Musical Chairs

Space planning to support volunteers is important

The following question recently appeared in an email: Our organization is moving to a new building. As we do our space planning, what should we consider specific to volunteer needs, particularly as we think to the future and more flexible, off-site, virtual volunteer involvement?

The first response was to congratulate them for asking the question in the first place. It's amazing how often administrators neglect to include regular volunteer work projects into the list of designated space needs, or simply forget that volunteers bring their physical bodies with them.

In 1990, the school system in Anchorage, Alaska, faced this exact problem when teachers in the elementary schools refused to allow volunteers to utilize the rest rooms in the "faculty lounges." In investigating a volunteer's complaint about this, it turned out that the oil pipeline boom had forced the school district to accommodate many more children by erecting "Quonset hut" temporary classrooms. There the so-called lounges contained "one-seaters" and an extra 20 or so adults per day genuinely caused a rest room line for the teachers. This is a great example of the disconnect between wanting volunteers and preparing for them to actually be on site.

When work space is at a premium for employees, don't be surprised if the problem affects volunteers (and clients), too. Saying "we welcome volunteers" is contradicted if the person has to hunt around for a work surface and chair or beg for someplace to store materials between shifts.

BASIC SPACE NEEDS

Most volunteer programs need office space that affords the following:

• Easy access from the entrance of the building, since prospective volunteers (members of the public) will be coming in for screening interviews. Also, proximity to the entrance allows the volunteer resources manager to maintain contact easily with volunteers as they arrive and depart for the day;

• Privacy is needed for interviewing prospective volunteers and for supervisory sessions. Volunteers who work one-on-one with members of the public or clients might also need private talking areas;

• Secure storage space for volunteers' coats and other personal belongings (and uniforms, if applicable);

• Places for volunteers to store work undisturbed from one shift to the next; and,

• Group work space for meetings, training sessions, or special projects.

It is not always stating the obvious to note that each volunteer also needs adequate space in which to work. Staff might indeed want assistance with a variety of projects, but has anyone thought through where the volunteer will sit, have a clear surface, have access to office equipment? Is there any provision for a mail bin or file folder so that messages can be left for the volunteer? These types of details make work go smoothly and indicate that volunteers are indeed integrated into the organizational environment.

In addition to the space needed on a daily basis, a volunteer office also needs access to:

• Meeting rooms for orientation and in-service training sessions (varying group sizes). Note that it is not enough to permit the volunteer office to request such general purpose rooms; a reservation by the volunteer office should never be "bumped" from the schedule for someone else's perceived priority;

• Adequate rest room facilities. (Remember Anchorage);

• Space in various locations for sign-in books or other volunteer communication mechanisms, such as bulletin boards; and,

• Possibly, lounge areas for volunteer breaks and snacks.

If the organization has a cafeteria or lunchroom, a staff lounge, or even a coffee area, it will be necessary to establish policies on whether and how such space will be shared between employees and volunteers. Do not leave this to chance. Without clear guidelines, you run the risk of inadvertent and uncomfortable confrontation. Keep in mind that you could have many more volunteers than employees on site at some times, and that some volunteers will be teenagers, seniors or others unlike the paid staff.

Determine the answers to these questions – and think through the implications and alternatives of each decision:

• Are all volunteers to have full access to all public and private space in the building (except for personal offices)? If not all volunteers, which volunteers get full access? As determined by whom?;

• If food or beverages are available, does everyone pay the same for them? If not, what are the criteria for paying more or less?;

• Is there some reason why employees might want occasional privacy? Why? Where? Under what circumstances? How will this be explained to volunteers consistently? (Now ask the same questions for volunteers.); and,

• Should there be different rules for those volunteers who give many hours on a consistent basis to the organization (versus those who come in once a quarter)?

FURNITURE AND EQUIPMENT

Assess available furniture and equipment in terms of the impact of more people (volunteers) coming into the facility at various hours. Many organizations have discovered too late that they did not have enough chairs for volunteers who dutifully arrived for work at their scheduled time.

It is common to budget for things like a new desk or extra telephone for each new employee. Yet it is far from common to routinely add such basic work tools for volunteers, generally under the assumption that very part-time workers have fewer needs. Placing a few extra desks in various offices might prove useful for employees visiting from other sites or occasional consultants, as well as for volunteers working a few hours at a time. Keep the desks stocked with basic supplies, as well as with instruction sheets for using the phone system or the copying machine, and they will be a welcoming "home base" to assist volunteer productivity.

Having unassigned work stations available is also a way to give volunteers who usually work off-site, independently in the field, or online a place to sit if they go on site once in a while. This is the nonprofit equivalent of corporate "hotelling" and "hot desking" practices, providing unassigned seating in an office environment for a mobile workforce.

While no one expects every volunteer to be given a computer for sole use (unless, of course, that volunteer's assignment requires a computer), the volunteer office really ought to have at least one computer with Internet accessibility available in a more public area than the program manager's desk. There are many things that volunteers ought to be able to access online, including the organization's intranet and other electronic communication forums. Key volunteers ought to be given an organizational email address, too, especially if they will be exchanging emails as a part of their assignment on your behalf.

If volunteers are kept from internal Web sites, question why that is so. For example, confidentiality is a legitimate issue, but applies to everyone. Most organizations have two Web areas: the public Web site for the world, and a staff Web site or intranet. The latter should be for both paid and unpaid workers. Sensitive financial or client data should not be available to all employees, either. The IT department ought to create password-protected areas to assure privacy with access given on a need-to-know basis.

EXPANSIONS AND RENOVATIONS

The advice to plan ahead includes incorporating the needs of volunteers into any expansion or renovation design. A new hospital in the Philadelphia area faced the embarrassment of having to set up a card table in the out-patient lobby for volunteers to assemble patient packets. When asked why, the volunteers said, "Well, we used to have a spot to do this every week, but they forgot about us when the architect drew up the new plans." Don't let this be your organization. NPT

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