



THE NAPA REVIEW

Rethinking Volunteerism as a Workforce Growth Strategy

The financial belt-tightening caused by the recession is forcing nonprofits, from large universities to community organizations, to review their workforce strategies. Already there are plenty of examples of hiring freezes, salary caps and reconsideration of open positions. It seems that these fixed “people costs” are always the first to go. While they may be the fastest way to decrease costs, such cuts can seriously compromise earlier investments and reduce the ability to invest in key growth areas.

Circuit City is a prime example. When its revenue began to fall in the face of online competitors, Circuit City laid off experienced salespeople. Unfortunately the one-time savings also eliminated the distinctive value of salespeople who knew their products well.¹ Now Circuit City has gone out of business. Short-term solutions may be short-sighted, and possibly fatal.

While many organizations are asking how they will get the job done with fewer staff, one bright idea is gaining momentum. Volunteers – especially the millions of Baby Boomers facing retirement – are a “brain trust” of talent who will not be content with only travel, golf and great books. They want to mix their leisure with meaningful involvement that won’t resemble “retirement” as we’ve known it. And the styles and expectations of a younger wave of volunteers demand new ways of engaging and keeping them.

President Barack Obama’s campaign was a dramatic example of how a well-trained and well-managed army of volunteers can build new networks of support, unearth millions of dollars and transform public attitudes.² A few large nonprofits – such as the March of Dimes, American Cancer Society and American Red Cross – have done the same thing recently, using volunteers’ professional skills to augment and invigorate their workforce needs.³

Now it’s essential to apply new thinking and new approaches to maximizing volunteers to reenergize fundraising, alumni relations and enrollment management, particularly as staff workloads increase. Volunteers add considerable talent. They also free up increasingly scarce resources that can be reapplied to other critical mission and growth priorities.

The Baby Boom’s New Wave

Baby Boomers are continuing to shake things up. This time, the beneficiary is the workforce. Approximately 76 million Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, are approaching retirement.⁴ In the next 10 years, 76 percent of them will be retirement-eligible, leaving a huge gap because the next two generations are smaller, plus a significant loss of expertise and leadership. Consider this – 500 of the largest companies can expect to lose half of their senior management in the next five years.⁵

Rather than putting their feet up, Baby Boomers are looking for new chapters in life – and often new careers. Most do not want to work full-time. They seek flexible arrangements, cycling between periods of work and leisure. According to a recent survey, 29 percent never want to work for pay again.⁶ Their strong pattern of volunteering is well-established, more than any other age group’s, and they are the best-educated generation in history.⁷ And today’s college students and young adults, facing a tight job market, are volunteer-minded.

1 “How to Survive and Thrive in Challenging Times,” American Society for Training and Development. www.astd.org, 2008.

2 “The New Organizers,” by Zack Exley. www.huffingtonpost.com, Oct. 8, 2008.

3 “The New Volunteer Workforce,” by David Eisner, Robert T. Grimm Jr., Shannon Maynard & Susannah Washburn. Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter 2009.

4 “Succession Planning,” by Steven Xavier. Talent Management, October 2008.

5 “Filling the Void Left by Baby-Boomer Techies,” by Ephraim Schwartz. InfoWorld, Feb. 28, 2006.

6 “Rethinking Retirement,” a cross-generational study by Charles Schwab and Age Wave, July 15, 2008.

7 “Tapping the Volunteer Power of Baby Boomers,” by Joanne Fritz, in About.com.

As one indicator of the spirit of these “millennials,” Teach for America, popular among graduating college students, recently announced a 50 percent increase in applications for social service jobs paid at a community service rate.⁸

The dynamic energy of today’s social service network presents a tremendous opportunity for nonprofits to do some rethinking as they ratchet up plans for sustainability. Integrating volunteers strategically and effectively in selected areas (in accordance with state and federal employment guidelines) can change the notion of the “workforce” as we know it.

How Obama Seized the Moment

Professionalizing volunteer management “the Obama way” can pitch directly to the short-term bottom line and help achieve longer-term outcomes.

The President’s approach to volunteer management hinged on this motto: “Respect. Empower. Include.” By increasing volunteer productivity, the campaign also turned activists into donors. Field staff mixed the discipline of good organization with the best practice fundamentals of workforce management – purposeful training, peer-to-peer education, coordinated decentralization, continuous feedback, measurement and accountability. Team leaders were rewarded for the infrastructure they built, which increased their impact.⁹

Dubbed “Obama 2.0,” the campaign stands as a superb example of how the most innovative social networking tools can yield exponential results. “You can have the most inspirational candidate, you can have the best organizing philosophy in the world, but if you can’t organize your data to take advantage of it...and take these volunteers and use it in a smart way...the rest of it is all pointless,” said Jon Carson, campaign field director.¹⁰

Leveraging Volunteers for Relationships and Fundraising

Too often nonprofits, large and small, have paid lip service to volunteer management, adding it on to another staff job without enough time for the care, feeding – and education – of volunteers. It’s not surprising that volunteers become disillusioned and drop out because of unrealistic expectations of their roles, absence of appreciative feedback, lack of appropriate training and supervision, excessive demands on time, feelings of second-class status to staff and little sense of personal accomplishment.¹¹

In analyzing volunteer trends in 2005-2007, the Corporation for National and Community Service found that more than one-third of the 61.2 million who volunteered in 2006 did not donate time to any charity in 2007. That meant about \$38 billion in lost volunteer time in just one year, calculating their time at \$20 per hour.¹² Imagine the impact of recovering the value of that volunteer contribution in any single organization through well-managed volunteer recruitment and retention programs.

⁸ “Applicants Flock to Teacher Corps for Needy Areas,” by Megan Greenwell. *The Washington Post*, Dec. 6, 2008.

⁹ Exley, *ibid.*

¹⁰ “Battle Plans,” by Ray Lizza. *The New Yorker*, Nov. 17, 2008.

¹¹ *Strategic Marketing for Nonprofit Organizations*, 5th edition. Philip Kotler and Alan R. Andreason, Prentice Hall, 1996.

¹² “The New Volunteer Workforce,” *ibid.*

Volunteer ROI

Channeling and managing volunteers' expertise, energy and dedication strategically offers extraordinary potential. Best practice suggests the following:

- A positive vision of volunteers is clearly articulated and widely shared in the organization.
- Leaders at all levels encourage and facilitate high-impact volunteer involvement.
- Paid staff are empowered to participate in decision-making about volunteers; volunteers participate in decision making about volunteers.
- Success breeds success when stories of volunteer contributions are shared.
- Volunteer feedback about their experiences is a sure way to performance improvement in organizations that are open to change.¹³

The New Volunteer Model

There is no better time than the present to correct for these missed opportunities and turn volunteers into a vital component of workforce strategies. Volunteers fill in temporary gaps when staff positions are put on hold or cut, work alongside staff to achieve mission-focused objectives and bring a phalanx of support that tracks to bottom-line goals.

Here are some important principles for using volunteers effectively:

- Manage smart volunteers smartly. That means investing in staff to oversee them as well as in training, technology and systems to ensure meaningful volunteer engagement, measurable outcomes and organizational ROI.
- Allow volunteers' creativity, fresh perspectives, knowledge, skills and experience to grow expertise and staff capabilities. Map this talent to organizational outcomes and defined metrics.
- Align volunteer recruitment with the human resources department to match their skills to organizational needs. Not every volunteer will be the right volunteer, so selection and placement are important.
- Initiate volunteer involvement with job descriptions, performance goals and benchmarks that map to metrics for full-time staff and shape mutually understood expectations.
- Use the website and other technologies to communicate with volunteers and connect them with leadership vision and strategy. When they are engaged as "insiders," they will see and hear that their involvement matters.
- Leverage the lessons from the Obama model. It was "job well done" and it's not over.

The familiar "donor pyramid" that moves donors up to higher levels of participation is a useful way of thinking about this new workforce growth model. Taking a broad base of dedicated volunteers and converting them to greater levels of activity expands an organization's reach and firms up mission-central commitments. As the Obama campaign made inescapably clear, it's a methodical process of building from the base and using those who know you to engage those who don't know you – just yet.

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¹³ Adapted from "Changing the Paradigm, The Points of Light Foundation," 1992, in *Strategic Marketing for Nonprofit Organizations*, *ibid.*