

VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT

A resource for association professionals June 2024

“As association professionals, it is our job to make engaging with the association a positive, productive, impactful and meaningful experience. Creating structures that make this possible requires intentionality, resources, strategy and future thinking.”



*Lindsay Currie, CAE
Executive Officer
Council on
Undergraduate
Research*

Decoding the Volunteer-Staff Relationship

– Peggy Hoffman, FASAE, CAE and Kristine Metter, MS, CAE

Volunteers are the lifeblood of many associations providing indispensable support that often accounts for 25% or more of the association's total workforce hours. Imagine doing without their subject matter expertise, creativity, connections or efforts.

Yet maximizing the impact of these invaluable contributions requires more than just recognition of their importance; it demands strategic management and robust support. At the heart of this endeavor lies the crucial role of staff members who serve as liaisons to volunteer groups, acting as bridges between the organization's needs and volunteers' passions.

What's the roadmap to maximize volunteer impact for the volunteer and the association? Let's explore that from three sides: the volunteer, the association, and the key bridge between those two - the staff.

VOLUNTEERS: YOUR MOST ENGAGED MEMBERS

Some 25% of your association's workforce has been remote all along. While they average 90 hours of work per year, some never get orientation or training and rarely are equipped with the best technology or tools. Fortunately, 90% are well-educated in their field. Who is this workforce? It's your association's volunteers.

From leadership roles to event support, volunteers offer a diverse range of skills and services, augmenting an association's productivity and supporting the achievement of its mission and goals. The research also shows volunteers maintain their memberships for longer periods than other members. We know all this from the [Mutually Beneficial Volunteer Relationship](#) research (MBVS) conducted by the ASAE Research Foundation.

This research also echoed something we have known since ASAE's 2008 [Decision to Volunteer](#) study: volunteers prefer shorter terms, shorter succession pathways and more flexible volunteering options. Research in 2017 and 2022 indicated that preference is still strong today amid other changes in our volunteer workforce. The 2019 [ASAE ForesightWorks Volunteering Driver of Change](#) offered two key observations about our next-generation professionals: (1) many are motivated to engage in outcome-based volunteering that drives change and provides a pathway toward leadership and (2) as a digital generation they are less attached to

tradition and less likely to align to associations based on yesterday's value proposition.

Another interesting point from the MBVS research was the finding that while overall satisfaction with volunteer experiences was high, respondents were least satisfied with the amount of feedback they received about their performance as volunteers. Respondents suggested their associations could better explain how their work fits into the larger picture, create clearer expectations for volunteers, and provide volunteer training.

These last points underscore the need for associations to take a fresh look at their volunteer systems. The Volunteering driver of change calls for the transformation of our volunteer systems that require adoption of the traditional human resource management system to volunteer management and rethinking our governance structure. So where do we begin?

THE VOLUNTEER SYSTEM: MAXIMIZING CONTRIBUTIONS

While crucial, effectively managing this capacity is often overlooked or left to chance, thus leaving staff and volunteers dissatisfied and frustrated. This was a key observation from the [Holistic Approach to Volunteer Management](#) (HVM) (ASAE member log-in required to view Executive Summary), conducted by the ASAE Research Foundation.

What would improve the situation? First, a successful volunteer program hinges on mutual benefit—the volunteers make a meaningful contribution to the organization's mission, while the volunteering enhances an individual's professional development and personal satisfaction. Associations that prioritize volunteer satisfaction and ensure their contributions are meaningful and well-matched to their skills tend to experience higher levels of engagement and productivity.

Second, it is about creating a culture that embraces the central role of volunteers. The [HVM research](#) report outlines the characteristics of a healthy volunteer program which in turn supports that mutually beneficial relationship. These include:

- An organizational culture of volunteerism
- Clarity of purpose and definition of high performing
- Holistic and transparent volunteer system infrastructure
- Commitment to continuous improvement
- Professional development (for volunteers and staff)
- Staff readiness and preparedness
- Information and knowledge transfer
- Anticipatory capabilities and responsiveness
- Resource commitment
- Community focus

- Strong identification and connection to the profession or trade

A central tenet of these characteristics is preparing people to effectively work together in a way that leaves all parties happy that they are engaged and fulfilled with the outcome of the experience. That preparation is often lacking in association volunteer programs.

One action the Volunteering driver of change suggests leads us to the next discussion. It is investing in your association's own staff. Since staff are vital to the success of a volunteer project, as well as the experience your volunteers have, investing in customer service and project management training for people on your team who will be working as volunteers can be a game-changer.

PREPARING STAFF TO SUPPORT VOLUNTEERS

How should you approach this preparation? Start with getting buy-in on the importance of supporting volunteers. Staff commitment to a volunteer program is stronger when they understand the value volunteers bring to the organization and that "they are worth the effort." Resistance to using volunteers can be addressed through staff involvement in solutions, clear role definitions, and recognition for collaborative efforts. Betty Stallings offers ways to gain staff support to build a solid staff-volunteer team in her book [Training Busy Staff to Succeed with Volunteers](#) (see sidebar).

How to gain staff support to build a solid staff-volunteer team:

1. Build staff involvement and influence in the volunteer program.
2. Clearly define roles and expectations for volunteers and staff.
3. Reward staff for their efforts to partner with volunteers in the accomplishment of the organization's mission.
4. Establish a mission and set of values for the volunteer program that appeals to a higher calling.
5. Invest in competency training for staff.

From Training Busy Staff to Succeed with Volunteers by Betty Stallings ([link](#))

A few associations are taking steps to formalize the role of working with volunteers versus tacking the task on as one of many in a position description. Tobi Johnson offers a [sample volunteer coordinator job description](#) with a link to core volunteer management competencies - all of which might be overwhelming to consider when the volunteer liaison role is one part of job. This does offer insight which can serve as a guide to updating job descriptions to recognize this critical role.

The Association Forum Professional Practice Statement on the volunteer leader and staff relationship offers a model for embedding this liaison role in staff expectations. Most of the statements begin with "in collaboration with ... volunteer" clarifying the staff as a partner; examples include:

- In collaboration with appropriate volunteer leaders, articulate the governing body's strategic charge and expected outcomes and

facilitate necessary planning and implementation.

- In collaboration with volunteer leaders, provide mechanisms to identify, train, retain and recognize volunteer leaders.
- In collaboration with volunteer leaders, organize necessary forums and meetings (in person or electronic as appropriate) to facilitate the work of the governing body in fulfilling its strategic objectives.

Second, invest in staff training. Identify what staff members need to know to be successful in working with volunteers and assess their current skill set. Volunteer Pro's [Competency Model for Volunteer Administration](#) offers a framework for supporting professional development. As a bonus, it becomes a guide for self-reflection to help staff pinpoint areas for growth and learning.

Identifying gaps provides a roadmap for staff professional development. Staff training might cover a range of topics, including trends impacting volunteering, communication skills, project management, delegation and cultural competency. There are a myriad of courses that expose staff to key skill areas like communications, meeting management, and delegation. Courses such as the [Navigating The Staff Liaison Role](#) and the advanced program, [Mastering Your Volunteer Liaison Role](#), will then help staff apply these skills to working with volunteers.

Third, set the appropriate framing to get full staff buy-in. Staff will only be interested in training if they understand how benefits them. The training must

be perceived as solving their problems or it will get pushed aside for other immediate priorities. An added benefit for associations investing in this training is that staff commitment to the volunteer program is enhanced when they feel competent in their abilities to work with volunteers.

In most cases, training staff to excel in their roles as volunteer group liaisons requires a comprehensive approach. The starting point is acknowledging the critical role staff have in the success of the volunteer's work and experience

and therefore focusing attention on supporting staff to get the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in this role.

Association leaders accept the importance of volunteers, yet their systems often do not leverage the potential of volunteers to work in concert with the association to move the mission and meet member needs in a changing world - all which creates an urgency in improving volunteer systems. #

About the authors

Since starting in association management, **Peggy Hoffman, FASAE, CAE**, has worked with and discovered the power of volunteers which has driven an interest in discovering how to make the best volunteer experience.

With more than twenty-five years of association management experience, **Kristine Metter, MS, CAE**, is driven by a strong belief in the transformative power of volunteers and champions the benefits of creating compassionate and connected communities.

References:

- [Mutually Beneficial Volunteer Relationships](#), ASAE Research Foundation, 2017
- [Holistic Approach to Association Volunteer Management](#), ASAE Research Foundation, 2023
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