



## Can You Save Money by Using Volunteers Rather than Paid Staff?

Is replacing paid staff with volunteers a good way to cope with budget cuts?

**Q:** Our organization needs to cut some staff positions. Is it possible to get the work done by volunteers instead?

**A:** Many organizations are faced with an impossible choice: the need to reduce spending while maintaining or increasing services. It's appealing to conclude that "we can do it with volunteers."

While volunteers can certainly be of enormous assistance, it's simplistic and false to see them as "free" labor. They don't require a great deal of cash outlay, but they're expensive in terms of recruitment, training, coordination, and supervision time.

As an overall observation, don't wait till a budget crisis to begin to involve volunteers. Doing so reinforces the notion that volunteers are a second-choice bandaid. Not only will staff resist volunteer help just when they themselves are coping with an increased workload, but it's hard to sound sincere when recruiting in desperation. The best way to gain expanded volunteer support in lean times is to have incorporated volunteers as a welcome resource much earlier.

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But what can you do, today, faced with staff layoffs? It's next to impossible to "fill a gap" left by a full-time employee with one volunteer—it would require an intricate schedule of several volunteers, each giving a certain number of hours per week and each bringing the organization a different set of qualifications. Take all the concerns of "job sharing" and multiply them several fold!

It's also a mistake to assume that it will be easier to find volunteers to handle low-level, clerical jobs. It's easier these days to find volunteers willing to handle the more challenging assignments of, say, writing the organization's newsletter or helping a family learn budgeting than to get a full shift of volunteers to do data entry or filing.

The best way to handle the real problem of a reduced budget is to reassess the job descriptions of the *entire staff*. This means doing a task analysis of the way things really work in the organization, not just what was put on paper in the distant past. Scrutinize the various tasks that each employee is doing and ask:

- What is someone doing daily or on an inflexible schedule?
- What are people doing that doesn't require their specialized training? (For example, a lot of time is spent in making follow-up calls and composing letters that may take someone away from direct service to clients.)

- What is someone doing that might be done more effectively by someone else with special training in that skill?

Once you've identified such tasks, you're ready to re-align all the job descriptions. *Rewrite employee positions* so they contain all the tasks that require daily attention and special training. Now add the responsibilities that were assigned to the "cut" staff members, so that the remaining employees are now assigned to the most vital, daily functions.

Next, remove the periodic or less technical responsibilities—which then become the basis for legitimate *volunteer* position descriptions. You'll be asking volunteers to handle work (still important) that can be done on a once-a-week or non-deadline basis or that makes use of special talents for which the volunteers have been recruited. This approach to the unfortunate need to trim the budget is good management of both paid and volunteer staff.

One last observation about retrenchment. Unfortunately, it's not unusual to see organizations lay off their volunteer program manager in the first round of staff cuts. The theory is that the volunteer program manager is "indirect" staff and, since there are already volunteers in place, there will be few immediate consequences from this vacancy. Then, often without seeing the irony, the same organizations also announce that they're seeking more volunteers!

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Clearly, my position is that the more critical volunteers are to your organization, the more important the position of the person who leads the volunteer program. Not only do you need such a manager to expand the volunteer corps, but current volunteers can feel unsupported and taken for granted when they lose their staff liaison.

On the other hand, if you're laying off employees in large numbers, this probably isn't the most diplomatic time to *create* a new position of volunteer program manager. So, again, plan for volunteers when times are good if you want their help in times of crisis. ■

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*This response is adapted from the 3rd edition of From the Top Down: The Executive Role in Volunteer Program Success, currently in production with a publication date of early 2010.*