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Employee

When "Just" a Volunteer is Better than a Paid Employee

By [Jayne Cravens](#)

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Are there some roles that are best done by volunteers?

If I gave your program all the money it needed to hire all of the employees or consultants needed to undertake absolutely every task at hand, would your program still involve volunteers?

I love asking this question during workshops. A lot of the times, the answer from several people is "No."

What that means is that these organizations involve volunteers primarily to save money: they can't afford to pay staff to do a task so they find volunteers to do it. This mentality can lead to all sorts of problems. One, volunteers feel like mere free labor - which isn't very motivating. You might hear them say, "I'm *just* a volunteer." Another, funders pressure organizations to replace paid employees with volunteers - which can create very bad relations with paid employees (and the unions that may represent them).

I write a lot on [my own website](#) about the many reasons an organization should involve volunteers that have nothing to do with saving money, reasons I believe are much more important than assigning a monetary value to volunteer time, and I won't rehash those here. Instead, I'm going to challenge you with another question:

Are there certain roles at your organization that should be reserved specifically for volunteers?

We hear a lot about why a role has to be filled by a paid employee. Some reasons are valid: someone is needed in the role full time and it would be impossible to find a volunteer that would be able to give that amount of service. Or someone with a very specific skillset and educational background is required for the role and paying someone greatly increases the chances of finding the right person for that role.

Some reasons are NOT valid, like the idea that having a paid employee in a role is necessary because the role requires confidentiality, as though a paycheck makes someone adhere to policies.

Why would an organization reserve certain positions for volunteers? Here are some scenarios:

- A domestic violence shelter may reserve certain counseling roles for volunteers because people who have experienced violence may prefer talking to someone who has volunteered to be there with the client, rather than a paid social worker.
- A city or county government council may create an advisory council made up of volunteers so members of the community can offer feedback regarding specific aspects of government action (bicycle safety, police procedures, parks management, etc.), because these advisors have no financial interest in the subject matter (it's not a part of their paid work).
- A fire station or association of first responders may reserve a certain number of first responder roles for volunteers because it's the best way to get local people involved, especially if most of their career staff live in a city different from the station where they are working, and benefit from the knowledge that only local residents would have (such as knowing without dispatch saying so that a 911 call is coming from a home from someone who is homebound or has a mental illness).
- A library may partner with a nonprofit to reserve certain roles, such as IT support for patrons using library computers, for clients from that nonprofit to undertake so that those clients can learn job and leadership skills and so that the library can show it leverages the strengths of the local community in different ways. These clients may also represent the community/demographics of the patrons better than most paid staff.
- An international humanitarian agency may encourage paid employees to create online micro-volunteering activities in support of their work, even though it would be more efficient for employees to just do the tasks themselves, because the volunteers may offer more frank, immediate feedback than, say, a paid program evaluator.
- A for-profit hospice or for-profit home for adults with intellectual disabilities may reserve certain roles for volunteers because clients and their families may feel more comforted at the idea of this support coming from people not being paid to provide support.
- A nonprofit that provides meals to home-bound people may reserve the door-delivery for volunteers, even if they have a budget for paid staff because the clients prefer interacting with a volunteer.
- An advocacy group may reserve neighborhood canvassing roles for volunteers because people are more likely to talk with someone at the door who says they are a volunteer who cares about an issue rather than a paid canvasser.

Note: none of these are theoretical scenarios: *all* of these cases actually exist, a few right here in the city where I live in Oregon.

A few years ago, I went through the Washington County, Oregon Sheriff's citizens academy, an intense 12-week course to learn how the sheriff's office approaches law enforcement. One evening,

the Sheriff's Office search and rescue team was discussed in detail. I was surprised and delighted to learn that **all of the positions on the sheriff's primary search and rescue team are reserved for teen volunteers**. You read that right: THESE POSITIONS ARE RESERVED FOR TEEN VOLUNTEERS. Not paid adults, not reserve deputies – TEEN VOLUNTEERS. This team is the PRIMARY search and rescue team for this area – not an auxiliary. The search and rescue team looks for (and finds!) lost people, downed aircraft, evidence in major crimes scattered across outside areas, and more. The members are highly trained and particularly-trained. They must be 14 to 19 years old, meet all of the minimum requirements, complete the intensive training academy, and make a minimum 2-year commitment. They “age out” of the program in December following their 21st birthday.

Why is such an important, essential, life-saving, high-responsibility investigative program reserved for teen volunteers? I asked the organizer during the presentation. His reply, according to my notes, “Because they will do absolutely anything. They will get down on their hands and knees, side by side, and slowly crawl across a football field in cold weather, literally with their noses to the ground, looking for a bullet casing linked to a crime. They will thoroughly search an area with young, sharp eyes. They will come when called, even when it's 3 a.m., and get right to work, and they will follow directions exactly – and in this work, they **MUST** follow their directions and training exactly. Because we can absolutely rely on them.”

Yes, of course, there are older people that could be just as committed... I hear those “we shouldn't make sweeping generalizations about different age groups!” thoughts out there, I do. And I'm sure there are other reasons that these teens make such great volunteers – because they don't have family commitments, they don't have job commitments, they have the flexibility and support to do these intensive activities, they aren't plagued by the physical constraints that many of us older folks are (I can barely get up off the ground anymore, let alone crawl across such), and on and on.

But consider **how refreshing it is to hear someone talk this way about teenagers**. In [all of my time working in volunteer management research and consulting](#) – two decades – I have *never* heard anyone say that *teenagers* were the best people for a particular volunteering role. I've just heard over and over why teens cannot do this or that, or shouldn't do this or that, why older volunteers don't want to work with them, how they don't take their commitment seriously, and on and on and on.

If you want to explore the idea of some roles at your organization being best filled by volunteers, the place to start is creating a [written statement that explains explicitly why that organization involves volunteers](#). Such a statement will guide employees in how they think about volunteers and guide current volunteers in thinking about their role at the organization. It will help your organization avoid the reputation for involving volunteers as just a low-cost staffing solution – something no volunteer really wants to be.

Please join the conversation and share your comments below.

What role in your organization might be uniquely filled by a volunteer?

Have you ever filled a role with a volunteer primarily because a volunteer would be a better fit than paid staff? Do share!

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Comments from Readers

Submitted on August 6th, 2019

Tina Lowery, Victoria, BC, Canada

Love this post! I have long been arguing that it isn't about paid staff being replaced by volunteers (or unpaid staff) but rather that we must be mindful of paid staff displacing volunteers! The volunteer client, patron, etc. relationship is a gift relationship and often the value of this is misunderstood. To a person who is marginalized or feels undervalued knowing that someone has come on their own time and who is there not because they are paid but because they want too is incredible. I have seen too how the perceived peer to peer experience is less intimidating or more welcoming. For example how many adults will ask a curator about dinosaur poop? But they will happily ask all kinds of questions of a junior docent volunteer. No one likes to ask "stupid questions and we forget that sometimes paid staff, such as doctors and nurse, can be intimidating and there is a built in power dynamic at play. Volunteers can and are often the right person for the job and that is how we should be considering all our staffing needs in any organization.

Submitted on August 28th, 2019

Jayne Cravens, Self, Portland, Oregon, United States

"For example how many adults will ask a curator about dinosaur poop? But they will happily ask all kinds of questions of a junior docent volunteer. "

I love this example! I am definitely going to use it the next time I talk about this in a workshop!

Submitted on August 20th, 2019

Barry Altland , Author, HHHE, Winter Garden, FL, USA

The mentality that predefines whether a role should be fulfilled by a paid person or a volunteer is akin to the same leftover bastions of the Industrial revolution that mislead leaders into "command and control" strategies. The reaction I get from some Leaders of Volunteer Engagement when I suggest they set aside their Role Descriptions long enough to

ask the person what they really want to do to make an impact on the mission and beneficiaries of the volunteer-supported organization.

The lingering Command and Control/Theory X approach to management still seems to win the day over meaningful Leadership. Even in non-profits.

Not for lack of desire. But at times, the policies and structures cage Leaders into very small places, making them less effective even if they know the right thing to do to engage the passions of their Volunteers.

Submitted on August 22nd, 2019

DJ Cronin, Brisbane, Australia

Brilliantly put Barry!

Submitted on August 28th, 2019

Jayne Cravens, Self, Portland, Oregon, United States

Thanks so much for commenting on Twitter AND here!

Submitted on November 9th, 2019

Nick Levinson, New York, NY, U.S.A.

I like saving money for the organization! It's a strong motivator for me. It leaves money for the organization to, for example, pay the paid people. I should not, and need not, displace any paid people. My goal is to add to what we accomplish and let the leadership expand its goals and objectives. In effect, my objective is to make your "all the money" question logically impossible, because there'd always be more tasks.

I haven't noticed volunteers objecting to being used to save money. They might object to seeing someone fired as too expensive because of the volunteer. More likely, they object to being used only as warm bodies. I'm happy to stuff a mailing, but don't tell me you have nothing for volunteers to do in weeks between mailings. Get hungry for your organization to achieve. What top leaders often get wrong is to tell paid people that we need the volunteers because they "save money". That leads to paid people opposing and sabotaging us.

Caveat, however: In the U.S., an expectation of compensation entitles the worker to be paid for work at the minimum wage rate even if the volunteer wants less. (Giving a volunteer transportation money or lunch money creates that expectation.) One solution is to define some tasks as being exclusively for volunteers, even if they entail the highest levels of skill and responsibility (consider the "dollar-a-year" leader, who often is a high leader in a nonprofit).

And I doubt any position would be without that expectation if the organization is a for-profit one (e.g., the hospice you referenced); they may have to apply Federal regulations on unpaid internships.

Submitted on July 28th, 2021

Lyndal Anthony, Wisconsin, US

I volunteered at a non-profit for four years now. I was the 70 year old "old guy" that worked rings around the paid staff because I found a job to do and just did it no matter how nasty/labor intensive it was.

The hard part for me was that the manager said I shouldn't be in any planning meetings because I was "just a volunteer." The irony is that the management stated that they were going through a transition and they were confused and writing the book as they went. This caused me a great deal of confusion especially when I was asked/encouraged to help design a new woodworking shop and I was supposed to think big, but the head of the program didn't think a new woodshop was necessary or in her "Vision/plans."

Through this confusion/uncertainty and what not, they have lost my skills as a volunteer and the thousands of volunteer hours I put in.

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