

[News and Hot Topics](#) » What Volunteer Resources Managers Can Teach

Human Resources Managers

What Volunteer Resources Managers Can Teach Human Resources Managers

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

September

2013

Volunteer resources managers (VRMs) are constantly being told what we can learn from professionals in personnel or human resources (HR). Maybe it's time we tell HR what they can learn from *us*.

Superficially, it is easy to see similarities between HR and VRM. But implementing a strong volunteer involvement strategy is often more complex than the role of HR and needs greater initiative and creativity. In 2010, I outlined the limitations of the human resources model for our work in a Hot Topic titled "[Reimagining Service: Is Corporate HR Management What We See?](#)"

Here are my thoughts on what we can offer as consultation to HR – please join in with your list!

Finding the Best People

When people apply for a paying job, they anticipate competition with many others and realize they might not even get a response to submitting their resumes. Prospective volunteers, on the other hand, expect their offer of time to be welcomed by a personal reply. VRMs understand that everyone applying for a volunteer position will form an opinion about the organization based on how pleasantly they were treated. Even someone deemed unsuitable for current volunteer vacancies still has the potential to become a time or money donor at a future time. So VRMs have to know quite a bit about screening and turning people down in a way that still results in "friend raising."

Also, VRMs are not limited to considering only an applicant's work history. We try to discover *potential* as well as assess credentials. Volunteering permits everyone to rise to the level of their abilities, not their resumes. We can give volunteers the chance to prove themselves (in a role they might not yet have been qualified to land as a paid job) and, along the way, uncover unexpected talents for the organization.

Flexible and Creative Work Design

VRMs have the freedom to address the organization's needs in any way possible if volunteers are willing to donate their skills and energy. This means that VRMs are experienced in adapting work to the needs of workers. We have expertise in:

- *Task analysis.* We can assess work being done or planned and break it down into discrete, time-limited activities that can be assigned to a range of people. So we can advise HR on how new initiatives might affect current employees and what tasks might be reassigned or done differently when new workers are hired.
- *Job sharing.* Because almost every volunteer works only a limited number of hours at a time, we are practiced in getting things done across the work week with different people rotating in and out of shifts. This means we understand how to create consistent procedures independent of who's assigned and know how to "hand off" work to the next shift.
- *Supporting remote workers.* Many volunteer assignments are done in the field (such as tutoring in branch libraries, coaching sports, or visiting clients in their homes) or virtually via the Internet. We have developed all sorts of techniques for staying connected to remote volunteers that are translatable to employees, too.



Creating a Welcoming Work Environment

New hires may learn mainly about the specific unit in which they will be working. VRMs usually have created a generic agency orientation that *all* volunteers receive as a welcome, in addition to role-specific material covered by each volunteer's supervisor. And this orientation is delivered on an ongoing basis. Maybe we should invite new hires to attend the same session, for the same reasons.

In training sessions, I often make the comment that it should not be our goal to treat volunteers as if they are paid staff. Instead, I wish we'd treat paid staff as if they are *volunteers*. Why? Because we would have much happier workplaces if all team members had:

- More choice in what they are asked to do and how they are expected to do it
- More flexibility in scheduling their work time
- More background information on what is happening (we are intentional about giving volunteers continuity between shifts, while employees are expected to learn things at the water cooler)
- More friendliness, courtesy and thank-yous

Money Is Not the Only Motivator

The most important thing that VRMs understand is firmly rooted in volunteerism: The desire to work hard and successfully is not a factor of how much money someone is paid.

Of course salary, benefits, perks, and promotions are important to paid workers. But it is a mistake to think that monetary incentives alone are sufficient to elicit dedication and top performance. A pay check is not a thank you; it's an obligation (even for the week someone is fired)!

From the earliest studies of worker motivation through today, we know that commitment to doing work right derives from intangible things:

- Seeing that the work itself is important, has meaning, fills real needs
- Feeling that someone is observing the effort being extended
- Feeling appreciated for that effort (including being thanked informally)
- Liking one's co-workers and being part of a successful team
- Celebrating accomplishments
- Continuing opportunities to learn and develop professionally and personally
- Being treated with respect, especially for one's ideas

All of these elements are central to engaging volunteers. VRMs understand the need to create what John Lipp (*The Complete Idiot's Guide to Recruiting & Managing Volunteers*) calls, a "culture of thanks" – an environment in which volunteers feel genuinely accepted as team members and appreciated for what they do. Let's teach others how to do this!

Finally, volunteering is a leisure activity, in that people can only volunteer at times they are not on a paying job, taking care of family, or other priorities. So when we recruit volunteers, we are asking them to take time away from what they might otherwise do for *recreation*. This means volunteering, on some level, must be *fun*. It can still mean hard work, but there has to be some enjoyment of the activity or the people involved. How wonderful that we can offer advice to our organizations on how to have productive fun! If it keeps volunteers coming back, imagine how it might boost employee morale, too.

How to Offer Consultation

You may be thinking that readers of this Hot Topic understand the special talents of VRMs, but HR and other colleagues may not. So how can you present yourself as an advisor?

Maybe you can start a conversation with this essay (after all, *you* didn't write it!). Share it with appropriate staff along with an invitation to coffee or lunch at a spot away from both your offices (neutral ground). The approach is: "You already know that volunteers help clients and staff, now what might help *you*?"

Come with some specific ideas. For example, suggest that you collaboratively transform the annual volunteer recognition event into a "team appreciation event" in which thanks can be given to both

volunteers and paid staff together. Provide an outline of what you cover in volunteer orientations to see how that content meshes with what new employees are given. If you have some staff who telecommute, ask how their supervisors monitor work performance and share tips you've learned through virtual volunteering assignments.

You might also make some specific requests. Can you attend HR unit meetings to represent the volunteer perspective, both in listening for what might affect volunteers and in contributing tips from working with volunteers that might be applicable to working with paid staff? Would someone from HR serve on the volunteer strategy advisory body to do the same thing?

Find teachable moments. If something occurs that might benefit from good volunteer management practices, speak up. Chances are your colleagues will be surprised at first. But when you offer helpful advice, they'll start welcoming your participation.

- *What else do VRMs know that HR could learn? How do we reciprocate with advice from our professional perspective?*
- *Have you already offered this kind of consultation? Tell us about what happened.*

Related Topics: [Employee Volunteering](#) | [Employee/Volunteer Relations](#) | [Ethics](#) | [Executive Director, Role of](#) | [Volunteer Resources Manager, Role of](#) | [Volunteer Work Design](#) | [Profession of Volunteer Management](#)

Submitted on 14 September 2013 by Lisa Sig Olesen, San Francisco, USA

As a former VRM looking for a new job in a new country, I have been looking for a way to word how my experiences can be useful in HR. This article gives me just that. If a job post asked the applicant to send one article as an application, this would be mine.

Submitted on 05 September 2013 by Helga Wientjes, National Manager Volunteering, Cancer Society of New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand

I would think that for many people in paid employment money is not the only motivator. If you look at the Gallup Q12 engagement approach, none of the questions is around pay, all of them are around being supported, recognition, having the right tools, opportunity to learn and grow, etc. Is that not similar to what we strive for with volunteers?

Submitted on 03 September 2013 by National Marketing Manager, St. Louis, MO, USA

When I was job searching a few years ago, perhaps the greatest frustration was never hearing back from an employer on a job for which I applied ... even if it's bad news. I work for a non-profit and with volunteers and understand what Susan is saying. Clearly HR managers are swamped with applicants on a daily basis, but communication is vital when it comes to status of their application. Their time, just as someone who volunteers, is just as valuable as the HR manager's. In the end, treating a job

applicant poorly, no matter where they are in the process, reflects poorly on the company. In previous searches, I've avoided even looking at openings at those places where the application process was a nightmare and/or those in which the communication about the job was lacking.

Submitted on 03 September 2013 by Roger Wyer, Mesa, Arizona, USA

This is a frustrating article for me. I always enjoy reading your articles and I love that you're challenging HR to stop and learn a few things from VM. At the end of the day though, this is still about people and work. I see very little difference between great HR and great VM. I just don't see a lot of either.

Response from Susan, 3 September

Thanks for the comment, Roger. Sad that you don't see much excellence in either HR or VM (maybe that's another Hot Topic). I just want to point out, though, that if we ourselves cannot articulate what's special about VM, who else will? And if volunteers are viewed exactly like employees, think of all the lost potential. Great management is indeed great management. But volunteers are so much more than simply workers to supervise. And therefore our role in volunteer engagement has to go beyond, as well.

PRIVACY STATEMENT

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

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025