

[News and Hot Topics](#) » Should We Cap the Number of Hours a Volunteer May Serve Each Week?

Should We Cap the Number of Hours a Volunteer May Serve Each Week?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

January
2013

Two weeks ago I received this very interesting e-mail from an American organization that is an exemplar in its extensive involvement of volunteers and has long served as a role model for best volunteer management practices. So I paid attention to their question:

How many volunteer hours are too much? My concern is two-fold, volunteer burn-out and supplanting paid staff. I've poured over U.S. and my state's department of labor information, Googled for hours...and found nothing.

Here at our organization, our expectation for a minimum weekly commitment is 4 hours and an annual commitment of one year. So we've got the minimum nailed down and it works well for us. We have a paid summer intern program and a college practicum for enrolled college students who can volunteer 8-24 hours per week, per semester.

It's the other extreme that's worrisome. Outside the parameters of an internship or college practicum, we believe that more than 16 hours per week as a volunteer begins to look like a job. A situation ripe for exploitation – or a labor grievance down the road. What's making this timely for us is receiving volunteer applications from currently unemployed specialists in the same profession as our paid staff.

Turns out I had lots of thoughts on a suggested maximum number of weekly volunteer hours. I could only think of one situation in which it made sense and said:

New volunteers may start off gung-ho and promise many hours before they know what they will experience. So I like the practice of setting an initial limit of maximum time until the situation evolves and looks to be successful. But once it's proven mutually beneficial to allow someone to donate their skills as intensively as they wish, a cap seems really foolish.

In considering my answer, I realized that I have never written about this particular issue and neither has anyone else, so it's time to do so!

A Multi-Layered Issue

As with so much else in the volunteer world, the seemingly simple question of “should we cap the number of hours a volunteer is permitted to serve” is anything but simplistic. There is not a clear, definitive answer because of the inherent diversity in what types of activities unpaid workers do, and who they are. Here are several examples of volunteer positions in which the volunteers work full time or even more hours:

- Many types of intensive volunteer efforts require extensive hours. The Peace Corps and United Nations Volunteers (both with living allowances but no pay), archeological digs (where people even pay to participate!), religious missions, medical field trips, and overseas Habitat for Humanity building projects – just to name a few – don't cap the time they will accept. Of course, these are usually not a paid staff vs. volunteers situation, in that the work tends to be created specifically for volunteers only. But all prove that volunteers can be effective working hard and long.
- During times of natural disasters and other crises, no one watches the clock for paid workers or for volunteers. Everyone works until the emergency is over.
- As noted in the e-mail, many organizations allow college students to do school “practicums” to receive academic credit but no financial remuneration, as opposed to paid “internships.” While this particular organization caps such students at 24 hours per week, I know of many programs that make such service full-time for a semester. (How was the magic figure of 24 hours determined? Seems pretty arbitrary, as does 16 hours for other volunteers.) Because it is couched as a school requirement, lasts only a set number of weeks, and commonly involves young people, service-learning is generally acceptable and rarely perceived as threatening to the job security of paid staff.

Of course, right now the *for-profit* world, especially big corporations and television stations, is under fire for abusing unpaid internships, so stay turned! (See the 2010 *Blue Avocado* article, “Legalities of Nonprofit Internships,” for various considerations in paid, stipended, and volunteer internships. Among other things, it reminds us that the U.S. Fair Labor Standards Act includes this bizarre requirement for unpaid internships: “The employer that provides the training derives no immediate advantage from the activities of the trainees, and on occasion the employer's operations may actually be impeded.” Maybe *that* will be another Hot Topic this year!)

- New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg does not accept the salary provided for his job. Neither did California Governor Arnold Schwarzeneger, President Kennedy or Vice-President

Rockefeller. So they all worked full-time (and more) without pay. Is this extensive volunteering OK simply because they could afford to do so?

Do We Worry about Too Much Donated Money?

When a question arises about volunteers giving time and skills, it is always revealing to see if our reaction changes when the same question is asked about financial donors. What would we answer to the question: "Should we cap the amount of money a donor wants to give us?" Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? Can you imagine not being thrilled at ever higher amounts of cash being offered? The more the better. So why do we raise concerns when someone wants to give more time to a nonprofit they care about?

One reason may be that spending money takes less effort than managing volunteers. Donation checks can be cashed and used. It's quite a bit harder to make sure donated services are welcomed and productive. In fairness, few organizations can effectively support endless volunteer participation to make sure the effort is successful both for the mission and for the volunteers. On the other hand, perhaps if more investment was made in the infrastructure needed to support volunteers properly, more quality volunteer time might be accommodated.

Volunteer Work Threatening Paid Work?

We have not yet discussed how threatening volunteers can be to paid staff, particularly in a time of tight budgets. Which is worse if you are worried about job security: limited volunteer help from people with different skills than the paid staff or intensive volunteer help from people highly trained in the same skills? (This is why those expert volunteers so similar to the employees pose additional challenges to the organization here. Would those volunteers allow the organization to lay off or avoid hiring paid staff?)

Paid staff can indeed feel threatened, but only if top administration *is*, in fact, taking advantage of free help to replace employees or not looking for funding for more. Of course, in a nonprofit, why is this necessarily wrong? Is it a right or a privilege to get paid to work in a mission-based organization? This is the sticky wicket and I usually come down personally on the side of mission. There is a strong argument to be made about right-to-work and rights of workers, but here is where nonprofits *are* different.

The answers are not going to be found in legislation. Despite the odd definition of an intern, the Fair Labor Standards Act and other Labor Department directives generally are silent on volunteering (and things are not much better elsewhere in the world). But internal organization policies that set an arbitrary maximum on permitted volunteer hours are almost always a way to assuage paid staff fears, without openly confronting the issue of replacement. There can be all sorts of excellent, reasonable guidelines as to what a volunteer may do and how a placement is determined, with consideration of

employee rights, without arbitrarily turning down potentially valuable (priceless?) time donors. Remember that *volunteers* have rights, too!

Designing the Right Work for the Right People

As with everything else in volunteer management, we shouldn't accept endless hours from volunteers just because they are offered. We can say no for good reasons. Someone may not have the skills we most need, for example, or not fit into the personal chemistry of a team. And I've already recommended an initial, more limited get-acquainted time for newcomers.

It all comes back to the challenge of *designing the right work for the right people*, including those unemployed specialists. Rarely should a volunteer do exactly the same work as an employee. If we craft volunteer positions to be value-added to what employees do, and important in their own right, shouldn't we want to provide these services to the greatest extent possible?

To repeat: we do not stop money donors from writing bigger checks! Once we value donated time as a critical resource, it becomes clear that turning down such talents is seriously bad management.

Thanks to my correspondent (who requested anonymity) for permission to focus on this issue for my first Hot Topic of 2013. Now you can help advance the thinking of our field by *joining in* the discussion of this complex question with a response comment.

Do you think capping volunteer hours is a good idea? Why or why not? (If you have such a policy in place, please explain what it is and how it was formulated.)

Related Topics: [Ethics](#) | [Interviewing](#) | [Policy Development](#) | [Retention](#) | [Volunteer Work Design](#) | [History](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#) | [Philosophy](#)

Submitted on 01 February 2013 by Pamela Holland, Youth & Family Asst. Director, South Shore YMCA, Mill Pond, Hanover, MA, USA

I believe staff should never feel like having a volunteer is a burden. Furthermore, I never want a volunteer to feel like the staff thinks that they are a burden to them, because we all know a volunteer can sense when they are truly wanted by staff or not. For volunteers and staff to work in harmony, the volunteer experience needs to be mutually beneficial to one another. If the volunteer's role helps support the staff's role it usually will work.

For the staff that is used to only managing staff, having a volunteer to supervise can offer a challenge when the supervisor is used to only giving directives. I often will say "If you can manage staff the way you manage volunteers, you are doing something right" because respect, appreciation, diplomacy, excellent communication and skill is needed to do this well. However, I often will say to staff or colleagues that come to me with a vision of a dream they would like to accomplish. I often say there

may not be the budget for your dream, but please remember that volunteers very well may be the gateway to your dream.

It is not often that I get a volunteer who wants to do more hours than I am comfortable with, but when the situation does arise I set a limit to see if it is a fit for everyone and not a burden on staff. With the right volunteer, patience, training and time sometimes we do have a volunteer who is here as much as our staff. When the volunteer and staff form a true positive partnership, our non-profit and our community benefit, so it is worth the initial investment of time to be careful that the role you give the volunteer does not threaten the staff's well-being.

Submitted on 11 January 2013 by Wendy Walters, Volunteer Engagement Advisor, UnitingCare West, Western Australia, Australia

In Australia and particularly WA the rule of thumb is for a volunteer not to work over 15 hours per week. After this you would be starting to expect the role to be a paid position, of course with every rule there are exceptions.

Special note from Susan, 10 January 2013:

We're delighted to be generating a lot of responses from many different colleagues on this important topic. Please note that I raised a big-picture philosophy question which many of you are instead answering from the perspective of daily volunteer management. Of course each individual case should be handled according to what is best for that case – often requiring limits on both the volunteer's schedule and the demands of the paid staff – and I do not advocate endless volunteer service. But the issue that concerns me is the blithe assumption that somehow it is *always* right to cap volunteer service at some arbitrary number of hours, regardless of the needs of the agency, the willingness and skills of the volunteer, and other variables.

Thanks again for this great discussion!

Submitted on 08 January 2013 by Hillary Roberts, President, Blankie Depot/PLNJ Inc., Keyport/NJ, USA

A response for Roslie Main:

I am very familiar with the challenge you're facing. My recommendation is two-fold. Make sure you are spending equal or more time with your paid staffers on the true nature and expectations they have of volunteers. Often it is staff that struggles to understand volunteer positions and how to go about setting proper boundaries with volunteer assignments week to week; not the volunteer ready to give their time and talents to a specific project. It can never be stated enough that volunteers are support staff and equal in their roles. Volunteers are not free labor with time on their retirement hands. Volunteers selected your organization for a reason.

And two, consider recruiting a larger pool of volunteers; three per staffer not one. This will not only help with burnout but bring a team approach to collaboration allowing for more scheduling flexibility and project oversight.

Good luck!

Submitted on 07 January 2013 by Sue Thoroughman, Mentor Match Case Manager, Powerhouse Mentoring Program, Portland, OR, USA

We provide mentoring services to foster youth, and we do ask volunteers to try to spend about ten hours a month. While there isn't a cap, when I see on a volunteer's activity log that the hours are creeping up, it's usually an indicator that the volunteer is spending time on roles that are outside of mentoring. It's a cue for me to call the volunteer and talk about how things are going and maybe help him or her get back on track.

Submitted on 07 January 2013 by Roslie Main, Volunteer Coordinator, Bowness Community Association, Calgary, AB, Canada

I have been struggling with this issue as I have lost three key and very hard working volunteers in the past couple of months to burnout. These volunteers were recruited as specialists and are usually professionals working full time jobs but are still keen to give their time and expertise to our organization. We do not have much staff and few resources so require experts to help with specialized areas like finance, event planning, etc. Unfortunately - or fortunately - they become so engaged that it becomes a struggle to help them keep a balance. Other volunteers and paid staff become dependent upon them for answers and soon it seems that the volunteer is helping full time even though they have been urged, usually on several occasions to be judicious with their time. It soon becomes too much and the volunteer burns out usually with a bad taste in their mouth.

In interviews with paid staff, they say when asked, the volunteer wanted to give their time so they assumed it was fine. In exit interviews with volunteers they say that they really enjoyed working with the organization but it was taking too much of their time and that staff were too demanding. During the volunteer orientation they are urged to communicate their challenges with me and again during follow ups. I am loathe to set limits on volunteering and I certainly do not wish to curtail their enthusiasm when they begin. But I am at a loss and do not want to lose other valuable volunteers in the same manner. Any suggestions?

Submitted on 07 January 2013 by Lynda Gerty, Director, Engagement, Vantage Point, Vancouver, BC, Canada

Thank you for this insightful and nuanced article, Susan! I appreciate and agree with SO many of the points you've made here.

Donated time and talent is the competitive advantage of our sector! At Vantage Point, we work with not-for-profit leaders to attract, meaningfully engage and integrate the abundance of available talent in the community. We've seen organizations (including our own!) leverage this strategy to exponentially increase their impact and build long term sustainability.

Cheers to you for writing about this important topic. Happy New Year to all of your readers...

Submitted on 07 January 2013 by Carrera-Leigh Dix, Volunteer Coordinator, A London-based homeless charity, London, UK

I too wonder about this from time to time. Whilst I'm lucky enough to work for an organisation where most volunteers seem to regulate their own hours appropriately (most doing 3-8 hours per week), I have concerns with some who insist on being here up for up to 8 hours a day, 7 days a week. On investigating, I have found that most falling into this category are the recently retired who want to remain agile and sociable by involving themselves in regular activity. Whilst I personally feel that 56 hours a week is far too much, I realise that imposing an upper limit would not address the issues that some these volunteers ultimately face (boredom, loneliness and personal feelings about their 'usefulness'). Whilst ensuring I do all I can to prevent dependency, instead of limiting their involvement point blank, I try to encourage regular days off, frequent breaks and fun alternatives where possible. If a volunteer looks tired or stressed, I make sure I take the time to address this with them and find out what's going on and how we might support them.

What we have to remember is that volunteers have different motivations and different work ethics. If someone has little else going on and is not seeking paid work, then who are we hurting by allowing them to spend as much time as they like doing something they enjoy?

Submitted on 04 January 2013 by Ken, Clement, Maple Ridge/British Columbia, Canada

As a retired electrician I volunteer for several organizations {Hospital, Live Theatre/Crafts, Parks & Rec., Community Outreach [handyman]}. Each week is different. Could be a minimum of 8 hrs. or a max of 30. If a ban is imposed, I would rethink my volunteer status

Submitted on 04 January 2013 by Nancy Martens, Coordinator Volunteer Resources, Queen Alexandra Center. for Children's Health, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

What a timely topic - yesterday I had a discussion with a potential volunteer on this exact subject. She is new to volunteering, keen and eager and wants to do as much as possible. I told her I prefer for volunteers to commit to one shift a week until they know they are in the right place to gain the kinds of experiences they want and need. This trial or probation period gives both the organization/staff/family and the volunteer an opportunity to check the 'fit' of the volunteer and organization. This is my way of ensuring quality and a win/win/win situation for all involved. Speaking for myself, it's not easy to eat humble pie and admit that I've taken on more than I can chew. My

philosophy is to allow the natural evolution of the volunteer placement based on how well it works, building on the success of the placement. Christine is right; many volunteers find employment in the organization where they volunteer after successfully completing the application and competition process. It's being in the right place at the right time, knowing the right people and having the perfect experience.

Gayle also made an excellent point that if one volunteer has many roles, when that person is absent or retires, the CVR must recruit many more people to fill all those spots left vacant by one individual.

Thanks everyone for your comments and food for thought.

Submitted on 04 January 2013 by Hillary Roberts, President, Blankie Depot (PLNJ), Keyport/NJ, USA

Yes, I believe strongly in a maximum time giving commitment but arranging what is in fact a mutual commitment should be discussed with the volunteer in an on going, educational manner. Since it may be difficult to know the exact hours going in to a new post, revisiting the weekly hours and general components to the volunteer assignment is key--and not waiting until problems and concerns arise essential.

Regarding monetary caps, volunteers should be included in financial contribution opportunities and pledge forms should offer a range of donor options but I would caution against setting specific caps. Ultimately, the donor should make the decision entirely on their own. Equally important is providing timely tax receipts and acknowledgements that emphasize how their hard earned dollars are spent at your organization.

While we VRM's are in the position and authority to recruit and train volunteers and attract funders in the course of our position, we should never forget the unique and often delicate balance we must employee with people relying upon our professional skills and (hopefully) excellent listening habits.

Volunteerism is above all else, a partnership.

Submitted on 04 January 2013 by Maelor, ACF, Melbourne, Australia

Any volunteer who works more than 168 hours a week should be given a severe reprimand.

Submitted on 04 January 2013 by Christine Martin, Manager, Volunteer Development, Evergreen, Toronto, Canada

Great topic! I've wondered about this myself. I think the issue is more the distinction between the nature of the roles of staff versus volunteers, rather than actual hours. It will vary from agency to agency, what is considered appropriate.

We have roles here where volunteers help full-time for several weeks. Other times, for skills-based role, the arrangement is negotiated and a volunteer might come in a few days a week. In any case, these roles absolutely enhance what staff can accomplish on their own and therefore enhance all of our programs. At the same time, we continue to offer the more traditional roles where people come a couple times a month or in some cases, just once for a couple of hours. It's all part of responding to the big trends facing the volunteer world, and working towards that great experience for both the volunteer and the organization. And we're all different.

One great thing that has happened is that quite a number of our dedicated volunteers have been hired (in competition with external applicants). Sometimes, it's the first place staff look - they see someone really invested and dedicated with amazing skills who would be a good fit for their team.

Great thoughts everyone!

Submitted on 04 January 2013 by Gayle K. Rose, Volunteer Director, Salina Regional Health Center, Salina, KS, Saline

This is a practical, not a philosophical, observation.

My largest concern about depending so heavily on a single or a few volunteers to deliver our services is that, as a manager, you face a crisis when one goes down--even temporarily. Quickly filling those slots can be very difficult. If we're to welcome unlimited volunteer contributions, which I believe most of us do, we'd better maintain a stable of less available volunteers to cover for them when needed or be prepared to spend more service time ourselves.

Submitted on 04 January 2013 by Mary Kay Hood, Director of Guest & Volunteer Services, Hendricks Regional Health, Danville, IN, USA

Let's not forget what happens when that wonderful volunteer who doesn't mind doing whatever is asked of them gravitates to 30-40 hours per week and then has an unexpected absence for an extended period of time due to illness, dealing with a family member, etc. There suddenly is a huge gap which can be challenging to fill on a moment's notice. I have chosen to limit the number of hours for that very reason.

Submitted on 03 January 2013 by anonymous, Volunteer Coordinator, Oregon, USA

I think it's crucial to make a clear differentiation between volunteer position descriptions and paid staff position descriptions. My organization has many highly skilled volunteers who put in 20-40 hours a week, and they are integral to the operation of the organization. Several of them frequently tell me, "You couldn't pay me to do what I do."

I think where you run into trouble is when you have both staff and volunteers performing the same tasks, such as filing, database management, direct client work, etc. Distinguish some tasks as solely volunteer tasks and some as solely staff tasks. Of course the downside of this is that if all your

volunteers disappear, your organization can't continue to function. But that just means you need to commit resources to volunteer development, which I believe all organizations which use volunteer should do anyway.

Submitted on 02 January 2013 by Carol Bloemer, RSVP Director, Volunteer Center of East Central WI, Appleton, WI, USA

In the past I have experienced situations that make me say that there needs to be a cap. The situations I experienced would not happen in some organizations. In a small organization, 30 employees, many part-time, several positions only required high school diploma. It became a habit of staff to ask volunteers "can you come back tomorrow" instead of calling a different volunteer to fill an open shift. Eventually, some volunteers had great comfort at the organization and had a lot of information. A small group of volunteers could handle most situations. They began to feel like staff. Sounds great! Until there was an opening for a paid position. The volunteers would apply for the positions and not get them. We would eventually lose the volunteers. As you can imagine the volunteers are thinking that you ask me to fill in for staff frequently but I am not good enough to hire. I also know that many volunteers left because of burnout. When a volunteer is so committed I feel they leave because they feel under-appreciated after awhile. If you do not have increasingly higher levels of awards or praise and are not prepared to truly honor this volunteer, no matter what they say, you will lose them. It happens in business also.

I believe that there are a number of other underlying issues in my scenario but capping volunteer hours would keep the staff from "overusing" some volunteers out of convenience.

Submitted on 02 January 2013 by Lucas Meijs, Prof.dr, Rotterdam School of Management, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Great topic, great reaction. Just some remarks from my observation

I think volunteer administrators do have an obligation to make certain that the agreement on volunteering hours and obligations is sustainable for the volunteer too. All too easily, a volunteer might say yes to an urgent request from the organization to show up on a certain moment and this might not be feasible for the volunteer. In the end, the volunteer might not show up and feel bad about this. I call this hidden volunteer burn out

Another situation is about the sustainability of the assignment. In Dutch membership organizations, in many cases, a board member or an important committee member will start with a typical assignment of about 4 to 8 hours a week. Then after some time when others drop out, additional tasks 'naturally' are added. After some time this volunteer will spend some 20 hours with the organization and, by this activity, signal that this is the expected workload for a potential new volunteer if he/she leaves. In workshops I usually discuss that if the average volunteer volunteers 4

hours a week, anything more than 8 hours a week becomes an assignment you cannot give anymore to an 'average' volunteer.

Submitted on 01 January 2013 by John, Mr, St John, Australia

With regards to volunteers posing a 'threat' to paid staff, I would strongly argue the opposite in many situations. There are many so-called 'non-profits' that take advantage of having volunteers because it allows them huge tax benefits and means they are far less scrutinised. The few truly volunteer organisations that we have left are now almost indistinguishable from a normal for-profit company at the management level, with paid staff now directly in charge of volunteers. This is a recipe for disaster, as these paid staff are very often brought in from the outside and have no idea about the specific needs of volunteers in that organisation, let alone volunteers in general.

Comments from Readers

Submitted on July 26th, 2016

Anonymous, Copake/NY, United States

I'm very curious about if it's legal to have international volunteers to work for over 60 hours a week with only one day off per week for a non-profit organization?

Submitted on August 1st, 2016

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

Your question, in turn, raises many other questions and I hope your group of "international volunteers" are connected to a sponsoring organization -- that is the place to raise your objections. In general however, the issues here are not really about volunteers, international or not. No one should have to "work" 60 hours a week -- but do you mean work or do you mean "being on call"? Many overseas programs are based on immersion -- asking the volunteer to be on-call and available whenever something is needed. The intent is not to make the person do work intensively without a break, but to be part of a community in which things happen 24-hours a day. So clarify your issues and then talk to the organization running your placement program about your concerns.

Submitted on April 5th, 2018

Dave Jecklett, owner, pmi co, Los Angeles, US

Very informative article, thanks.

PRIVACY STATEMENT

Energize, a program of Adisa <https://adisagroup.com/>

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025