



Volunteers are assets nonprofits must protect

How much are your volunteers worth? The not-for-profit advocacy group Independent Sector estimates the value of the average American volunteer at \$24.69 an hour. Volunteers who perform specialized services may be even more valuable.

Whether your entire workforce is unpaid or you rely on a few volunteers to support a paid staff, you need to safeguard these assets. Here's how.

1. Create a professional program

“Professionalizing” your volunteer program can give participants a sense of ownership and “job” satisfaction. New recruits should receive a formal orientation and participate in training sessions. Even if they’ll be contributing only a couple of hours a week or month, ask them to commit to at least a loose schedule. And as with paid staffers, volunteers should set annual performance goals. For example, a volunteer might decide to work a total of 100 hours annually or learn enough about your mission to be able to speak publicly on the subject.

If volunteers accomplish their goals, publicize the fact. And consider “promoting” those who’ve proved they’re capable of assuming greater responsibility. For example, award the job of volunteer coordinator to someone who has exhibited strong communication and organization skills.

2. Keep them engaged

A formal program won’t keep volunteers engaged if it doesn’t take advantage of their talents. What’s more, most volunteers want to know that the work they do matters. So even if they must occasionally perform menial tasks such as cleaning out animal shelter cages, you can help them understand how every activity contributes to your charity’s success.

During the training process, inventory each volunteer's experience, education, skills and interests and ask if there's a particular project that attracts them. Don't just assume that they want to use the skills they already have. Many people volunteer to learn something new.

3. Make it fun

Most volunteers understand that you'll put them to work. At the same time, they expect to enjoy coming in. So be careful not to make the same demands on volunteers that you would on employees. Also, try to be flexible when it comes to such issues as scheduling.

Because many volunteers are motivated by the opportunity to meet like-minded people, facilitate friendships. Newbies should be introduced to other volunteers and assigned to work alongside someone who knows the ropes. Also schedule on- and off-site social activities for volunteers.

4. Remember to say "thank you"

No volunteer program can be successful without frequent and effusive "thank-yous." Verbal appreciation will do, but consider holding a volunteer thank-you event.

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