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Are your volunteer numbers falling?

This month Cat Dean asks what do you do when 28 volunteers suddenly walk out of your organisation or you realise that despite a fantastically successful recruitment campaign, your volunteer numbers are still in decline?

 Natural History Museum volunteer image; credit NHM and Sue Snell

These problems were experienced very recently by two large volunteer-involving organisations – Citizens Advice Bureau and Samaritans respectively – and prove that being a household name does not make you immune from difficulties with volunteer retention.

When you think about it, it's a wonder that any volunteer-involving organisation doesn't have problems on this score – unlike a job, where people depend on a regular salary to pay the mortgage, volunteering provides no such golden handcuffs.

Volunteer managers rely on the volunteers' commitment to the organisation, as well as their own ingenuity in making the opportunities both attractive to sign up to and stay in. Add to that the rising costs of living and prospect of an immediate recession, and you're left with so many variables it's a miracle any volunteer manager is willing to get out of their bed of a morning!

On this last point, the volunteer managers at the Natural History Museum and Parkinson's Disease Society said they had yet to notice any direct impact of the credit crunch on their volunteer numbers.

This was due in large part to good practice in immediately reimbursing their volunteers for legitimate expenses and giving plenty of information about the role upfront so expectations are well managed from the start.

However, one area of the volunteering sector that seems to reflect the national trend towards belt tightening is that of volunteer drivers – in fact there is currently a petition in circulation calling on Government to increase its recommended tax-free mileage rate.


Kate Engles, from Volunteering England's Policy and Information Team, says that VE's Information Service has noticed an increase in calls from volunteer managers concerned that the rising costs of running a car could affect people's willingness to volunteer as a driver.

In terms of the perceived credit crunch, we have identified two factors which might be particularly relevant to our sector, she says. On the one hand, the financial climate may mean that people have to worry more about things like household expenses and the costs of volunteering. It might become more important for volunteer managers to adopt and publicise clear expenses policies, or to be more proactive about encouraging volunteers to claim expenses. You don't want people to feel out-of-pocket after helping your cause.

Another possible effect of the credit crunch would be an increased emphasis on employability and skills. Says Kate: "This could influence how volunteers, and non-volunteers, regard volunteering as a potential source of new skills and experience."

Volunteers' Week, the national celebration of volunteering every June, takes as its theme "reward, recognise and recruit"; the first two Rs being key to successful volunteer retention (in fact, why not add "retain" as a fourth R?).

Much of the focus seems to be on original and entertaining ways of raising awareness and promoting the benefits of volunteering, both to the individual and the organisation. But once the hordes have signed up, how do you make sure they stay happy, motivated, and, well, there?

 Learning Volunteer Programme at the Natural History Museum; credit NHM

According to the Volunteering England Good Practice Bank, the following is recommended for anyone keen on keeping hold of their volunteers:

- Fully inducting volunteers
- Keeping volunteers advised of what they can expect and what your organisation expects.
- Having a volunteer policy in place
- Having a named supervisor to go to with problems
- Clear problem solving and complaints procedures
- Taking equal opportunities and diversity seriously.

By focusing on creating rewarding volunteer roles, examining motivation, recognising your volunteers for their achievements and undertaking thorough exit interviews you will be giving yourself the best chances of keeping turnover to a minimum.

The Natural History Museum involves more than 200 volunteers, from behind-the-scenes admin roles to maintenance or cataloguing of collections and interaction with the public through the Learning Volunteer Programme.

The volunteer managers believe that thanking volunteers (both in person and as part of events and celebration days) and involving them in museum-wide staff events form a crucial part of their retention strategy.

When the Institute for Volunteering Research published its evaluation and impact assessment of the museum's Learning Volunteer Programme last year, it concluded that "a surprise benefit of the programme has been that interested younger family members join the programme in school holidays. There are currently eight children who volunteer alongside their parents. This is a new and compelling form of engagement, as well as providing a novel experience for the Museum's core audience of family groups."

Clearly, not all volunteering opportunities are suitable for children, but if you are able to adapt yours for families, you're more likely to keep them volunteering regularly during the school holidays, a time when volunteers can be thin on the ground.

At the Parkinson's Disease Society, which involves a staggering 4,500 branch volunteers and over 6,000 fundraising volunteers, they try to keep volunteers motivated and engaged by providing ongoing support and training and encouraging those working at a local level to become involved nationally – e.g a branch chairperson becoming a trustee.

Head of Volunteer and Branch Support Kathy Reay advises other volunteer managers to: "look carefully at your requirements in the first instance, be clear about what you would like volunteers to get involved in, provide as much support as possible, thank your volunteers on regular basis and, encourage frank feedback when volunteers leave so that improvements can be made."

Ali Thomas, Volunteers Project Manager at the Natural History Museum, offers some words of reassurance to those concerned about volunteer turnover: "It may sound clichéd but quality not quantity is so important so I don't think that a high turnover is necessarily a bad thing. I have found that we can now control the flow of volunteers by recruiting as/when projects arise through the Museum website; our turnover has increased but in turn the quality of our opportunities, our volunteers and what we can offer in return has also improved dramatically."

Box out: Volunteer retention tips from Rachel Prebble, Learning Volunteer Programme Developer at the Natural History Museum:

To prevent excessive volunteer turnover, managers should ensure:

- All organisational expectations of the volunteer are outlined clearly from the onset.
- Paid staff and volunteer roles are clearly different.
- Clear communication between the volunteer managers and the volunteer team.
- The volunteers feel appreciated and valued
- Buy-in from senior management
- The programme is mutually beneficial to both the organisation and the volunteers.

Useful web links:

The Good Practice Bank on managing volunteers includes a theme focused on "retention":

<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/goodpractice>

Please choose the "core theme" called "retention"

Volunteering England statement on volunteer mileage expenses, July 2008:

<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/WhatWeDo/Policy/whatwearesaying/volunteermileage.htm>

Natural History Museum volunteering information:

<http://www.nhm.ac.uk/take-part/volunteer/volunteering/index.html>

Parkinson's Disease Society information:

<http://www.parkinsons.org.uk/local-to-you/volunteer.aspx>

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