

Seven Ways to Maximize Volunteers' Time

BY MARK O. THORSBY, CAE



Associations' resources generally fall into one of two categories: time or money. Obviously, the economic downturn has reduced the latter. Now, however, organizations also are seeing declines in the former, particularly among volunteers, who are less willing to spend time working on behalf of their associations. It's a challenge for even the most experienced association executive, as governing boards continue to expect their associations to accomplish more with less.

According to the Corporation for National and Community Service, the volunteer rate in the United States declined by 2 percent in 2010 — the fourth consecutive annual decline. At the same time, staffing firm Hudson recently surveyed employers and found that nearly half of American workers fail to use all their vacation days. Thirty percent say they use less than half of their allotted time and 42 percent say that they regularly have to cancel vacation plans. Americans are even taking less vacation than the Japanese, who coined the term *karoshi* — the phenomenon of being worked to death.

So, what's an overworked association executive to do? In the face of shrinking resources, consider the following strategies for maximizing your and volunteers' limited time:

1. Critically evaluate whether a job needs to be done by a volunteer.

"It forces us to utilize the scarce time our volunteers have to focus on the unique contributions they — and only they — can provide," says Tom Stautzenbach, CAE, executive director of the American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation. "We are complementing this with more staff to do the tasks that don't really require the member/industry skills and experience. This is also helping to build harmony between the role of staff and the unique and valued role of our member volunteers."

2. Create an array of jobs with varying time commitments.

Redesign jobs to provide a greater spectrum of time commitments from which to match volunteers' availability.

"We continuously evaluate our volunteer positions and the commitment that is necessary for the volunteers to be successful," says Dale West, CAE, executive director of the Society for Gastroenterology Nurses and Associates. "We have added new volunteer opportunities that focus on very specific projects that allow for shorter time commitments."

3. Re-deploy staff to leverage volunteer expertise.

To maximize the contributions that only volunteers can make, tasks that have traditionally been performed by volunteers should be given to staff.

"A key volunteer recently told me that he was about at the end of his resources; the time and money being devoted to the organization as a volunteer was both rewarding and exhausting," says Tom Nicholson, executive director of the Organization Development Network. "He was asking me to take more of the administrative, planning and organizing responsibility so he could get back to equilibrium and enjoyment of all that the organization offered him. So, we did. It wasn't like my staff wasn't busy, but reducing the load on the volunteer was critical to retaining his leadership."

4. Communicate time expectations prior to making assignments.

Volunteers who fail to perform according to the organization's expectations often don't know what they are getting into from the beginning.

"We clearly communicate the time commitment to potential volunteers before making assignments," West says. "I've had potential volunteers thank me for taking the time to explain what's expected and then decline our invitation. But that door is still open for a job that is less demanding instead of a volunteer who feels he or she has let the organization down and is 'damaged' from a future volunteer standpoint."

5. Create new opportunities to appeal to new volunteers.

Although it may seem contradictory, consider creating more opportunities of shorter duration that are focused on using the expertise of the volunteer.

"Our goals and strategies are to increase the number of overall volunteers involved, which also gives us much broader perspective but requires us to do a better job of matching the volunteers' passions, expertise and time availability to the most valuable and appropriate need," Stautzenbach says.

6. Avoid overworking the overworked.

Some associations rely on volunteers to do staff work in addition to strategic leadership, believing the volunteer to be irreplaceable. This is the death knell of associations that rely heavily on volunteers because it results in volunteer fatigue.

“Whether volunteer or employed staff, no one is irreplaceable,” says Kathleen M. Bell, MBA, FASAE. “This is the time for leadership to understand what work has been done, by whom and at what price. When leaders engage in staff work, there is a strategic opportunity cost that often is not tallied.”

7. Seek external advice and counsel.

There are certainly consultants available to help you assess your situation and determine your best response. However, conversations with colleagues outside your association can prove equally valuable — and much more affordable.

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“I’ve found that management solutions can come from a variety of sources and not just other, similar associations,” Bell says. “Frequently, sharing seemingly unrelated challenges with colleagues has given me new perspectives — even when our organizations are very different.”



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The economic recession that started in 2008 caused association executives to rethink their spending priorities. Similarly, the “volunteer time recession” that many organizations are experiencing should persuade association executives to rethink their volunteer management strategies.

This doesn’t have to be a negative, either. View it as an opportunity. Like they say: Adversity is the mother of invention.

“We’re experiencing volunteer time constraints, but I don’t think that’s bad,” Stautzenbach says. “We’re finding that there’s a better way to utilize the volunteer resources we do have and we are appreciating the value our volunteers contribute to the association.” ■

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