degree, however. This finding suggests that the practices for volunteer management are known, if not always fully implemented, in America’s charities.

Likelihood of Adoption Depends on Characteristics of the Charity. The likelihood that a charity adopts a particular management practice depends on its specific needs and characteristics, such as its size, level of volunteer involvement, predominant role for volunteers, and industry. For example, charities that emphasize episodic volunteer use adopt different management practices than charities that emphasize more sustained use of volunteers. Charities operating in the health field have generally adopted more of the practices as well. Larger charities are more likely to have adopted most, but not all, of the management practices under study.

Some Practices Tied to Greater Retention of Volunteers, Some Not. Charities interested in increasing retention of volunteers should invest in recognizing volunteers, providing training and professional development for them, and screening volunteers and matching them to organizational tasks. These practices all center on enriching the volunteer experience. Management practices that focus more on the needs of the organization, such as documentation of volunteer numbers and hours, are unrelated to retention of volunteers. Even though they help the program to realize other benefits.

Charities Can Do Other Things as Well to Maximize Volunteer Retention. Volunteer management practices are only part of the picture. In addition to adopting certain management practices, charities can provide a culture that is welcoming to volunteers, allocate sufficient resources to support them, and enlist volunteers in recruiting other volunteers. All of these practices help charities to achieve higher rates of retention.

The research shows that adoption of volunteer management practices is important to the operations of most charities. By investing in these practices and by supporting volunteer involvement in other ways, charities enhance their volunteer management capacity and their ability to retain volunteers.

In 2003, with the backing of the UPS Foundation, the Corporation for National and Community Service, and the USA Freedom Corps, the Urban Institute undertook the first national study of volunteer management capacity. One purpose of the study was to document the extent to which charities use various practices in managing volunteers. The field of volunteer administration has long promoted a range of best practices, including supervision, data collection, recognition, and training. However, until we undertook systematic research, we did not know the extent to which these practices have taken root in the nonprofit sector or their influence on retaining volunteers.

We drew a sample of nearly 3,000 charities that had filed Form 990 with the IRS in 2000, which excludes charities with less than $25,000 in annual gross receipts. We conducted telephone interviews with volunteer administrators or executive managers in most of these charities, asking them about their volunteer activities and management practices, and the challenges and benefits that volunteers bring to their operations. We learned that four out of five charities use volunteers in their activities, either in service to others or in helping to run the organization. The results we present are based on those charities that engage volunteers; we exclude charities that do not use volunteers.

We focus on volunteer management? The prevailing wisdom is that unless organizations pay attention to issues of volunteer management, they will not do a good job of recruiting, satisfying, and retaining volunteers. The importance is underscored by the findings of a study commissioned by the UPS Foundation in 1998. That study revealed that two-fifths of volunteers have stopped volunteering for an organization at some time because of one or more poor volunteer management practices. Reasons included the organization not making good use of a volunteer’s time or good use of their talents, or that volunteer tasks were not clearly defined.

The study warned, “Poor volunteer management practices result in more lost volunteers than people losing interest because of personal or family needs.” Administrators of volunteer programs are not without tools to recruit and retain volunteers. As volunteer administration has become more professionalized, public and nonprofit leaders, agency managers, and field experts have turned their attention to improving the capacity of host organizations to accommodate volunteers. In a report prepared in cooperation with the Points of Light Foundation and the Association for Volunteer Administration, the UPS Foundation advocated adoption of 23 volunteer management practices.

In general, the practice of centering or providing funding to support volunteer involvement, especially for a designated leader or manager and the Association for Volunteer Administration, the UPS Foundation advocated adoption of 23 volunteer management practices.
practices should be a subject for managers and policymakers alike. The next five pages document the degree of adoption of volunteer management practices by charities with different characteristics. Although many charities resist the culture of becoming more businesslike, funders and board members often demand that charities adopt modern management methods. As evidenced by the number of charities that are adopting volunteer management practices at least to some degree, the professionalization of volunteer management is clearly underway. The costs, benefits, and consequences of adoption of volunteer management practices should be a subject for managers and policymakers alike.

The next five pages document the degree of adoption of volunteer management practices by charities with different characteristics. Following that, we confront the issue of retention of volunteers. Although observers have been quick to advocate the adoption of volunteer management practices, little research to date has examined the relationship between these practices and the retention of volunteers. In this report, we present an analysis of the relationship between volunteer management capacity and retention.

Notes from this section

1. See, for example, Susan Ellis (1996) From the Top Down: The Executive Role in Volunteer Program Success and Steve McCurley and Rick Lynch (1996) Volunteer Management: Mobilizing all the Resources in the Community.

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ent characteristics. Following that, we confront the issue of retention of volunteers. Law and Contemporary Problems. Volunteer Management Practices and Retention of Volunteers.

3. Volunteer Management Practices. Key Finding: Charities Are Receptive to Best Practices in Volunteer Management, but Commonly Adopt Them Only to Some Degree. An effective volunteer management program focusing on recruitment and retention is essential in maximizing volunteer engagement, improving strategic outcomes, furthering the mission, and preserving your organization’s good name. Jennifer Hoffman, CPA, and Edward Miller, CPA, are audit partners in the Not-for-Profit and Higher Education practices of Grant Thornton LLP. Jennifer Hoffman is an Audit Services partner in Grant Thornton’s Long Island office, a fully dedicated member of the East region Not-for-Profit practice and is the partner-in-charge of the metro New York Not-for-Profit practice.