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Paull, M., Holloway, D.A. and Burnett, H. (2010) Managers of volunteers: Underrated, undervalued and underpaid? In: 13th National Conference on Volunteering: Initiate. Discover. Examine., 27 - 29 October 2010, The Sebel and Citigate Albert Park, Melbourne.

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Managers of Volunteers: Underrated, Undervalued and Underpaid?

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A recent online survey (completed in 2009) of volunteer involving organisations in Western Australia included in its scope an examination of the responsibility for the management of volunteers in respondent organisations. The nature of these positions elicited responses that ranged from “no designated volunteer manager” to a “volunteer strategy and planning specialist”. In the early 1990s English researcher Roger Hedley (1992) observed that the management of volunteers is far more complex than that of managing paid staff. Despite efforts by peak organisations to increase the recognition of this role, many of those who occupy this important position are still referred to as “volunteer co-ordinator” or some derivative of this title, and very few are paid at a rate comparable to the managers of paid staff. This paper considers the value placed on managers of volunteers, and the contribution they make to their organisations and the wider community. It examines an apparent contradiction in the social construction of volunteering. We value volunteer activities as altruistic and vital to a healthy community, and afford it a status above that of paid work. However, we often resource volunteer activities poorly, and those with the responsibility for managing volunteers are often isolated, inadequately rewarded, under-resourced and comparatively underpaid.

INTRODUCTION

The management of volunteers is receiving increasing attention in volunteer-involving organisations. There are a number of reasons for this – including:

- Increased demands for excellence in service delivery from clients and beneficiaries of volunteer effort;
- Increasing levels of risk management requirements stipulated by insurance providers;
- Increasing concerns about financial and fiduciary responsibility of non-profit boards and management committees; and
- Increasing expectations from volunteers themselves that their work will be well organised and their time well spent.

These pressures have been met by the gradual adoption of modern management techniques in volunteer-involving organisations. Some commentators have been opposed to this process (e.g. Darcy, 2002), but generally the adoption of a management approach has been accepted. Meijis and Ten Hoorn (2008) are quick to point out that there is no “one best way” of

managing volunteers. They also demonstrate that much of the literature on volunteer management examines the process from the perspective of paid managers where there is a management structure and a paid manager and that there are differences where the manager is “all volunteers” and organisations are run by a volunteer committee or group, or by the chair of that group.

Background

Lyons (1994, p. 164) suggested as far back as the early 1990s that confusion over meanings of volunteering might contribute to the lack of recognition of the value of the services provided by volunteers to the Australian economy. In Canada a scan of public perceptions of voluntary work found similar views (Husbands, McKechnie & Leslie, 2001). Concern over definition and methods of calculation are compounded by concerns over the classification of volunteer activity as “work” or as “leisure”. Part of this concern is perhaps associated with the changing view of the volunteer as active citizen rather than “Lady Bountiful” (Sheard, 1995). Social scientists (Baldock, 1988) and labour historians have also examined this view (Oppenheimer, 1998; 2000; 2004; Scott, 1998). Scott (1998) argues that if volunteer activity is classified as “work” much of labour history, especially that of women, is yet to be examined. Oppenheimer appears to be a solitary voice attempting to breach this gap. Such lack of recognition of the value of volunteering translates into the recognition of volunteers in organisations, vis a vis paid work,

Research carried out elsewhere with regard to the management of volunteers has highlighted the need for organizations to recognise that part of placing a value on volunteering is valuing the person or people who are charged with responsibility for managing volunteers and volunteer programs.

Volunteers, and those who manage them, operate in an environment which sends contradictory messages about the value of volunteering. Volunteers are valued for the work that they do, it appears that the actions of organisations and the community tend not to reflect the value of their contribution. In organisations managers of volunteers tend to be relatively low paid, with limited training and limited support. In many cases they are not full time, or their role encompasses other roles in the organisation.

Volunteering vis-à-vis paid work

Volunteers are highly regarded on the one hand for their contribution to society but volunteering appears to enjoy lower status as an activity when compared to paid work. This

status has been the subject of concern and debate amongst researchers and practitioners in the volunteering field for some time. The “spectre” of paid work may contribute to the organisational status afforded volunteering. The neo-disciplinary or pre-paradigmatic state of volunteering may also have contributed to this position. It has been reported elsewhere (Paull, 2007) that the tensions and contradictions in the field have contributed to a lack of coherence in the measurement and therefore quantification of volunteering. The inability to accurately estimate the numbers of volunteers, and the consequent limitations on accurately calculating the value of volunteering in monetary terms has contributed to the delay in volunteering being recognised for its importance to the economy and to a society which often fails to recognise those things which are not quantified. Recent changes to this, including attempts to promote the value of volunteering in social capital terms are beginning to change this situation. Many organisations, however, have yet to translate their acknowledgement of the importance of volunteers to their work into better recognition of the importance of the paid staff who manage the volunteers, both in terms of pay and conditions and in terms of the training and support offered them. Volunteers indicated their awareness of the workloads and pressures faced by managers of volunteers. It is not the individual organisations, rather the societal view of volunteering which contributes to this situation by the apparent contraction in place whereby volunteering is on the one hand valued as an altruistic act and one which contributes to the society in immeasurable ways, and on the other hand poorly resourced and supported at both the organisational and societal level. The expression volunteers work for free but good volunteer management is not without expenses is an important concept recently explored by the task force which reported to the federal government recently on the rising costs of volunteering (Costs of Volunteering Taskforce, 2006).

Our Findings

Recent work in Western Australia which was aimed at examining changes in volunteer management practices between 1994 and 2009, sought data *inter alia* from respondents to an online survey about their title, role and pay, as well as some aspects of their training and support available to them as managers.

54 of the 61 respondents (88%) occupy a paid position in their organisation. Of the 54 respondents who occupy paid positions only 23 are in full time positions, ten (10) are in part time positions, and of the remaining 19 (both full and part time) whose role includes duties other than volunteer management, 11 occupy a role where volunteer management is less than 50% of their duties.

Salaries for the paid employee respondents in the volunteer management roles are as follows:

Less than \$30,000 per annum (pro rata)	17.0%	9
\$30 – 35,000 per annum (pro rata)	7.5%	4
\$35 – 40,000 per annum (pro rata)	3.8%	2
\$40 – 45,000 per annum (pro rata)	11.3%	6
\$45 – 50,000 per annum (pro rata)	11.3%	6
\$50 – 55,000 per annum (pro rata)	17.0%	9
\$55 – 60,000 per annum (pro rata)	9.4%	5
\$60 – 65,000 per annum (pro rata)	7.5%	4
\$65 – 70,000 per annum (pro rata)	1.9%	1
Over \$70,000	13.2%	7

Further investigation of the data provided about salaries shows that of those in the over \$70,000 pro rata two (2) are on full time contracts, two (2) are on full time individual agreements/industrial instruments, and one did not disclose the nature of employment agreement. The other two are in part time positions, where volunteer management is less than 50% of their duties – one on this is on a contract and one on a state government award.

Of those who are on less than \$30,000 per annum pro-rata seven (7) are part-time employees, and two (2) are full-time employees. One of those full-time employees is on an individual agreement/industrial instrument with volunteer management being more than 50% of the duties of that role. The other is paid pursuant to a community service award which has volunteer management as part of the role at less than 50%. However, the organisation has only a very small number of volunteers.

What is more important for the purpose of this analysis is that there seems to be no pattern of pay rates relative to volunteer numbers. Similarly, the basis for the determination of pay rates/salary also seems to have no consistent pattern. A significant number of the managers (16) are employed pursuant to or with reference to the community service award; another group (14) on individual contracts; nine (9) are on an individual agreement or industrial instrument; six (6) are on a state government award; four (4) on an enterprise bargaining agreement; and one on a local government award. When those employed on the community

service award are examined, it is apparent that no consistent set of criteria, relative to the volunteers, applies.

The social construction of volunteering and the contradictory nature of how it is or is not valued is reflected not only in the lack of a pay rate or band into which volunteer managers fall but also into the lack of an agreed title or label for the position they occupy. Twenty four of the respondents to the online survey who have responsibility for managing volunteers are known as volunteer co-coordinators. Only five of those have the the title of Manager of volunteers or Volunteer manager (8%). Twenty four (or 39%) have the title of Volunteer co-ordinator, a title which has been in use for a long time in volunteer-involving organisations. However, organisations such as Volunteering Western Australia have sought to have an adoption of titles across the field which recognises the management role inherent in this position.¹

A further twenty four respondents indicated that “other” titles are in use. Six use titles which are similar to or derivations of the title volunteer co-ordinator, including “co-ordinator of volunteers”, and “volunteering co-ordinator”. One indicated “we do not have a designated volunteer manager” whilst another mentioned “no title given”, and a third “no title only use his given name”. Further investigative checking of v other responses indicates that this is not confined to organisations where the manager is not in a paid role. Other titles include Office Co-ordinator, Project Manager – HR, Service Manager, Marketing and Development Manager, Operations Manager and Program Manager, Organisational Development manager where the management of volunteers is part of another role within the organisation. This is perhaps an indication that the role reflected in the title is of equal or greater importance to the organisation than the management of volunteers. Some titles, however, show an importance placed on volunteering: Volunteer Strategy and Planning Specialist, Volunteer Engagement Officer, Activity and volunteer coordinator, Team Leader, Volunteer Services.

Support, training and resources provided to the person responsible for the management of volunteers were not specifically surveyed in this study, but further information sought about volunteer management practices for the initial report provides some further insights for consideration with respect to the role of the manager of volunteers. For example, 83% of respondents indicated that potential volunteers are interviewed, but 56% responded no to the question “are your interviewers trained in interviewing?”. In addition, 70% of respondents

¹ An example of this was the renaming of the Volunteer Co-ordinators’ Network to the Volunteer Managers’ Network in YEAR.

indicated that this interview was for the purpose of ascertaining suitability of applicants for volunteering tasks, record keeping and appropriate placement. In the area of grievances, 70% of respondents have a policy or procedure for volunteers to have grievances heard, but over 55% of respondents indicated that the person who hears grievances is not specifically trained in grievance handling.

Discussion

The data from this survey is limited with regard to the detail it provides about volunteer managers and co-ordinators but it points to the need to further explore this topic. In the *National Survey of Volunteer Issues 2009* published by Volunteering Australia 70% of volunteer managers occupy a paid position. No indication is given as to what proportion of these roles relate to volunteer management, but 48% are part time.

The VA survey authors suggest that the Volunteering Issues results “may suggest that adequate resources, particularly the role of manager of volunteers, is important if organisations are to have the capacity to develop and maintain management systems and processes for volunteers.” It is of particular importance to note that in the VA survey 54% of volunteers reported no volunteer appraisal or performance management process available - - this is despite their indication that feedback is important to them to feel valued. (p. 15).

Within the field of study volunteers and volunteering are defined in relation to paid work. In general terms this is to be expected given that the absence of payment and the voluntary nature of the act are things which are seen to characterise volunteering. The complexity associated with pinning down a definition of volunteering, and the fact that the lack of agreement or understanding has meant that volunteering is yet to be adequately measured or valued in quantitative terms are factors which contribute to ambiguity in the status of volunteering. Volunteering is seen to be both altruistic and somehow above paid work, whilst at the same time viewed as not as important as paid work in terms of organisational support and infrastructure. This in turn leads to the lower status of volunteering in organisations, and *the lack of support and status afforded managers of volunteers and their programmes*. Such lack of support and status means that at times managers of volunteers are ill- equipped to manage complex management situations.

Some volunteer participants in a study into the management of older volunteers (Paull 2007) felt that the respect of the organisation for the program was reflected in the who and

how of the management of volunteers –if the programme is valued and respected a person who both values and respects the volunteers will be appointed to the position.

*Generally speaking, I think it's the coordinator is the key to it. The person who is the manager or whatever ... whether they are old or young or whatever .. it is an important position and I **don't think a lot of organizations appreciate that** [my emphasis] (V)*

the most important person in this chain of volunteers is the coordinator, the actual person who deals with the volunteers (V)

the organisation can appoint or retain a person whose approach to the volunteers is seen to be disrespectful:

In another organisation which shall remain nameless Because we have got a coordinator that doesn't give a damn and doesn't want the job. She is telling the chief that everything's rosy, and not giving any work to the volunteers 'cos she hasn't got the time or the inclination to go about it. (V)

and

She's not interested in what am I doing, why should she bother? It's ... it just seems that her time's more valuable doing what she wants to do and this doesn't matter.[aside] not here of course. (V)

With respect to the second example above another volunteer observed:

She may have been forced into that role in the first place (V)

Well ... that's how it seems ... (V)

Nobody else wants to take it on ... oh well I'll do it ...(V)

... yes ... and she's been delegated ... (V)

Evidence that such an appointment is not isolated:

... I've seen that so many times ..(V).

from another volunteer in the group discussion.

The status afforded volunteering in organisations is reflected in the resources which are put into volunteer programmes. The amount of support received by the manager in terms of training and development, time allocation and other resources are part of this picture.

Managers of volunteers are often time poor and trying to cope with many pressures including

administrative requirements and demands from other parts of the organisation. As has been discussed, the manager of volunteers is often responsible for a range of duties beyond management of volunteers, or occupies a part time position. In some cases the management role falls to another volunteer, or is considered to be a minor part of the paid worker's role in the organisation. There is evidence elsewhere of the burden of responsibility placed on managers of volunteers (e.g. Paull, 2001; Usiskin 2003, AVM, 2009).

The fact that a manager of the same number of paid FTEs would not have the same number of people to manage does not seem to be taken into consideration by the organisation on many occasions. The status of the manager or co-ordinator of volunteers is evident in the allocation of volunteer management as an additional duty for workers in other positions, and the part time employment status of many managers of volunteers. This may be due to the paradoxical status of volunteering vis-à-vis paid work.

A recent survey of over 1500 people conducted during the 2010 Federal election campaign was the basis for a manifesto published by ProBono Australia and the Centre for Social impact which called for government commitment to **Facilitate and promote volunteering, especially through support of sector-led initiatives**". This included *Supporting good volunteer management needs to be much more on the agenda*

Since (date) the Australasian Association of Volunteer Administrators (AAVA) has sought to gain recognition for the work of their members, and in England a similar campaign has recently been ramped up in the face of recognition from other governments in the UK (Usiskin, 2010).

Conclusion

At the organisational level recognition of the importance of good management practice which meets the needs of the volunteers and the needs of the organisation including those of clients and other stakeholders is required. Such recognition will come from viewing volunteering programmes as more than an add on or money saving activity for the

organisation. Actions which will reinforce such recognition include paying managers competitive wages, providing them with organisational infrastructure and support.

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Manifesto towards...

http://www.probonoaustralia.com.au/sites/www.probonoaustralia.com.au/files/manifesto_toward_a_thriving_community_sector.pdf