



# I've Been Thinking about... Maximizing Volunteer Participation

**Are you making the best use of volunteers?  
Is it worth it to accommodate those who can participate only in a limited way?**

By Martha Golensky

In this difficult period of tight budgets, when volunteers are more essential than ever, it's important to be flexible enough to accommodate the many ways people want to volunteer. Some organizations may have volunteers who participate on a regular schedule, but many more are finding the norm to be episodic volunteering. Individuals may offer their help for just a few hours, as for a neighborhood cleanup effort. Others may show up at a site whenever their schedules permit; sorting goods at a food bank is a good example. Still others may take part in a project for a short period, perhaps to assist victims of a natural disaster.

**Episodic volunteers  
present a different set of  
challenges.**

The key point is that episodic volunteers present a different set of challenges. For example, what do you do with people who show up unexpectedly, wanting to volunteer for a few hours? If you aren't prepared to put them to work on the spot, you may lose both their volunteer and financial support. You need to have a broad range of assignments on hand at all times to fit volunteers' varying needs. That requires flexibility on the part of staff at all levels.

Lack of time is the most common reason people don't volunteer.

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One option to widen the pool of prospects is online or virtual volunteering. Here volunteers use the Internet to help you with activities such as mentoring, doing research, providing technical assistance, and giving professional advice. This type of involvement is often a first step toward a more personal commitment: You can introduce on-site tasks to complement or expand the online work.

Many people today are interested in volunteering in groups rather than alone. A family, company, or congregation may volunteer as a team—say, to enter a charity-sponsored race or to serve dinner together at a shelter. You need to be creative in designing team assignments—and prepared to involve whole groups of people in meaningful ways.

All these kinds of volunteering require new ways of thinking about rewarding volunteers. Neither episodic nor virtual volunteers are apt to be comfortable receiving the same recognition as those who devote countless hours to weekly assignments. To solve this problem, you could award points based on frequency of volunteering. Then, considering the number of points, you could acknowledge volunteers along a continuum from a thank-

you letter to an annual recognition event.

Volunteering, in some form, has been part of the American tradition since colonial days and continues to be a vital resource for nonprofits. As an interactive process between the individual and the organization, there are costs and benefits on both sides of this exchange. For the most part, the pluses clearly outweigh the minuses. ■

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## **Volunteering Ideas Start Here**

Find out more about managing the new volunteers with these *Nonprofit World* articles at [www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members):

- **Can You Save Money by Using Volunteers Rather than Paid Staff?** (Vol. 28, No. 5)
- **Why Be Boring when You Can Celebrate in So Many Ways?** (Vol. 26, No. 5)
- **Managing Your Volunteers: 19 Ways to Work Wonders** (Vol. 25, No. 6)
- **Volunteerism Vectors** (Vol. 25, No. 3)

Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Volunteer Management ([www.snpo.org/lino](http://www.snpo.org/lino)).