



## ***The AHA-MK Guide to Working with Volunteers***

Collated from the AHA-MK Forum Workshop  
7<sup>th</sup> September 2011 to consider

### **The Pinnacles and Pitfalls of Volunteer Management**

Following presentations from Voluntary Arts and from regional and city organisations with multifarious volunteers, AHA-MK members and guests thrashed out issues and solutions for volunteer management – on which this guide is based

*'Recruit – Retain – Recognise – Reward!'*

*'Volunteers are a force to be reckoned with...'*

*'Devise volunteering roles first; then diversify.'*

*'Volunteers can shine with training, support and supervision.'*

*'Volunteering is a starting point for many – for paid work or a new career.'*

*'Volunteering is a discipline, a tool you use.'*

*'Volunteering is not free...'*

*'We like working with volunteers!'*

...Some quotations from the workshop

## 1. Why do people volunteer?

- **For work**

To gain new work experience; to share work experience and skills; to learn new skills or hone rusty ones; recently, to overcome the negative effects of redundancy or lack of jobs for new graduates

- **For pleasure**

To socialise or be part of social interaction; to fill in time or get out of the house; because they believe in your 'cause', in your organisation; to do good in the community; to get something out of your organisation – like free tickets

- **For personal esteem**

To make things happen; to gain status, respect and friendship; to build self-confidence; to feel needed and valued.

- **For a combination of these**

To maintain a lifetime's routine of work and leisure



### **Issues:**

- Work-seekers might get lucky and go; the loss of experienced volunteers can have massive implications...although some volunteers never leave!
- Volunteers are not staff – with the paradox of them needing different but 'equal' treatment
- Volunteers are not free help – there are 'hidden' costs eg overheads, desks, equipment, staff management time etc
- 'Culling' of volunteers may be sometimes necessary but always difficult.

### **Solutions:**

- Guard against loss of expertise when volunteers leave - or against lack of new skills within your volunteer cohort - by ensuring there is a continual volunteering recruitment programme
- Ensure that your Board commits to an agreed Policy on Volunteers which identifies how they should be treated within the organisation (see also 'Management' below)
- Be realistic about the potential demands of volunteers on staff time and resources – be prepared and avoid shocks!
- Emphasise that volunteers' experience with the organisation can influence their future – it isn't wasted if they leave.

## *2. Why does an organisation use volunteers?*

- **For survival**

The organisation wouldn't exist otherwise – sometimes there are few or no paid staff at all

- **For fresh ideas**

Volunteers' enthusiasm and passion for your organisation and what it does enrich it, along with the depth and richness of their experiences.

- **For support, facilitating, enabling, providing opportunities**

Volunteers can 'give back' to society whilst opening up new opportunities for the organisation's development. This can increase organisational capacity, enhance and expand the existing offer, as well as providing advocacy support. The scale of achievement with volunteers' help can be 'massive'.

- **For connections**

To maintain real links with the community

### **Issues:**

- In a volunteer-heavy organisation, their involvement – and ownership of the organisation's space – can be overwhelming. Unmanaged volunteers may do random things...

### **Solutions:**

- It is possible to manage a degree of eccentricity! (See 'Management' below)

## *3. How should an organisation acquire volunteers?*

- **By targeting specific volunteer roles**

Organisational needs should determine where volunteers could fit in; be precise about the role – advertise what specific skills or standards are needed; have short-stay positions (eg for students or work experience)

- **By trial and review**

Offer a trial period – for both parties to decide the outcome. Set good standards from the start

**Issues:**

- Finding the right volunteers for the required task
- Difficult to recruit young people – and keep them

**Solutions:**

- Be selective for specific tasks, but try never to turn anyone away
- Be mindful of students' summer vacation availability; graduate unemployment – and consequent need for graduates to acquire portfolio of experience and skills

*4. What do volunteers do?*

- **Work behind the scenes**

Tasked with specific jobs, like cataloguing; archiving; scanning; transcribing; digitising; cleaning; stuffing envelopes... Or generally involved in the total running of the organisation - including building, maintenance of buildings and equipment, landscape work, catering, conservation of artefacts, school loan boxes, photography. The aim is to offer opportunities for volunteers to do as much as is possible for them and for the organisation, but without creating a two-tier position with paid staff.



- **Work with or for the general public**

Receptionists; tour guides; assisting with family activities or large-scale school visits; trained volunteers for specific tasks (like handling artefacts); helping set up exhibitions; recording interviews; participating in public performances – like

large-scale musical documentary plays, creating films, or dressing up in period costume; assisting with audience events, as ushers, ticket sellers, bar tenders, programme sellers, invigilators...

**Issues:**

- Finding the right tasks for volunteers
- Staff have no time for training volunteers

**Solutions:**

- Consult with umbrella organisations in your sphere (eg Local History or Arts groups) for identifying suitable volunteer tasks
- Use experienced volunteers as trainers

**5. How should an organisation manage volunteers?**

- **With an overarching perspective**

The manager needs to support all personnel whatever the status; her/his holistic strategic vision is essential; s/he can bridge the gaps between differing demands / needs and with sensitivity can resolve problems

- **With clarity of roles and functions**

What both staff (including managers) and volunteers ( including Board members) do – and the expectations of them and by them - must be clear to all. Match skills with the task needing to be done. Use person specification as well as role specification. Supervise – gently but assertively. Ensure written role descriptions, adequate resources for the role; a Volunteer Policy agreed at the highest level; regular team meetings; and focused training for specific tasks. A customised Volunteers' Handbook could cover much of this.

- **With logistical care**

Use rotas – eg for resources like computers, or for short shifts; use signing in books, emergency contacts; provide adequate space and resources... For specific events, send out lists for signing up with the commitment to arrive ½ hour before it starts; keep tags on the impact of numbers

- **With partnership(s)**

Partnering external groups can bring catalytic relationships that create a further credible role for the organisation; internal 'buddies' or pairings can provide strong support for individual (and new) volunteers

- **With appreciation**

Masses of tea and biscuits; social elements; thanks – cards, presents; group gatherings at some point in the day (tea break / lunch); special events like Christmas lunch with senior staff/Board present; providing references; treated with respect; friendly relationships. Although all volunteers should feel that they are equal, they may need treating differently, otherwise the relationship may not seem genuine.

### ***Issues:***

- Long-serving volunteers sometimes do not want to change
- Having a lack of paid staff makes structure and sustainability difficult
- Manager or Chair has no experience of working with volunteers
- Contradictory management routes may complicate partnership working.
- Other demands on volunteers' time – holidays, paid jobs elsewhere, childcare – can cause logistical problems; and emails and telephones can be tricky communications
- There can be strains in relationships between paid staff and volunteers. Staff rights and needs - like appraisals, health and safety, equal ops etc – may be considered irrelevant for volunteers and cause resentment

### ***Solutions:***

- Steer gently but assertively – even a super-tanker can turn round eventually! Move volunteers around to encourage variety for them as well as for the organisation
- Empower volunteers to assist in leading and managing the structure themselves : they have an interest in this working
- Seek help within the community and council to develop management roles (see links and contacts at the end)
- Be clear about your management direction – good communications are essential – and use well-trained co-ordinators (perhaps volunteers themselves) to cascade it
- Involve volunteers in the logistics of the organisation – administration, accounts, filing – even compiling a Volunteers' Newsletter to keep all in the loop and up-to-date
- Consider the volunteer's rights and needs as well as staff's. Formal conversations – to ask how things are going, to introduce change etc – can provide useful regular feedback. Consult advice given by support agencies (see links and contacts below)

## ***6. What outside support is available?***

- **Association of Volunteer Managers:** <http://volunteermanagers.org.uk> (click 'Community' to find the Volunteer Management Wiki - or go straight to <http://wiki.volunteermanagers.org.uk>)
- **Do-It:** <http://www.do-it.org.uk/> (click 'Need Volunteers' for details of how to use do-it to advertise your volunteering opportunities)
- **Investing in Volunteers:** <http://investinginvolunteers.org.uk> (download the liV Standard 2010 as a pdf - under the Key Documents heading)
- **Voluntary Arts:** <http://www.voluntaryarts.org> (click 'E-news sign-up' (top right) to subscribe to their free weekly email newsletter)
- **Volunteer Centre Milton Keynes** <http://www.volunteermk.org.uk> Support for Milton Keynes not-for-profit groups since 1976. All services are free including advice on best practice in volunteer management, promotion in local problem solving, and a brokerage service for the recruitment of new volunteers.
- **Volunteering England:** <http://www.volunteering.org.uk> (click 'Managing Volunteers' to access the information service, good practice bank and publications).

## The presenters:

**Robin Simpson:** Chief Executive of Voluntary Arts. Past experience includes using volunteers to record for RNIB, managing concerts for amateur orchestra and later, 'Making Music'. Currently sits on various national think-tanks for volunteering. (robin@voluntaryarts.org.uk - Tel: 07834 693 819)

**Joy Todd:** Head of Volunteers for six Oxford University Museums and Collections – 560 volunteers in total, with co-ordinators to manage them. Volunteers use OUMC website to register – they are 'very reactive' to events (joy.todd@oum.ox.ac.uk - Tel: 07903 233 064)

**Mel Jeavons:** General Manager of Living Archive, Milton Keynes with around 50 volunteers helping with recording and archiving people's memories. Developed a Volunteers' Handbook and tradition of celebrating volunteers with special events. (mel@livingarchive.org.uk Tel: 01908 322 568)

**Herb Booth:** Bletchley Community Heritage Officer for Living Archive, Milton Keynes having started as a volunteer himself 20 years ago. Based in Bletchley Library and W Bletchley Resource Centre, volunteers research, record and exhibit local history. (bchi.info@googlemail.com Tel: 01908 368851)

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**The Arts and Heritage Alliance of Milton Keynes**  
*is a unique voluntary representative forum and resource working collaboratively to position the Arts and Heritage sector as a strategic contributor to the community of Milton Keynes*

**We aim**

- to engage members with professionals in arts, heritage and business within and beyond the Milton Keynes community
- to identify where arts and heritage can fit the planning objectives of statutory and other bodies - local, regional and national
- to promote members' considerable achievements – of which this guide is evidence – and ensure they are acknowledged as valued contributors to community wellbeing and the economy.
- and further to develop member audiences:

We have estimated that in 2009-10 around 2½ million visits were made to over 7,000 arts and heritage activities offered by AHA-MK members with £14.6m of turnover generated directly by AHA-MK members, thus helping to create employment and generate tax revenue.

For subscriptions, list of current members and other further information please visit  
[www.aha-mk.org](http://www.aha-mk.org) email: [chair@aha-mk.org](mailto:chair@aha-mk.org)



Images of volunteers courtesy of Living Archive Milton Keynes

*The AHA-MK Guide to Working with Volunteers*  
Workshop notes edited by Marion Hill  
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