



samag
Seminars for Arts Professionals

ENGAGING VOLUNTEERS: THE PITFALLS AND THE PLEASURES SEMINAR

HOST: Tim McGarry, SAMAG Committee Member
PANEL: Eve Proper, Historic Houses Members, Friends at the Australian Ballet
Craig Brush, Events Manager, Art Gallery Society of New South Wales
Alex Rich, Contempo Development Manager, Art Gallery Society of New South Wales
Rony Bogner, Volunteer Co-ordinator, Sydney Jewish Museum
DATE: Monday 31 March 2008

Volunteers: The Facts

- In 2006, 5.4 million Australians volunteered. That means that 34% of the population volunteered. Of that number, 44% were aged between 35 and 44 years.
- There are two types of volunteers: retired professionals with an interest in the organisation, and younger people who volunteer to continue their professional development.

Why do people volunteer?

- People volunteer for many reasons: to continue to use their professional skills, to socialise, to contribute to a cause, to learn more about a particular area, because they have a vested interest in an organisation, to fulfil vocational requirements, and to fill a creative void.
- Many young people volunteer to forge social or professional networks, and many volunteer in creative fields to take advantage of exhibits or events they might not be able to afford otherwise.

Tips for Employers

- Always treat a volunteer like a paid employee. After all, they represent your organisation and contribute to it just like your paid employees do.
- Be clear about the volunteers' role. Try writing a job description to clarify the parameters of their responsibilities. At the Sydney Jewish Museum, Rony says this works well.
- Train your volunteers. Rony says that when she implemented a training program for the Museum's volunteers, they performed much better.
- Remember that your volunteers aren't being financially rewarded. Try to find other ways to compensate them. For instance: be mindful of their length of service (and recognise it); throw Christmas parties; make meetings as sociable as possible.
- Be respectful of volunteers' ages. Many are older and might not have computer experience, for instance.
- Ask your volunteers to highlight their skills. That way, you can place them in the role that suits them best.
- If a volunteer becomes problematic, handle the situation as if they were a paid employee. Keep your emotional intelligence about you and manage the problem as professionally as possible.
- Appoint a volunteer representative in the group – this ensures that, if the volunteers have any problems, the representative can take them to management to be addressed appropriately.
- Be prepared: many volunteers are older and can become sick more easily. It's a good idea to have a back-up roster, in addition to the regular roster.
- As Craig, from NSW Art Galleries, says, it's usually not difficult to get feedback from your volunteers! But if you are finding it hard, use volunteer meetings to engage them.
- All volunteers need to be insured – both onsite and offsite. They also need to follow the same health and safety procedures that regular employees adhere to.
- Do not track volunteers' hours in your accounts – if you do this, you will have to pay fringe benefits tax.
- Remember to be flexible – different organisations require different volunteers, and different volunteer programs. Be adaptable and your volunteers will flourish.

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Volunteers: The Pitfalls

- Just like paid employees, sometimes you'll have to manage volunteers who you don't like. They can be inexperienced – handle them as professionally as possible.
- Occasionally, you may feel you have to cease the services a volunteer. Craig, from Art Galleries Australia, admits that the process can be awkward, but is sometimes necessary. Keep in mind that the situation is very sensitive – and the last thing you want to do is disgruntle your volunteer. If you do have to bite the bullet, take a leaf from Rony's books and offer your volunteer alternative responsibilities.
- Volunteer insurance doesn't cover them in the same way that workers' compensation covers paid employees. Workers are compensated for a loss of income *and* medical costs, but as volunteers aren't paid, they are only compensated for their medical expenses. This can be problematic if your volunteers have other responsibilities.

Volunteers: The Pleasures

- Volunteers generally have a genuine interest in your organisation – this is a rare quality that should be nurtured.
- Volunteers often do the drudge work that you don't have time for – remember that!
- Many volunteers are older and have led incredibly rich lives – this is a wonderful dimension that they bring to their roles.

Volunteer Success Stories

The Sydney Jewish Museum is a fantastic example of how volunteers have contributed to the success of an organisation. The Museum began with one man who recruited Holocaust survivors as the Museum's first tour guides. Today – only ten years later – the Museum currently manages 230 volunteers.

Similarly, the Art Gallery of New South Wales's Community Ambassadors group began when the Gallery's Asian curators noticed a lack of Asian visitors. The curators developed a plan to recruit ambassadors from Asian communities – who were then charged with engaging their community's interest in the Art Gallery. This has been an incredible success.

The Gallery's Contempo group – which consists of 18-40 year olds – began when the Gallery's regular volunteers realised that very few young people visited the Gallery. By engaging younger volunteers, the Art Gallery hoped to engage a younger visitor population. When the program began in 2000, there were 156 members. Today, there are 1330.

And finally, as Rony says, "Volunteers don't get paid, not because they're worthless, but because they're priceless."

By: Lauren Smelcher