



Don't Waste a Volunteer's Time

Steve McCurley, SHIP TA Center Volunteer Management Consultant

One of the things that is amazingly fair about the world is that we are all allocated 24 hours in a day, no more and no less. Some of those hours are occupied by activities that we must engage in, such as working to support ourselves or looking after our children. Other hours can be occupied by whatever we choose to do. There is an increasing number of activities on which we might decide to spend our leisure time.

All of these activities compete for the available time. Over the course of a person's life, the choices they make will change based on the things that are available, how easy it is to engage in them, and their interests and abilities. How we spend our leisure time is an increasingly complex decision but a significant one because we all have less of it than we might like. Determining how and where to spend it is important.

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Volunteering is a leisure time activity, one that obviously has some value since so many people continue to engage in it. When volunteers offer their leisure time to help a cause, they are offering something of great value to them. If volunteers get the impression that their time is not valued, they will go do something else. That impression is most deeply made when volunteers feel that their time is being wasted. It is one of the primary reasons that some organizations have very poor volunteer retention, often without ever realizing what they are doing wrong.

While this situation may be obscure to the staff things are quite obvious to the volunteer. Part of the reason for this may simply be that the staff are being paid to be there, thus they are at least getting money even when they aren't doing anything. The only paycheck for the volunteer is the motivational paycheck they receive for helping others and this doesn't happen if they are simply standing around doing nothing.

Volunteers may feel their time is wasted for a variety of all-too-common reasons:

- There is nothing for the volunteer to do when they arrive. Staff forget that the volunteer is coming or there is no need for the service the volunteer provides that day. A frequent example is when a volunteer SHIP counselor shows up to meet with a beneficiary only to learn that the beneficiary has rescheduled the appointment but no one remembered to inform the volunteer. Staff should contact the volunteer to tell them before they travel to the meeting.
- The people they were to meet with are not prepared for them. This might happen when a SHIP volunteer is scheduled to give a presentation at a senior center but arrives only to learn that nothing is ready – the room is not set up, the center staff they were to work with are not available, possible attendees have not been informed, etc. It can also happen when a SHIP counselor meets with a beneficiary but no one has made sure that the beneficiary has brought the information they need for the counselor to address their issue. When a volunteer is asked to work on a given



task, SHIPs should make sure they will, indeed, be able to work on the task at that time.

- The resources or equipment that the volunteer needs is not available – handout materials are not available, equipment doesn't work. Poor support is a very quick way to give a volunteer the impression that "we don't care what you do" and lead to the conclusion that attempting to help is useless because the organization has become an obstacle, not an avenue to help others.

But there are other examples beyond these obvious ones:

- Volunteers are given things to do that don't seem to be worth doing or don't seem to match their level of ability or interest. A volunteer who decides that the work they are being asked to do could be done by "any other warm body" is a volunteer who is close to concluding that the organization is wasting both their talents and their time. One of the main points of volunteer interviewing is to identify not just the role that the volunteer could play but, more importantly, the one that will engage their interest and enthusiasm. One of the purposes of volunteer evaluations is to learn when a volunteer has become bored with the kind of work they have been doing and need a re-energizing change of role.
- Volunteers spend a good portion of their time waiting for instructions or assignments. This happens in a number of ways to SHIP volunteers. It often happens early in the volunteer's engagement when they have been recruited, screened, and officially accepted but then may have to wait for a long period before they can be trained and begin work. New volunteers are eager to contribute; waiting for three months to even begin preparing for the role is a clear indication that you're wasting time. It may also happen in cases where there isn't actually enough work for the number of volunteers available, resulting in some volunteers simply being "on hold" for indefinite amounts of time, feeling increasingly ignored, abandoned, and without purpose. Experienced coordinators of volunteers will say that the only thing worse than having too few volunteers is having more than you can meaningfully involve.

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A basic truism to remember is that no one volunteers simply to fill a hole in their schedule – people volunteer to do something meaningful during that empty time, something that makes a difference. The more motivated the volunteer then the more irritating it is when the program doesn't seem to have the same sense of urgency to involve them. No one volunteers to waste their time.

A good part of respectful volunteer management is making sure that we honor the commitment of the volunteers and ensure that every hour of their precious time is utilized to the fullest. It's also a really smart practice if you care about volunteer retention. 