



Lost a Volunteer? Maybe Not.

A new twist on recruitment

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Volunteers stop volunteering for a variety of reasons: some from poor health, some from the demands of family, some because of conflicts with other people or the volunteer program itself, and some simply because they move to another community. Many of these reasons are things you can't do anything about.

Some volunteers, on the other hand, may simply become unconnected in a less obvious way, one that suggests that they aren't totally lost if you take the time to reach out to them. This is the volunteer who simply "vanishes" or starts coming up with reasons why they can't meet their commitments for a while and increasingly becomes disconnected because they aren't actively participating. Drifting away is particularly easy to do when the volunteer commitment is one that comes and goes without ongoing work or with periods in which the volunteer may not be in direct contact with the organization. In such cases it is difficult to determine whether the volunteer has actively decided to stop volunteering or whether they are simply in a state of hiatus.

If the organization does not reconnect the volunteer – which can be easily done by contacting them and "reinviting" them to participate after a period of absence – the volunteer will tend to drift further and further away and eventually cease to view themselves as a volunteer. Many organizations make the mistake of assuming that a volunteer who isn't pushing forward to be involved does not want to be involved; they may simply be waiting to be asked. Ignoring these "lapsed" volunteers is very common. A study of Australian Landcare volunteer groups found that 40 percent of local efforts indicated that their group doesn't follow up with members when there is a pattern of absence from group activities, thus pre-emptively moving the member to the "former volunteer" category without verifying that status with the volunteer.

You can easily see the impact of this if you put yourself in the place of the volunteer who knows that they have been "absent" for a while or that they have had to turn down some requests to perform work due to other commitments. Your failure to make contact could well be interpreted as being uncaring or ungrateful for the services the volunteer has previously given. Even for the most caring of organizations, it can be very difficult for an individual to gain the confidence to return after a lengthy break. Your contact could well prevent the loss of a valuable volunteer.

If you think about it briefly, these "former" volunteers ought to be easy to rerecruit – they liked the program enough to volunteer for it before and (since you're only contacting the good ones) they probably enjoyed the work and the people they were with. You couldn't find a more receptive target audience for a recruitment pitch.

In most cases, reconnection is a distinct possibility for many "lost" volunteers. A study of volunteer ambulance officers who had resigned found that 74 percent indicated that they would consider rejoining, if asked. That, you have to admit, is an amazing recovery figure. Note that these were volunteers who actually quit, not just those who got lost in the shuffle.



One program I know did the reinvitation of vanished volunteers in a somewhat humorous way – they sent out a postcard with the headline “Come back! All is forgiven!” I’m still waiting for a really daring program to put pictures of the lost volunteer on milk cartons that then mysteriously get placed on the porch of the volunteer.

You might even take a very long view about reinviting volunteers to participate. Some age groups – such as college students – may stop volunteering as they begin work. For a period of time they will focus on work until they feel like they have successfully mastered its demands. Hosting an “alumni reunion” party several years after they have departed gives them the opportunity to reconnect with the program and with other people they volunteered with – an opportunity that they may not take on their own initiative. It’s a good excuse to have a party, something every volunteer program needs as frequently as possible.

One final suggestion: If you have a great volunteer who resigns because they’ve moved to a new community in a different state, pass that information along to the SHIP program in that territory. If they proactively contact the newcomer – noting that you recommended them as an outstanding volunteer – there is an excellent chance they can be rerecruited. Remember, when it comes to recruitment, we’re all in this together. 🤝