

“On Volunteers” column, September 2003  
© 2003, *The NonProfit Times* and  
Susan J. Ellis, President, Energize, Inc., [www.energizeinc.com](http://www.energizeinc.com)

## **Volunteers Are Human Resources...or Are They?**

What should be the interrelationship of an agency’s Volunteer Services Department and its Human Resources (Personnel) Department? This question remains unresolved, with models ranging from never-the-twain-shall-meet to placing volunteer management staff within the human resources office.

This issue was drawn into focus during the first annual Nonprofit Human Resources Conference sponsored by Action Without Borders in Philadelphia this June. More than 300 personnel professionals gathered for three days of over 60 workshops, with the theme of “What Makes Nonprofit Human Resources Unique?” Ironically, the topic of volunteers was added in at the last minute, having not been identified originally by national focus groups as a concern of this audience. But volunteers are *human*, and they are *resources*, aren’t they? Volunteers are the unpaid personnel of an organization.

In a great many nonprofit organizations, the ratio of paid employees to volunteers is the tail wagging the dog. Yet the subject of volunteers is rarely on the agenda of nonprofit executives, especially if there is a designated volunteer program manager or entire volunteer department tasked with responsibility for effective volunteer involvement. It is easy to assume that volunteers are “taken care of” and no one else needs to pay attention. These are bad assumptions.

It is appropriate to expect the volunteer department to be the organization’s experts in the skills of volunteer administration. But there are important questions to be asked and answered from an agency-wide perspective, not left to every unit and individual to work out independently.

### **Hot Topics for HR Professionals**

Even if there is a designated Volunteer Program Manager in place, if HR staff are truly concerned with all “humans” working within the agency, not just employees, the following issues need to be considered:

**Philosophically**, what exactly is the interconnection of paid and unpaid staff? Who makes the policies for either or both groups and why? Are volunteers expected to operate under the same or different rules than employees?

**Practically**, how do the Volunteer Services Office and the Human Resources Office work together on a day-to-day basis? Do they have any required communication? Do they operate at cross purposes? How can each be a resource to the other? Who has what authority?

**Managerially**, when employees are hired, does anyone ask them about their experience in volunteer management (not irrelevant if the job will put them in contact with volunteers, as so many do)? Do staff job descriptions mention supervising volunteers as a work responsibility? Is there any training offered in how to do this? How about recognition for good supervision of volunteers and consequences for bad? What happens if a volunteer has a grievance against a paid worker, or vice versa?

**Legally**, is the organization liable for the work of volunteers? (Yes; they are not “employees” but they *are* “agents” of the organization.) Is the employee supervisor of a volunteer liable for accidents or wrongful acts? (This grabs attention.)

In terms of **risk management**, are volunteers interviewed and screened properly? Are any required background or health screening checks done on them? Are they taught what is necessary to insure the safety of everyone?

**Financially**, are volunteers included in the organization's liability insurance or workers' comp policies? Do they get any benefits such as meals or travel reimbursement? Who budgets for and administers that?

In terms of **labor relations**, how do any unions see volunteer involvement? Who is making rules about what is and isn't legitimate volunteer work—and on what grounds?

In terms of the **Fair Labor Standards Act**, do any employees also give volunteer services to the agency's clients? Are they doing this legally or in violation of the law?

Are **student interns** who receive academic credit “volunteers”? Are they administered as employees, as volunteers, or not at all? Who screens them, orients them, places them, thanks them? (Are there, in fact, “bootleg” workers around that nobody registers anywhere?) In one hospital, the Nutrition Director allowed graduate students in his field to do semester-long placements in his kitchen as a “professional courtesy” to the university department—but never told anyone! For several years, students worked invisibly, receiving no introductions, no insurance, no thank you's, or any other benefit—or screening.

Does the agency have any **“stipended” volunteers**, such as Ameri\*Corps or VISTA? Does it pay anyone something for, perhaps, summer work—but less than a real wage? How do these workers mesh with volunteers or with employees? Who's in charge?

Does the agency have any **“mandated” workers** (court referred, welfare to work, students required to do service in order to graduate)? How do they mesh with everyone else?

What is the agency's position on **hiring volunteers**, past or present? Do volunteers get to see job announcements before the general public? Are volunteers considered as possible job applicants? How about as referral sources to good candidates?

## **Employee/Volunteer Relations**

Universally, the most-requested training topic in volunteerism (no matter what the setting or in what country) is "help us deal with tension between volunteers and paid staff." Because volunteers are the invisible personnel issue, both employees and volunteers on the front lines are left to "work it out" on their own. Unfortunately, teamwork can only be successful if someone at the top of the organization pays attention and makes consistent decisions or policies about the following:

- What do employees really think or feel about volunteers in general and about the volunteers presently in the agency? Are volunteers truly welcomed/valued as part of the team or tolerated as nice-but-unskilled help?
- Are volunteers treated differently in each department? Why and what should the standards be? Does each department have a designated liaison to the Volunteer Office?
- What are the best ways to craft assignments for volunteers to make use of their skills but also of their scattered schedules and very disparate demographics?
- Who's in charge? In a dispute, is the employee always presumed right? Why? Why not?
- What are the differences and similarities in supervising volunteers vs. employees?
- Who is responsible for work if a volunteer does not complete an assignment or is absent?
- Are employees rewarded in any way for successfully encouraging volunteers? Are there consequences to poor performance as a volunteer supervisor?
- Can volunteers use everything available on site: staff lounges, dining hall, copy machines, computers, closets, office supplies? What are the guidelines on this?
- Will the organization allow a volunteer to be fired for poor performance? How and by whom?
- Is the paid staff jealous because volunteers get a recognition banquet and balloons and they don't? Is it time to thank employees and volunteers together?

The complexity of volunteer involvement often amazes people. Given the consequences to employees of ineffective volunteer involvement, how can a Human Resources Department not be connected to the daily issues of employee/volunteer relationships?