



# Volunteers

## some thoughts on the view from the other side

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**M**aking use of volunteers is often discussed in times of financial stringency when resources are limited or dwindling, or very often when a new enterprise needs to get off the ground. In fact, many non-governmental organisations, clubs or associations would not be able to exist at all were it not for volunteers giving freely of their time and expertise.

Libraries also are interested in making use of volunteers - albeit in a limited capacity within the libraries themselves but more particularly in the form of their Friends. But this viewing of the role and use of volunteers in an organisation from a management perspective is somewhat different from the perspective of the volunteers themselves.

### Reasons for volunteering

This is a view that I should like to consider, from the other side as it were, examining why volunteers volunteer; why they remain committed to the responsibility they have undertaken and what are their expectations of reward or payback? Let us not fool ourselves - every volunteer has a personal agenda - the art is to recognise and tap into that agenda.

Volunteers offer their services for many reasons - they may have too much disposable time on their hands so that volunteering is almost a therapeutic activity; they are motivated by a cause that they care deeply about and that appeals to their sense of self-worth or self-achievement or they feel they can make a difference - the psychological benefits of being needed and of

knowing one is doing good are often beyond measure. Or they simply want to meet new and different people or pursue an interest whether it be an old or a new one.

And in South Africa we have a new breed of volunteer - somebody who is a so-called volunteer but who, out of financial necessity, is paid an honorarium or at least expenses - volunteering without any kind of financial remuneration is a luxury he or she cannot afford. These volunteers are often young people who simply cannot find a job despite their qualifications and who hope that, by becoming volunteers in an organisation, they can either get the experience that will stand them in good stead when applying for a job or even ensure they will be considered should a vacancy in the organisation arise.

### Rewards

Having tapped into the motives of the volunteer - whatever they are - the next hurdle seems to be (and using the metaphor of obstacles is not as far-fetched as it may appear) to keep the volunteer not only motivated but committed. How does one ensure that the volunteer turns up regularly, continues with the task if it is ongoing or remains with the task until it is completed - despite inclement weather or outside temptations like visitors, attractive invitations, a good day for going out, or a new exhibition or display? The enticements not to remain committed are many.

It seems to me that the best way to not only attract or recruit volunteers but also to ensure their continuing commitment is to view volunteering quite frankly from the perspective of reward or payback or even barter - the volunteer giving something like time, energy or expertise that is needed in return for something equally valuable to him or her. And I am not talking financial reward or tangible payback. I am talking of intangibles that make giving up one's time and energy worthwhile.

For me, my volunteer job must be something that grabs my interest; or stimulates me; or gets me excited and energised; or involves a learning curve (but please not a vertical learning curve); or brings me into contact with interesting, active and productive people; or makes me feel that in sharing my experience and knowledge I am making a contribution (to say paying back is too pi, even for me); makes me feel I am part of a significant whole or, finally, gives me the satisfaction of a job or jobs well done. And these jobs need not be high-powered. I get a lot of satisfaction out of being part of a team that puts Mountain Club newsletters in their envelopes or taking visitors to the top of Table Mountain on a guided walk round the plateau.

For untate indeed is the manager or chairperson or organising committee that can recognise the importance of these intangible rewards and tap into them - they can be assured of a willing, productive and satisfied volunteer workforce or individual.

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