

The Limitations of Seeing Volunteers Only as Unpaid Staff

The potential of your volunteers is boundless, if you just unleash it.

By Susan J. Ellis

When you set goals for volunteer participation, don't make the common mistake of picturing volunteers mainly as "unpaid help" assisting in the work of employees. From this grows the image of two parallel, connected workforces, organized using the personnel or human resources model. Yes, both groups are "human" and "resources" to the organization, but they're far from equivalent.

The differences between employees and volunteers are major and strategic. The following grid makes it clear that

“Perhaps the greatest value of volunteers is to diversify the expertise available.”

treating the two as the same (except for pay) is deceptive and limiting. Both groups are critical to meeting your mission, but each needs and deserves its own model of management.

See if this comparison table helps you change your thinking about the distinct importance of both groups to your organization. Feel free to share the grid with others to start some important conversations up and down the chain of command.

Differences between Paid and Unpaid Employees

EMPLOYEES	VOLUNTEERS
<p>In any organization, the paid work force is a known quantity, predictable and measurable in a number of key ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We know how many job slots we have, even if there's some turnover in the people filling them during a year – or some change due to new or ending funding. • We also know how many hours of work employees are expected to give – and to what tasks. • Except for occasional job-sharing arrangements, one employee fills one job position. 	<p>No organization can confidently predict what its volunteer corps will look like at any point in time. It's not predictable, but it's also potentially unlimited:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's possible to create a countable number of volunteer positions and hours of service, but the number and types of individuals filling those positions will change constantly. • Some volunteers will contribute episodically, others on a regular schedule; some will come on site, others will serve online; and so on. • In the same vein, a volunteer position might be filled by an individual or several volunteers can work together in teams with friends, family, co-workers, faith communities. • Many models can produce successful results, but it makes no sense to set a <i>goal</i> of X number of volunteers per year. Head count doesn't equate to degree or quality of service.
<p>Part of our planning for employees is to provide them with consistent support and tools: a supervisor; a place to work; an official e-mail address; supplies.</p>	<p>But head count <i>does</i> affect the amount of interviewing, screening, training, supplies, supervision, and coordinating time needed. Because we assume the very part-time nature of volunteers, we rarely plan or budget for their consistent support, even if their numbers grow and grow.</p>
<p>We cannot add employees to our payroll unless we first obtain funding for their salaries and benefits.</p>	<p>Though there are some financial considerations of staff time and other resources, we can add new volunteers at any time based on our recruitment efforts and the willingness of people to contribute their time.</p>

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Differences between Paid and Unpaid Employees - continued

EMPLOYEES	VOLUNTEERS
<p>Employees in the same job slot are hired to be similar in qualifications and skills. Such expertise permits your organization to provide the highest quality of service in your core programs.</p>	<p>You can find volunteers who are as qualified in the same skills as paid staff, which may be necessary for some roles. But perhaps the greatest value of volunteers isn't to "assist staff," but to <i>expand and diversify the expertise available</i> to clientele. So there's great value in recruiting volunteers for skills and qualities that are intentionally different from those of the paid staff.</p> <p>In fact, you can accept unexpected offers of talent from new volunteers, adding services beyond what the staff might have identified on their own but of clear value to clientele.</p>
<p>While there may be demographic diversity, most paid staff are likely to be at least 21 and under 70.</p>	<p>Volunteers can be of any age, occupational background, citizenship, neighborhood, and more. In fact, by design, some volunteer corps are recruited to be more like the clientele than the employees, especially if recipients of service are under 21 or over 70, or speak a different language, or are dealing with specific health or other problems.</p>
<p>Employees have a defined scope of work and organization-defined priorities, and may have to operate within guidelines or restrictions imposed from legal sources.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because of funding sources (what was proposed to a private funder or determined by legislation), you can rarely decide quickly to change course and redirect employees to new issues. • Employees must center their efforts on the clientele who are direct beneficiaries of the funded services. • Employees must be equitable in spreading their time and attention across as many clientele as possible, and cannot (unless so funded) give endless individual attention to selected clients. 	<p>Volunteers can always be asked to focus their attention on priorities, even those that were not anticipated in advance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteers, if they agree, can refocus their time on whatever is most needed right now. • As private citizens, volunteers can sometimes do things paid staff aren't permitted to do (cross geographic boundaries, speak to legislators, attend public meetings). • Volunteers have the "luxury of focus" and can devote their time to one project, one cause, or one client. And the organization can even recruit several volunteers to concentrate on one client, if necessary. • Volunteers can be recruited to provide supportive services to the families, friends, and employers of clients, if such services make the primary focus (paid staff role) more effective.
<p>Employees are an organizational <i>expense</i>. While we may solicit them for voluntary cash donations, that's not an obligation. When they leave our employ, there are no official ties (except perhaps retirement benefits).</p>	<p>While expenses to support volunteers should be budgeted, volunteers are time <i>donors</i>. We find ways to solicit them for financial gifts in addition to their hours of voluntary service (which already stretch what the organization can do with the funds on hand). We cultivate long-term relationships with them because they are community <i>friends</i> and can be advocates and financial donors long after they leave their volunteer positions.</p>
<p>Employees are paid labor. As individuals they can care deeply about our organization's mission and give of themselves above and beyond their job descriptions. But they're defined by their work positions.</p>	<p>It's short-sighted to think of volunteers simply as unpaid labor. Their contributions go way beyond assisting in the delivery of services – and not all volunteers do direct service. Volunteers govern, advise, advocate, organize, represent us in the community, provide a link to the client perspective, add new ideas into our strategic planning. Their potential is limitless, if we unleash it.</p>



“Volunteers can re-focus on whatever is most needed right now.”

Susan J. Ellis, longtime contributor to Nonprofit World and president of Energize, Inc., passed away on February 24, 2019. Since 1977, Energize, Inc. has helped a wide diversity of clients start or expand volunteer efforts. Ellis has written 14 books on volunteerism and dozens of articles. She was co-publisher of the international online journal, e-Volunteerism (e-volunteerism.com), and dean of faculty for the online volunteer management training program, Everyone Ready®. Browse the 1200+ pages of free volunteer management information on the Energize website: energizeinc.com.

Find Out More

For more on volunteering, see these articles at NonprofitWorld.org:

The One Job Volunteers Can't Do (Vol. 23, No. 1)

New Volunteers Are Closer than You Think (Vol. 37, No. 1)

Are You Making It Hard to Volunteer? (Vol. 22, No. 5)

How to Measure Your Volunteers' Success (Vol. 35, No. 3)

Building Trust with Your Volunteers (Vol. 34, No. 4)

Volunteers: Recruit, Place, & Retain the Best (Vol. 29, No. 6)

Maintaining a Teenage Volunteer Network (Vol. 36, No. 1)

