



Defining Best Practices in the Life Cycle of the Volunteer

Introduction

Every non-profit organization is either dependent on volunteers or is stronger as a result of an effective volunteer program. In order to develop a list of best practices for the lifecycle of a volunteer, the committee reviewed best practices from the 17 sections within the USTA, other non-profit practices, and formal studies of volunteer practices. This compilation of best practices is the result of the committee's research.

The study revealed that the successful implementation of a volunteer program requires a formal planned approach. Great volunteer programs don't just happen. They are thought out and deliberately put in place. The whole organization needs to "buy into" the importance of volunteers to the mission of the group. Both volunteer leaders and professional staff play a key role in integrating new volunteers into the association.

This collection of best practices focuses on Identification, Recruitment, Welcome, Engagement, Development, Recognition and Retention. A list of criteria for best practices for volunteers is set out below. In addition, samples of documents used by the USTA sections which are consistent with these criteria are available in the depository associated with this study.

Identification & Recruitment

Every successful volunteer program begins with the task of identifying the needs of the organization and the needs of the volunteer. These include such factors as: skill sets, experience, diverse background, and other organizational needs. The process should also include measures to insure that volunteers accept the obligations placed upon them. The bullet points listed below are some of the best practices identified for the purpose of identifying and recruiting quality volunteers.

Key Points for Identification and Recruitment of Volunteers:

1. Know and own your mission; use it as a springboard to invite and attract volunteers.
2. Assign a staff person to coordinate volunteers across all programs.
3. Maintain a current database of active and potential volunteers.
4. Use multiple and varied methods to attract a diverse cross section of volunteers.
5. State the value and importance of volunteering to both the individual and the organization.
6. Learn as much as possible about the volunteer via an interview, application and questionnaire.
7. Provide a written and comprehensive job description for each assignment.
8. Provide a comprehensive volunteer handbook.

Know and own your mission; use it as a springboard to invite and attract volunteers.

- Have a 30 second presentation that you can use to sell a person on volunteering
- Know the answers to FAQs
- Understand and be passionate about why volunteering is beneficial to them

Assign a staff person to coordinate volunteers across all programs.

- One person should be the contact for volunteers
- This person should be aware of all upcoming events that need volunteers
- Volunteers should be shared across programs
- Keep in contact with volunteers throughout the year, update contact information
- Keep in contact with counterparts in USTA and complementary organizations in the area

Maintain a current database of active and potential volunteers.

- Input all information regarding the volunteer to include contact, skills, volunteer hours, length of service, etc.
- Periodically send out information on upcoming events, if you get email bounce backs, update the data
- Use this to track volunteer hours for USTA
- Use this to send out thank you follow-up
- Use for awards

Use multiple and varied methods to attract a diverse cross section of volunteers.

- Make your web site easy to navigate and keep it updated with volunteer opportunities
- List your information on social networking sites: Facebook, MySpace, Twitter
- Use current volunteers and staff to recruit volunteers
- List opportunities with local volunteer agencies
- Seek local businesses who are interested in volunteer activities for their staff

State the value and importance of volunteering to both the individual and the organization.

- List both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards-personal satisfaction, thank you, helping others meet new people, freebies
- Offer testimonials
- List total hours given each year and the dollar value to the organization

Learn as much as possible about the volunteer.

- Use a questionnaire to learn: why are you volunteering, what are your expectations, etc.
- Interview the candidate
- Have them fill out a comprehensive application. This lets them know you are serious, include: full contact information, volunteer history, special skills
- Ask for references- this gives you another opportunity to let others know about the organization

Provide a written and comprehensive job description for each assignment.

- Include tasks involved
- Length of task/activity
- To whom they will report

Provide a comprehensive volunteer handbook.

- Include the history and mission statement of the organization
 - Provide an organizational chart to show where the volunteers fit within the organization
 - Offer it in both electronic and hard copy
 - List job descriptions
 - List staff and contact information
 - List a calendar of events
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Welcome, Engagement & Development

Once an individual is brought into the organization as a volunteer, steps must be taken to make the experience a successful one. Any quality volunteer program must include a process to integrate the individual volunteer and give them an opportunity to succeed. The bullet points listed below are some of the best practices for the purpose of welcoming, engaging, and developing volunteers.

Key Points for Welcome, Engagement , and Development of Volunteers:

1. Have a consistent plan through which volunteers are warmly welcomed into the organization.
2. Conduct a formal orientation that volunteers should attend.
3. Set them up to succeed .
4. Be perceptive about potential road blocks and fears and address these.
5. Create teams where possible.
6. Provide opportunities for volunteer development.
7. Solicit appropriate and timely feedback.

Have a consistent plan through which volunteers are warmly welcomed into the organization.

- Make a good first impression, you only get one chance
- Describe the pathway for the volunteer and how they can contribute
- Thank them for their time

Conduct a formal orientation that volunteers should attend.

- Tell them about the organization and its mission
- Review the volunteer handbook
- Introduce them to other volunteers, staff, and leadership
- Go over their role and job description
- Go over specific details for each event/job (time, location, staff person, etc.)
- Set the expectations
- Give them time lines for each job

Set volunteer up to succeed.

- Ask questions of them to match their skills, desires and expectations with their roles
- Provide information about potential roles
- Keep the vision bright
- Set realistic volunteer expectations

Be perceptive about potential road blocks and fears and address these.

- Check in periodically
- Ask how they are doing
- Show personal interest and support
- Be mindful not to overwhelm the volunteer

Create teams where possible.

- Builds community
- Have fun together
- Eat together
- TEAM- Together Everyone Achieves More

Provide opportunities for volunteer development.

- Make available additional training
- Include them in planning and decision making
- Plan for the future, groom new leaders with mentoring

Solicit appropriate and timely feedback.

- Ask how engagement is working for them
- Ask what would improve their experience

Recognition & Retention

It is much easier to retain a volunteer than to recruit a new one. Recognizing contributions by volunteers is a key strategy in retaining volunteers. It is also the right thing to do. To a certain extent your organization's culture is defined by the way volunteers are treated. The bullet points listed below are some of the best practices identified for the purpose of recognizing and retaining quality volunteers.

Key Points for Recognition of Volunteers:

1. Make it a priority.
2. Do it often.
3. Do it in different ways.
4. Be sincere.
5. Recognize the person, not the work.
6. Make it appropriate to the achievement.
7. Be consistent.
8. Be timely.
9. Make it unique.

Make it a priority.

- Volunteers want to be appreciated

- Make volunteers feel like insiders, their experience should give them access to organization leaders, and knowledge about the organization
- Designate someone to be responsible for recognizing volunteers
- Incorporate a line item in your budget to fund activities and awards

Do it often.

- Have different intervals for recognizing volunteers- annual and following specific events
- Create different levels- formal, informal
- Say “Thank You” often

Do it in different ways.

- Vary the format- informal verbal thank you, spontaneous treats, hand written note, more formal dinner and awards
- Spontaneity will eliminate the “if/then” (if you do this then you get that) mentality
- Use both intrinsic and extrinsic methods as people are motivated differently
- Send a letter to volunteer’s employer/school recognizing their service

Be sincere.

- Make each occasion meaningful
- Creates opportunity to reflect on volunteer’s value to the organization

Recognize the person, not the work.

- Phrase recognition to emphasize the contribution
- Emphasize the value of the process to the final goal
- “You did a great job” vs. “This is a great job”

Make it appropriate to the achievement.

- In person during and at the conclusion of an event
- A thank you note for a few months of service
- A more public thank you and plaque after several years of service

Be consistent.

- Create a framework for recognizing service and stick to it
- Add it to the event “to do list” and have a staff person assigned to be sure it’s done
- A group thank you is appropriate at the end of an event
- Holding an annual event sets expectations for future volunteers

Be timely.

- Recognize effort without delay otherwise it diminishes the value of your gratitude
- Collect names of volunteers to ensure an accurate record of those involved

Make it unique.

- Get to know your volunteers and their interests to match the thank you to them
 - Keep records of past awards so as keep the message fresh
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Key Points for Retention of Volunteers:

1. Be consistent and sincere in your expectations.
2. Be receptive to new ideas and ways of doing things.
3. Incorporate evaluations of and by the volunteer.
4. Take every opportunity to applaud competence, punctuality and all other things you value.
5. As volunteers prove their capabilities, give them added responsibility.
6. As much as possible, make work fun.
7. Use discretion.
8. Make it apparent that you appreciate the person.
9. Encourage them to volunteer more.

Be consistent and sincere in your expectations.

- Volunteers (as well as anyone) will perform better when they know what to expect, what deadlines they have to meet, who their supervisor is, etc.
- Staff person in charge of volunteers should follow set protocol for each volunteer

Be receptive to new ideas and ways of doing things.

- You don't have to implement them, but you should at least be willing to listen to them
- Volunteers can provide valuable input from the field

Incorporate evaluations of and by the volunteer.

- Volunteers deserve feedback on their efforts in order to enhance their growth
- Volunteers have the right to provide feedback on their experience, what is going well and what they may need

Take every opportunity to applaud competence, punctuality, and all the other things you value.

- Saying "Thank you", "Good job", or "I really appreciate you coming out here/doing X on such short notice" costs nothing, but it goes a long way
- At least once a year, go out of your way to recognize volunteers by holding a Volunteer Appreciation Luncheon or a similar activity

As volunteers prove their capabilities, give them added responsibility.

- Match the task to their interests where possible
- Volunteers enjoy learning and mastering new skills
- Limit the task to what they can reasonably be expected to fulfill in the amount of time they have
- Talk about upcoming opportunities and create interest ahead of time
- By using a volunteer's professional knowledge they bring with them, you reinforce their value, and allow them to add to their professional resume

As much as possible, make work fun.

- Vary tasks, have background music, let volunteers work together, serve cookies during break
- Remember that volunteers are doing this on *their own time*, and be considerate of that

Use discretion.

- Never criticize a volunteer in front of his or her peers
- Utilize constructive criticism to guide the volunteer
- Volunteers deserve the same courtesy and consideration as regular employees

Make it apparent that you appreciate the *person*.

- Recognize their hard work and how it impacts the organization
- Keep track of volunteer's birthdays, anniversaries, graduation, birth or child etc. and send them a card
- It's perfectly acceptable to keep costs down by sending electronic cards

Encourage them to volunteer more.

- Higher levels of volunteer commitment lead to a higher level of involvement
- Find opportunities for them to volunteer regularly
- Ask them to return for future assignment