

**managing**volunteers  
in museums & cultural collections

10  
ten things  
you should know

helen arnoldi

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TEN THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW

Helen Arnoldi



*Managing volunteers in museums and cultural collections: ten things you should know*

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Helen Arnoldi  
October, 2010



## foreword

The volunteer sector is a fast growing one, and it is becoming increasingly commonplace for organisations and institutions such as the University of Melbourne to work with volunteers on all manner of projects. It is essential that this relationship remains a fair, positive and constructive one for all involved. *Managing volunteers in museums and cultural collections: ten things you should know* explores the issues that should be considered if you want to effectively involve volunteers with your collections.

For the past six years, through the University of Melbourne Library's Cultural Collections Projects Program, student interns, alumni and volunteers from the wider community have engaged with the University's 31 cultural collections. While working on carefully selected collection management projects, these volunteers have been exposed to the inner workings of the University's museums and collections. They have made a difference to individual collections while simultaneously enriching their own vocational and life experience by working closely with the collections and the professionals who manage them. This ongoing successful association between volunteers and the University's museums and cultural collections continues, due to a carefully managed volunteer program that highly values the volunteer role and the work achieved.

If you are considering utilising volunteers with your cultural organisation, or if you already have them involved, then I would encourage you to read *Managing volunteers in museums and cultural collections* — it will help you achieve a dynamic volunteer program that benefits all.

Philip G. Kent, University Librarian  
University of Melbourne  
October 2010



## preface

The inspiration and development of this book are a result of an article I wrote in 2004 entitled ‘Ten things I know about volunteer program management’, and my professional work with volunteers over the past nine years, which started me thinking more comprehensively about these issues.<sup>1</sup> The reality of volunteering has been with me much longer. I, like many museology students, had spent several years while I was studying museums, volunteering in them in an effort to gain that all important work experience that would enable me to take the first steps in my chosen career. This volunteer work saw me working with local council art collections, house museums and art galleries, and during this time I had a good introduction to some of the real issues confronting collecting bodies in the late twentieth century. I also had direct experiences in being managed as a volunteer, some of which were positive and some not so. I can remember turning up to one volunteer position enthusiastic and eager to apply my newly acquired knowledge, only to find that the person who was supervising me was ‘too busy’ to work out what I should be doing that day. After an hour or so of trying to look busy myself (and feeling as though I was in the way), I was told that it would be easier if I returned next week when they would have something for me to do. In contrast to this, I have had wonderful professional volunteer experiences where I was given a task over which I could claim ownership. Week after week, I delighted in the opportunity to build on my body of knowledge in a defined area, really getting to know a particular aspect of a collection and perhaps most importantly, knowing that I was having a positive impact on, and making a difference to, that collection.

When a volunteer experience is good, it can pave the way for a lifelong passion and loyalty to a particular institution, and perhaps influence career choices. When a volunteer experience is not so good, it can be unrewarding and de-motivating, generating thoughts that the time would be better spent elsewhere. Regardless of whether people volunteer their time to gain vocational skills, satisfy a personal interest, support a particular cause or develop a social network, the issues that inform the good management of these volunteers remain constant. And it is these issues you should consider if you wish to ensure that your volunteers, staff and institution gain the most from this relationship.

*Managing volunteers in museums and cultural collections* aims to help you successfully manage volunteers working with the collections in your cultural collecting institution.<sup>2</sup> While the themes addressed can be applied across the area of volunteering generally, this book is specifically aimed at people who manage volunteers in collecting institutions such as museums, galleries, libraries, archives and historical societies, as there is a shortage of material specific to this sector. Much of the existing volunteer literature comes from the community welfare or sport and leisure spheres.

The aim of the book is to raise awareness of various issues that should be considered when working with volunteers. *Managing volunteers* should not be seen as a comprehensive manual; rather it aims to explore some of the main challenges and to complement existing volunteer theory from a cultural collections perspective. There is ample published literature that relates to volunteers, volunteering theory and practice (including ‘how to’ manuals) which can be useful in

providing a broader context of the issues involved, and I have included some of these in my bibliography. This text should expand your understanding within this defined area and allow you to relate it directly to your own practice.

It is hoped that *Managing volunteers in museums and cultural collections* will stimulate discussion in your own collecting institution and prepare you to recognise some of these issues when you go about managing your volunteers. An understanding of the issues will provide the initial step to achieving a successful association between all involved in the volunteer equation: the volunteer, the staff, the organisation and of course, the collection itself.

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#### Notes

- 1 Helen Arnoldi, 'Ten things I know about volunteer program management', *Museums Australia magazine*, August 2004, pp. 6–7.
- 2 In this text, when I refer to 'cultural collecting' institutions I include amongst others: museums, non-commercial art galleries, archives, university collections, historical societies, historic houses, rare book sections of libraries and the like. Also, throughout this book in the interest of continuity, I often use the generic term of 'collection' to encompass all types of cultural collecting institutions.

## introduction

Volunteering is not a new concept; it has been around for a long time. What is new, is the steady growth in the number of people who volunteer. Coinciding with this, governments are beginning to recognise the importance of volunteering in national life and the role that it can play in social cohesion, networking and community development. Put simply, many of the services that we take for granted within our community could not happen (certainly not to the same level) without volunteer participation. While this book is primarily concerned with the management of volunteers in the cultural collections sector, it is useful to first understand the nature and context of the volunteer sector in Australia and how it has changed and developed over recent years.

In Australia, when volunteering is mentioned, people tend to think mainly of those volunteers who are involved in health, community services (e.g., aged care), sport and the environment and not necessarily those volunteers who work in the cultural sector. This is not surprising as large numbers of volunteers are involved in these aforementioned areas. In 2006, it was estimated that 34 per cent or 5.2 million adult Australians volunteered, and that 713 million volunteer hours were worked.<sup>1</sup> Also, the number of people who volunteer in Australia has been steadily increasing.<sup>2</sup> A recent Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) survey shows that the four most common types of organisation where people volunteered were sport and physical recreation, education and training, community welfare and religious groups. These four areas accounted for 74 per cent of the volunteers. According to the survey, 2.9 per cent of all volunteers were giving their time to 'Arts/Heritage' organisations.<sup>3</sup> This may not sound significant in comparison to the larger groups, but it still represents approximately 151,000 people. Similar to the other sectors, the cultural sector relies on these volunteers and therefore it is important to ensure that this valuable resource is well managed and developed.

If volunteers are integrated well into an organisation they are more likely to enjoy the experience, act as an ambassador out in the wider community and, importantly, add real value to the organisation through their participation. Volunteer labour should not be viewed as replacing paid staffing positions or doing those tasks that no-one else is prepared to do. Rather, if they are incorporated well into a collecting organisation, volunteers can in many ways build on and extend organisational objectives. The key to an enduring and successful relationship is a mutually advantageous exchange. That is, volunteers satisfy their personal motivations through their volunteer work while simultaneously meeting the objectives of the host organisation.

Before proceeding further, it is useful to clarify what is meant by the term 'volunteer'. A volunteer in this context is generally accepted as being someone who of their own free will, through a not-for-profit organisation, undertakes an activity that is of benefit to both the organisation and the volunteer. There is no financial payment for this position (however a volunteer should be given reimbursement for any minor out of pocket expenses incurred while undertaking the work, such as train fares).<sup>4</sup> This is the definition I will be using throughout this book. Other relevant terms include 'internship' and 'student placement'.<sup>5</sup> While in general understanding, these terms suggest a more defined and structured arrangement within a predetermined timeframe, I propose

that these ideals are not that far removed from a well-structured volunteer assignment and that the general requirements are similar. In fact, it is because there is much common ground between these groups I have decided to cover them in this book. In my experience, especially in the cultural sector, many students are now actively seeking ‘volunteer’ work in the form of student placements and internships.<sup>6</sup> The work that they do fits within the definition of volunteering in that they are giving of their time freely for a variety of reasons, most common of which is learning vocational skills.<sup>7</sup> Similar to volunteering they are not financially rewarded for this work. However, as with all volunteers, the students do gain something out of this exchange and investment of their time, as does the organisation. The main difference with student volunteers in this context is that the volunteering tends to be completed over a limited timeframe to achieve a specific outcome. This outcome may include satisfying a course requirement, for example an internship subject, or picking up particular skills in a certain area such as learning how to use a museum’s electronic catalogue. As we will come to see, reasons for volunteering and differences between volunteers are many and some of these ‘ten things’ will be more applicable to one type than to another, but generally they will have resonance for all types of volunteering.

In recent times, there has been a push to ensure that the management of volunteers moves into line with modern management practices. While this approach has received some criticism for overly structuring the volunteer role within an organisation, I believe that a move in this direction is a good thing. It helps ensure that the volunteers are part of the main administrative system and therefore covered by insurance, and receive adequate training and ongoing support for their work. However, this needs to be balanced by ensuring that the volunteer role is also defined by its difference from the paid structure; you do not want to stifle the freshness and enthusiasm that volunteers can bring to an organisation by overly heavy-handed management practices. This is where balance and experience come into play. Volunteers must be considered to be a central part of the organisation requiring the same levels of planning, development and support as other areas. Good management should also recognise that a volunteer program offers unique opportunities and experiences that an organisation should take advantage of and appreciate. In other words, you need to maintain a level of flexibility to ensure that the volunteer role does not become so formalised that the organisation misses out on unexpected opportunities and benefits that can arise.

It is essential that the volunteer role within a cultural collecting institution is approached with professionalism, and it is the issues arising from this foundation concept that this book will address. The chapters in this book explore ten issues to be considered for a successful association with your volunteers. Each chapter explores one of these ‘ten things’ in detail, using examples from my own experience in working with volunteers within the cultural collections sector. The first chapter explores the concept of professionalism and how it should be the foundation stone for all that follows. You will see that this concept is a persistent theme throughout the book and firmly underpins the next nine ‘things’. The remaining chapters explore other factors to consider and include: understanding volunteer motivations, making sure the relationship is a mutually advantageous one, maintaining flexibility, ensuring the right work balance between paid staff and volunteers and the importance of evaluations. These ‘ten things’ are by no means an exhaustive list of all of the areas relevant to volunteers within the cultural collections sector. Rather *Managing volunteers in museums and cultural collections* is a starting point to help you to engage with the issues from which you can formulate your own position.

While for clarity the ‘ten things’ are separated into individual themes, in reality they have fluid

boundaries and interrelate with one another. So where one idea will finish, the next may overlap with it and engage with themes discussed in earlier chapters.

The last chapter explores some of the issues that are particularly relevant to student volunteers in the cultural collections sector. While all nine previous ‘things’ also apply to student volunteers, there are some issues that are especially pertinent to student placements and as such merit their own chapter. It is useful to be aware of the issues particular to students as there is a good chance your organisation has been, or will be, involved with students, of whatever age, seeking a quality volunteer experience. I have chosen to dedicate a chapter to this area as I feel that it is extremely relevant in the current cultural landscape where there are limited job opportunities for graduates wanting to pursue a career in the cultural collections sector. There has also been a considerable rise in the numbers of students who are realising that volunteer work often leads to, and most definitely increases their chances of finding, paid work within this sector.

Lastly, there can be no ‘one size fits all’ approach to the way that different museums and galleries involve volunteers with their collections. However, all organisations should benefit from an awareness of some of the issues as a starting point, and from there can then begin to navigate and develop best practice that works for their own unique circumstances.

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## Notes

- 1 These figures were taken from the latest Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) survey, *Voluntary work, Australia*, 2006, p. 3.
- 2 In 1995, 3.2 million adults or 24 per cent of the adult population had volunteered. In 2000, there were 4.4 million volunteers or 32 per cent of the adult population. See ABS, *Voluntary work, Australia*, 2006, p. 5.
- 3 See ABS, *Voluntary work, Australia*, p. 44. ‘Arts/Heritage’ organisations in this context include performing arts groups, public radio and television, libraries, museums and galleries, historical associations and festivals. Also included as heritage organisations are zoos and botanical gardens. For more details see the ‘Glossary’ of the aforementioned report.
- 4 See *Definition and principles of volunteering*, June 2005, an information sheet from Volunteering Australia available from the Volunteering Australia website.
- 5 Useful definitions of ‘internship’ and ‘placements’ are given in Marianne Wallace-Crabbe, *Guidelines for internships*, Art Museums Association of Australia, 1993, p. 10. Wallace-Crabbe identifies an internship as ‘a pre-arranged, structured learning experience that is relevant to an intern’s academic or professional goals and to the professional needs of the museum’, while a placement is ‘the act of placing an individual in a work situation in order to carry out certain tasks’.
- 6 In *Volunteer management: an essential guide*, the authors draw the distinction that if students are performing community work to satisfy an educational requirement, then this cannot be classified as volunteering. However, those students who are undertaking an assignment on their own accord to ‘bridge the gap’ between theory and practice can be classified as volunteering. See Joy Noble, Louise Rogers and Andy Fryar, *Volunteer management: an essential guide*, 2nd ed., Adelaide: Volunteering SA, 2003, pp. 48–49. While I agree in principle with this definition, I have included student internships and placements, as I believe in this context they are a so closely aligned category to volunteering that they are relevant to be considered within the parameters of this book.
- 7 It is important to note that while some students will be pursuing a work placement as part of their course of study many students often undertake volunteer placements in addition to their studies as a way of broadening their professional skills.



# 1 The concept of 'professionalism' should inform all that you do

*My tasks in the project were clear and I had brilliant guidance on how to complete it.*

Volunteer exit review comment<sup>1</sup>

The practice of 'professionalism' is a foundation concept and should underpin all that you do when involving volunteers in a museum, gallery or cultural institution. By this term I mean using generally accepted standards of good practice within the workplace. It is not by chance that this concept forms the first chapter in this book, as all of the 'things that you should know' are generated from it. Professionalism is essential and should be always present: from the type of projects assigned to volunteers and the way they are recruited, through to volunteer orientation, training, ongoing mentoring, development and management. If you were only able to realise one concept regarding the management of volunteers this would be the one, for through its application, it is likely everything else will follow. By professionalising the volunteer role within an organisation you are laying the groundwork for a successful ongoing relationship.

For qualified people working within the cultural collections sector it is accepted that they approach their work with professionalism, doing all they can to ensure that the collections within their care are managed to the highest possible industry standards. Unfortunately, this professional approach does not always extend to the treatment of volunteers working within this sector. This is often not intentional, but rather reflects the demands already placed on their time. There may also be an assumption that volunteers can be readily absorbed into the current collection environment 'helping out' as needed, rather than being perceived as a planned resource that needs to be carefully managed to ensure that the relationship is mutually advantageous.

In recent years, there has been much theory that has examined the 'professionalisation' of the volunteer role across the entire volunteer sector. The emphasis on the 'professionalising' of the volunteer role and its management has met with both positive and negative criticism.<sup>2</sup> At different times in the past, the definition of 'volunteer' has been incorrectly equated with that of 'amateur'. However, in recent times and with the rise of volunteerism across all sectors, the theory is slowly catching up with the fact that many volunteers are skilled workers who bring to their volunteer roles many life skills that can have a positive bearing on the organisation.<sup>3</sup> Many of the volunteers seeking to work in the cultural heritage sector are highly skilled and well informed. They expect that the skills that they are offering will be utilised well by the organisation and if this proves not to be the case they are likely to change to an organisation that will more fully appreciate their commitment.<sup>4</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, students and younger volunteers who are hoping to gain professional development and learn new career skills will also expect to work in a challenging and well-organised environment. They will seek out places and be more likely to stay at organisations that take their volunteers seriously and have a clear and professional framework in which they operate.<sup>5</sup> Cultural collecting institutions are competing with other organisations inside and outside of the sector when they are looking to attract volunteers to their operations.

Therefore, to successfully incorporate volunteers into your organisation you need to ensure that volunteers are involved in such a way that their individual motivations are satisfied, while simultaneously meeting the objectives of the organisation. This is not easy to accomplish, but in order to best target these varied motivations you need the concept of professionalism to be your foundation, as it will best prepare you to meet the needs of the organisation and the volunteers.

The management of volunteers within a museum, gallery or cultural collection should be approached in the same way you would administer any other aspect of your work. The professional mindset used to approach the day-to-day management of collection related issues should inform the way you approach the daily management of volunteers. Ideally, the concept should be present from the earliest stages of planning for the inclusion of volunteers within an organisation. However, even if volunteers are already involved in a more haphazard fashion, it is not too late to put into practice some basic procedures that will lead the organisation in the right direction. It is also worth noting that while some collecting institutions are now beginning to see the value in appointing a person whose primary responsibility is to manage the organisation's volunteers (the value of this will be explored in Chapter Six), many cultural organisations still do not have the resources (or inclination) to employ a person solely for this purpose. In this situation, often the management of the volunteers is assigned to a particular staff member in addition to their regular duties. While this is not ideal, it is often the reality and therefore makes it even more imperative that effective management skills are employed in relation to the volunteers.

For an organisation considering utilising volunteers, a useful starting point is to take the time to consider why you would like to involve volunteers with your collection at this time and how they could help your organisation to meet its objectives. Many museums due to necessity are keen to get volunteers involved in any capacity. However, if this is done without a clearly defined purpose for this involvement they will be more likely to encounter problems down the track. A museum needs to have a well-articulated position and clear picture of what it anticipates volunteers can achieve within its framework. A useful question to ask is: how will the organisation, volunteers and public benefit from this arrangement? Once you are able to answer this, then you are in a much stronger position to initiate this involvement. A clear volunteer policy is an essential tool in clarifying for your organisation how volunteers will fit in to its broader objectives.<sup>6</sup> Assigning time to work this out in the early stages is time well spent, because the organisation will have a clear framework in which to make future decisions. Further, careful planning contributes to the establishment of more productive relationships between paid staff and volunteers that will in turn achieve better outcomes for your museum. From the volunteer perspective having these policies in place is more likely to translate into better attraction and retention rates, with volunteers going about their tasks more efficiently and enthusiastically and with greater commitment and loyalty to the organisation.

Once you have determined what the volunteer role should be within your museum and how it fits with your organisation's broader mission, you can then begin to develop volunteer positions and assignments that can fulfil this purpose. When creating the positions that volunteers will be offered, try to think as broadly as possible about what you want to achieve. It is a good idea to start by meeting with other staff and getting their ideas on areas of the museum and its services that they would like to see supported, expanded and improved. As well as ensuring you identify the right sort of volunteer positions, the involvement of other staff (who subsequently may be working closely with some of the volunteers) will ensure they will be more open to the process and invested in its success. Involving paid employees in these early stages may mean that there are less likely to be problems between paid and volunteer staff later.

Once the potential volunteer positions have been identified, as part of the professionalising process it is useful to write position descriptions for these roles. This serves several purposes: firstly, it demonstrates that a volunteer position has been thought through and that the volunteer will have a defined place and purpose within the organisation. Secondly, it enables the volunteer to see that they are applying for a position that has specific responsibilities and requirements and they can then initially evaluate whether they would be a suitable fit for the position. Position descriptions are very important in defining the volunteer task within the museum and have many benefits, including the setting of clear expectations and assigning the right person to the task. Further, it has been asserted that the effective design of a volunteer position will have several important factors from a volunteer perspective, including providing the volunteer with a sense of 'turf', ensuring the volunteer is empowered through having the authority to think about as well as perform the job, and showing how the role links into organisational objectives rather than being an isolated task.<sup>7</sup> The types of positions that may be offered to volunteers in a cultural collections environment will vary from back of house collection management roles such as conservation, cataloguing, research and exhibition preparation, through to the more public-facing positions of guides, invigilators and front desk roles. Each of the positions benefits from having the exact responsibilities of the job defined. Position descriptions should include the goal of the position, its responsibilities, the qualifications needed, the training involved, associated benefits and how the role furthers the organisation's objectives. (See the example of a position description on page 33.) Also, by establishing this level of detail from the outset, it becomes easier to recruit the right person for the position. An added benefit of the creation of a position description is that because you are required to go through this level of detail to get the position off the ground, it alerts you to the kind of infrastructure and support you will need to make the position a success. For example will the volunteer need a desk, an office, a computer, protective clothing or equipment to carry out the task? If you are unable to think through all these areas and resolve any arising issues it may be an indication that you are not able to offer this type of position at this time.

The concept of professionalism also needs to run through the whole of the recruitment process. Similar to the foresight and energy invested in the design of the volunteer roles, so this vision should carry through the actual hiring process. An organisation has one opportunity to make a good first impression on a potential volunteer. A person chooses to approach a certain organisation for a reason, whether they have always enjoyed visiting as a member of the public or maybe because a friend has recommended it to them. Whatever their initial motivation, from that first encounter they will make assumptions about your organisation. It will be up to you to make sure that they go away with a positive view irrespective of whether or not they end up volunteering. A young applicant may return in ten years time as your new director; an elderly applicant may leave your collection a generous bequest. In the cultural heritage sector there is an ongoing need to promote your institution and to garner positive community support for your collections. Everyone who approaches your organisation, in whatever capacity, has the potential to become an ambassador for it. A professional encounter will do much to help engender support of your museum in that person, while a negative experience will achieve the opposite. Actions such as timely correspondence, returning phone calls promptly and following up on enquiries are vital to show that you take your volunteer positions seriously. By doing so you are demonstrating to the applicant that a position with your organisation is a professional engagement. In my experience, in the initial stages, it is also very useful to have potential applicants complete an expression of interest form and submit it with a copy of their current résumé (see Figure 1, sample expression of interest form, page 18), rather than just leave their name at the reception to register their interest. This puts the onus on them, in that they need to take the time to get an application

Figure 1

Volunteer Program  
Cultural Collecting Institution  
Expression of Interest / Application

Cultural  
Collecting  
Institution

Name: .....

Address: .....

Telephone No.: ..... Mobile No.: .....

Email Address: .....

How did you hear about our Volunteer Program?

Which cultural collections project or type of work is of interest to you?

Why would you like to work on this project or with this collection? (Please provide as much detail as possible.)

Once completed, please attach an electronic copy of your current curriculum vitae and email it to [vp@culturalcollectinginstitution.com.au](mailto:vp@culturalcollectinginstitution.com.au) or mail to:

Volunteer Program Manager  
Cultural Collecting Institution  
Melbourne 3000

So what's next?

After your application has been received, the Volunteer Program Manager will contact you to arrange for an interview. If you have any questions please contact the Program Manager on .....

Thank you for your interest in the Volunteer Program at the Cultural Collecting Institution.

organised, and the level to which they do this I have found to be a good indicator as to how seriously they view the role. Further, it also makes them think through and articulate their own motivations for volunteering.

In keeping within a structured professional framework to recruit volunteers, setting specific selection criteria is an important tool for refining applications in the first stages. Further, these criteria ensure that in the interview process all applicants are treated equally and that you are accountable for your decision-making. It is vital to practice equal opportunity principles when it comes to recruiting volunteers and not to make any assumptions about a person based on their gender, age, race, nationality, religion or other extraneous factors. Questions asked should be specific and relate to the actual requirements of the job. For example, you would not ask a young mother, 'Will your child care commitments make it hard for you to be available in the evenings?' Instead you should be asking all applicants, 'We hold exhibition openings from six to eight in the evening and our volunteers need to be occasionally available for this. Is this possible for you?' Professionalising the recruitment process reduces the chances of problems arising. The process also demonstrates to potential volunteers that they will be committing themselves to work in an organisation that takes these roles seriously and invests time in the process in an effort to ensure a more successful volunteer position for them. In my experience, I have found the feedback from volunteers to be very positive about these practices. They have appreciated being treated with professionalism and are keen to be part of an organisation that is prepared to do this as it attests to the ideals of the organisation beyond the volunteer role.

Professionalism from the earliest stages of volunteer involvement needs to flow through into the actual work environment. If you go to the trouble of recruiting the right people for the volunteer positions, you want to make sure that you are able to support them in these roles. The good impression generated through the recruitment process should flow through into a sound orientation and training experience in order to best prepare the volunteer for their work within the organisation. Orientation is especially important, as it has been suggested that once a volunteer commences work with an organisation they are seeking confirmation through the next couple of meetings that they have in fact made the right choice.<sup>8</sup> As part of this orientation it is important that they are introduced to the museum's culture and that they have a strong sense of its goals and how their contribution will further these goals. Good orientation also acquaints them with basic things such as where to hang their coats, kitchen facilities, bathrooms, opening and closing hours, security arrangements (so they do not accidentally get locked in), safety, alarms, emergency evacuation routes and the like. Equally important is a sound training program that will give them the confidence and competence they need to carry out their tasks effectively. Training and volunteer development should continue throughout their association with your museum. Where possible, to broaden the volunteer experience, provide training and information on areas beyond their immediate brief as this will help maintain their interest and keep them motivated in their work. The importance of understanding volunteer motivation will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two, however for now it is important to be aware that professionalising the volunteer role in your organisation hinges not only on the actual job they are doing but extends into their interaction with the whole organisation.

Remember also that volunteers have responsibilities to your organisation, and as such you will need to ensure that they treat the position as a professional one. If for example they are delayed, or will not be able to make it in on a particular day it is important that they advise a staff member who will be expecting them. Or, if they need to take 'leave' from the volunteer position you must

have systems in place to deal with this effectively. For instance if they volunteer in a front of house position and they will be absent for a couple of weeks, alternative arrangements with other volunteers will need to be made so that the organisation is not understaffed during this time. I have found that in the majority of cases the professionalism that volunteers demonstrate in the way they approach their role is directly relative to the professional framework in which they are operating. If the volunteer positions are administered in a professional manner then volunteers tend to reciprocate this professional manner. That said, it is still a good idea to outline their responsibilities to your organisation during recruitment and orientation sessions.

Professionalising the volunteer role also means that you continue to ensure that volunteers are valued in the work that they do. This may mean writing about their achievements for other staff and the public, organising events that acknowledge their input, and regularly providing opportunities for them to develop or understand the broader rationale of the place in which they are volunteering their time. Generate situations that encourage networking and socialising. Feedback sessions are also vital in ensuring good communication lines and through semi-regular informal meetings volunteers can influence the direction of their work. As mentioned earlier, most volunteers in museums and galleries are highly trained and educated and likely to have a variety of life experiences to draw on. In this way, feedback sessions can be a valuable source of information sharing and direction setting that should not be overlooked.

When a volunteer has finished their assignment or wishes to move on, the idea of professionalism should also inform how this process is undertaken. Regular meetings, ideally with the volunteer program manager (or the person who oversees the program), are a useful way to see if your organisation is fulfilling its commitment to the volunteer. It also provides the opportunity for valuable feedback about any number of things, from how the work is progressing, to how they feel about their work environment, colleagues and the organisation itself. Exit reviews, which will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter, are also an essential tool in evaluating how a volunteer has found their experience to be, how it could be improved upon, what they thought worked well and not so well.

Volunteers are a valuable resource and to leave this interaction to chance is unacceptable. Professionalism is the keystone on which all the other factors that will influence the success of your volunteer program are based.

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## Notes

- 1 Throughout this book I have interwoven quotations from volunteers taken from evaluation sessions and exit review forms. These forms were completed by volunteers working with the University of Melbourne's cultural collections at the conclusion of their placements. Exit reviews are an excellent source of enlightening comments about how volunteers feel about their time spent working with a particular collection. The value of these reviews is discussed in more detail in Chapter Nine.
- 2 For some critics, the growth of volunteer program management as a concept and the professionalising of this area parallel the rise of corporate management practices into a sector that was previously run by different drivers. For them, this has been seen as overbearing, and a trend that has stifled the 'special something' and flexibility that defined volunteer organisations in the past. See Meta Zimmeck, *The right stuff: new ways of thinking about managing volunteers*, London, 2001, esp. pp. 4–9. For other commentators, this move towards a more professional set-up is welcome. They believe that the rise of volunteer program manager positions in organisations has paved the way for more clearly defined volunteer roles and experiences. Texts such as James C. Fisher's and Katherine M. Cole's *Leadership and management of volunteer programs: a guide for volunteer administrators*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993, advocate a broadening and strengthening of the

- volunteer role to ensure best practice. Similarly, Noble, et. al., explore the usefulness of the term 'management' in relation to this area and conclude that if volunteers are effectively 'managed', then rather than limiting their potential and initiative you in fact ensure that you maximise their involvement with an organisation. See Noble, et. al., *Volunteer management*, esp. Chapter 2, 'Volunteer resource management', pp. 27–28.
- 3 A breakdown of just who volunteers can be seen in the ABS national Voluntary Work Survey conducted throughout Australia in 2006. Among many things, the results demonstrate that the factors associated with above average rates of volunteering include good health, current study, a level of educational achievement and a high income. Employed people had a higher volunteer rate than those who were unemployed. See ABS, *Voluntary work, Australia*, esp. 'Table three', p. 20.
  - 4 It has been noted that this is particularly the case with the so-called 'baby boomer' generation who make up a growing number of volunteers. These volunteers are more likely to see themselves as being equal to paid employees and if they do not feel they are being treated as such will look to invest their volunteer hours elsewhere. See Noble, et. al., *Volunteer management*, pp. 27–28.
  - 5 See Deborah Edwards and Margaret Graham 'Museum volunteers: a discussion of challenges facing managers in the cultural and heritage sectors', *Australian journal of volunteering*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2006, esp. p. 25. The authors conclude that those museums that will be the most successful in attracting and retaining volunteers will be those which are mindful of and respond to the differing needs of potential volunteers.
  - 6 For a good introduction on how to go about developing your organisation's philosophy on volunteers see Noble, et. al., *Volunteer management*, esp. Chapter 6, 'Policies and practice', pp. 63–68. A practical starting point for training materials can be accessed through the 'Training and resources' section of the Volunteering Australia website.
  - 7 See Fisher and Cole, *Leadership and management of volunteer programs*, esp. pp. 30–34.
  - 8 See Mary Merrill, 'The importance of good orientation', *Volunteer management review*, February 2002.



## 2

## Understand what motivates volunteers

*It satisfied my love of history and books and I found viewing and handling of rare manuscripts very exciting.*

Volunteer exit review comment

Understanding volunteer motivation is an important ‘thing’ to take into account if you want to facilitate a flourishing working relationship between a volunteer and an organisation. The act of volunteering is not a purely altruistic one. A person’s reasons for volunteering will be influenced by a multitude of factors, from socio-economic background through to the current circumstances affecting their life. Volunteer motivation will vary and it is common for a volunteer to have more than one factor motivating them. Further, volunteer motivation is not static but likely to change and evolve over the duration of their association with an organisation. To optimise the volunteer relationship it is essential to have a sound understanding of what factors motivate your volunteers. This in turn will enable you to match the right volunteer to the right assignment. An awareness of volunteer motivations will also put you in an ideal place for planning future volunteer positions with your collections, and make it easier to attract new volunteers to your organisation.

Much has been written about what motivates people to volunteer, and these motivators are likely to be consistent across all sectors.<sup>1</sup> Some of the identified volunteer motivations include: pursuit of an interest, broadening of social opportunities, keeping active in retirement, doing something worthwhile, gaining new skills, seeking a challenge, recreation and personal development.<sup>2</sup> These main motivations provide a useful entry point to explore why volunteers choose to give their time to a cultural organisation. It is important to realise that different demographic groups within the volunteer sector may exhibit markedly different motivations, and that within these identifiable groups there will be further discrepancies in motivations. For example, you should expect there to be some general differences in the motivations between a group of ‘generation Y’ student volunteers and those from the so-called ‘baby boomer generation’. While the dominant motivator for the students is more likely to be the gaining of new skills and professional development, it is less likely that this would be a prevailing motivation for volunteers nearing retirement age. The latter group may be more likely to be motivated by a leisure seeking experience than a work experience.<sup>3</sup> So, whereas generation Y volunteers usually look upon their volunteering as an experience intimately connected to future employment opportunities, the older generation may be more motivated by the social interaction and quality leisure experience that volunteering can provide.<sup>4</sup> Another point to consider is that while some volunteer motivational needs may be satisfied by slight effort on behalf of an organisation, e.g., a person’s desire to become affiliated with what they perceive to be a prestigious organisation, other motivational factors are not so effortlessly fulfilled. For example, if a person’s primary motivation is to develop new specialist skills through their volunteer work, then the organisation will be required to have the training and support mechanisms in place in order to meet these volunteer expectations.<sup>5</sup>

It is also important to remember that within these broad demographics there will be variation and individual differences to take into account, as volunteers do not automatically fit into one neatly defined category. In my experience, in recent years there has been a rise in the number of mid-career professionals who want to undertake volunteer work to develop new vocational skills that will support (or enable them to test out) a possible career change. Or, there is the student volunteer who is not planning a career in a museum, but is motivated to volunteer in one to satisfy a personal interest in a particular area. As such, they see volunteering primarily as a leisure pursuit. Both examples demonstrate that many volunteers defy categorisation and therefore each volunteer needs to be understood on an individual level.

Often, there will be several motivating factors that encourage a person to volunteer, and these factors are not static but subject to change over time. What initially motivates them to volunteer for an organisation may not be the factor that continues to be their primary motivator a year later. So, if a volunteer commences with your organisation because they wish to work with your collections to ‘pursue an interest’, over time that initial motivator may lessen in importance and another motivating factor such as utilising skills and experience may surface as their primary motivator.<sup>6</sup> This was the case for a trained graphic designer, who as part of a career change had just completed a museum studies course and was seeking volunteer work. When she found work as a curator for an archive collection, she was keen to maintain a link with her graphics background by undertaking volunteer work with an art collection. Her volunteer work in an art museum involved the cataloguing and conserving of an international poster collection. It proved to be ideal volunteer work for her as she was able to hone her collection management skills while remaining connected to her graphic designer past. After working on the cataloguing project for about a year, she sought to apply her newly developed curatorial skills to the poster collection. Consequently, her role was renegotiated so that she could curate an exhibition of the collection that she had been cataloguing, thereby satisfying a different motivation (albeit a related one) to her initial motivator. Thus, she was keen to continue volunteering because the art museum had been able to respond to and accommodate her changing needs.

Because motivations can and do change over time, it is essential that you maintain good channels of communication with your volunteers. One way to achieve this is to have regular meetings with individual volunteers that specifically address how they feel about their current volunteer assignment. If you discover through these meetings that the position is no longer fulfilling their expectations, there is an opportunity to explore ways that this can be rectified. Actions may involve broadening their role, making available other opportunities or, if necessary, reassigning them to a more suitable position that meets their current motivations. If you are aware of these changing motivations early on, before a volunteer becomes disillusioned with their work, you will be more likely to maintain their involvement with your organisation, resulting in increased volunteer satisfaction and productivity and reduced volunteer turnover.

An understanding of what motivates your volunteers will enable you to be in a better position for maximising this resource within your organisation. It takes time, effort and skill to recruit and train volunteers to work with your collections. Matching the right volunteer to the right position is crucial and this process is simplified by utilising the position descriptions you have created as part of the *professionalising* of the volunteer role in your museum. There are a limited number of volunteers available within the cultural collections sector, and if you can offer them a good experience that meets their expectations, your organisation will benefit.

*I found that they were also prepared to answer all my questions on anything about the collection, rather than just on the tasks that were allocated.*

Volunteer exit review comment

In order to meet the motivations of individual volunteers you need to first understand what they are. One of the best ways to determine volunteer motivation is to find out (ideally in the interview stage) what it is that inspires them.<sup>7</sup> This can be as simple as asking them an open-ended question such as why they have chosen to volunteer with your organisation and what they hope to get out of the work. Often it is possible to identify several motivating factors from their answers, and once you have done so you can use these indicators to assign them a suitable volunteer role. Position descriptions for the volunteer roles help you here, in that you will have already identified the goals and requirements for the various positions. It is then possible to assess the criteria for the role against the information the person is sharing with you. Within this framework it is more likely that you will be able to place them in a role that will meet their expectations. Consequently, they are more likely to be satisfied with their volunteer work and also to be a positive ambassador for your organisation in the general community.

If we take as an example the case of a student volunteer whose primary motivation is to gain professional skills that will assist them in their chosen career, it is very important to make sure their expectations are met. You have a responsibility to match them to a project that will enable them to do this. It would be unacceptable to slot them in anywhere there is a need without taking into account their requirements. In an overburdened, under-resourced collections sector it may be tempting to do this, but ultimately it is short-sighted, as the student will be unlikely to stay in the position or work productively and may even start to resent your organisation. Wherever possible (and this will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter), you want it to be a mutually beneficial arrangement and to do this requires commitment and work on your behalf. If, for example, the student wants to work in a museum and has ample theoretical knowledge but no previous practical experience in object handling, then if possible the volunteer role to which they are assigned should give them the opportunity to learn, utilise and become confident in these skills. You should also consider giving them the occasion to develop skills outside of the area of their immediate responsibility. For instance, a student volunteer involved in working with a decorative arts collection could learn about handling issues that extend beyond their immediate responsibilities to include works on paper and paintings. Or, if they are involved in the installation of an exhibition, also allow them to become acquainted with some of the administrative work involved in exhibitions such as loan agreements, condition reporting and insurance issues. While developing their knowledge in these areas and exposing them to the bigger picture may not be immediately relevant to their task, most will appreciate the information and broadening of their knowledge. These 'insider' professional opportunities can make all the difference in defining their experience with your organisation and help ensure their motivations are being met.

At the other end of the spectrum, for the volunteer who is motivated primarily by the social opportunities that volunteering brings, ensure that they are matched to a role that will enable them to feel as though they are part of a team. If due to the responsibilities of the task this is not immediately possible, try to create other opportunities that enable them to mix with other volunteers and staff at morning teas or group training sessions. If this cannot be easily done, then you might need to consider a different role for them. If on the rare occasion you are unable to find a work placement that satisfies the volunteer's motivations and meets organisational needs, then you may have to consider not taking on that volunteer. It is better to do this than to have them

undertake a volunteer position with which they are incompatible. A good option may be to recommend them to another cultural organisation that may better satisfy their motivations.

It is well worth investing the time to think about individual volunteer motivations when you take volunteers into your organisation. Just as you have carefully considered the tasks you will assign volunteers, it is just as important that the right person is placed in the right volunteer position. Understanding what motivates each volunteer is an important component in the recruitment and placement process and essential in the ongoing management of volunteers within your program.

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## Notes

- 1 In *Voluntary work, Australia*, more than 50 per cent of volunteers gave 'helping others or helping the community' as a reason for volunteering. Volunteers also identified benefits to themselves with 44 per cent citing personal satisfaction and 36 per cent 'doing something worthwhile'. Other reasons for volunteering included: 'social contact', 'to be active', 'to use skills and experience' and the 'learning [of] new skills and gaining work experience'. See ABS, *Voluntary work, Australia*, 'Summary of findings', esp. Tables 12 and 13, pp. 33–34.
- 2 See Kirsten Holmes, 'Volunteers in the heritage sector: a neglected audience?' *International journal of heritage studies*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2003, pp. 348–350.
- 3 See Holmes, 'Volunteers in the heritage sector', p. 354.
- 4 An exploration of the different motivations of volunteers and the challenges they present to museums is explored in Edwards and Graham, 'Museum volunteers', pp. 19–27.
- 5 See Edwards and Graham, 'Museum volunteers', pp. 24–25.
- 6 See Holmes, 'Volunteers in the heritage sector', pp. 348–349.
- 7 See Nan Hawthorne, 'Four typical basic motivators of volunteers', *Volunteer management review*, vol. 1, 2001. In the article Hawthorne suggests ways to find clues to a volunteer's motivators through the language they use.

## CHAPTER THREE

### 3 The arrangement needs to be mutually beneficial for the organisation *and* the volunteer

*My training was excellent, I knew exactly what was being asked of me ... [and] I feel that my time was worthwhile in helping to conserve a historical collection.*

Volunteer exit review comment

For a volunteer role within a museum to be fully successful it must be mutually beneficial to both the volunteer and the organisation. Volunteering should not be seen as a one-sided relationship, but rather a partnership. The requirements of both parties will need to be met if the volunteer and the organisation are to benefit from the exchange.<sup>1</sup> This is an essential factor to consider when developing projects for volunteers. The most rewarding volunteer experiences will be those that understand and facilitate an exchange that is jointly advantageous for both parties. If cultural organisations mistakenly ‘use’ volunteer resources only to meet the demands of the collections, without taking into account the needs of the volunteers, they are likely to give rise to unsatisfactory experiences. Likewise, over-catering to the needs of the volunteers without developing these roles in synchronisation with organisational objectives will also lead to undesirable outcomes. The full potential of any volunteer can only be realised if the relationship to their host organisation is based on a mutually beneficial arrangement.

Volunteers are a resource that can bring numerous benefits to an organisation. As previously discussed, they will have different reasons for volunteering. If an organisation can develop volunteer positions that satisfy these motivating factors, then it follows that the volunteers will see their time as having been well spent. You must also not forget that the primary reason for engaging volunteers in the first place is to enable your museum to better meet its objectives. Therefore, it makes good business sense to create an environment where the requirements of the organisation can be met, while simultaneously satisfying volunteer motivations. It is possible to meet the needs of both parties, if from the outset you have a clear picture of what your organisational objectives are, and then consider how volunteers can positively interact with these objectives.

*They went out of their way to show me how the archives work, and different projects going on.*

Volunteer exit review comment

Volunteers are not dissimilar from other staff working within your organisation. Like paid staff, it is important for volunteer staff to understand how the work they do fits into the museum as a whole. An understanding of the ‘bigger picture’ helps engender within people a sense of belonging. If a volunteer can see how their project relates to an organisation’s broader objectives (rather than as an isolated role), they are more likely to be satisfied with the work they are doing. The key here is to nurture a sense of personal investment in the position and, consequently, the cultural organisation. This can be achieved through relatively simple measures such as familiarising volunteers with other facets of the museum’s business and demonstrating how it

relates to their own work. It is also beneficial to encourage volunteers to become involved in any decision-making processes that relate to their role.<sup>2</sup> Another positive action is to let volunteers see how their work makes a difference in the organisation's achievements as a whole. Momentarily putting aside other motivational factors, the position will be more likely to satisfy a volunteer's desire to 'make a difference' and feel that they are making a worthwhile contribution that advances organisational aims. Take the example of a volunteer whose role requires them to take digital images of artefacts in a science collection that will be added to an electronic catalogue. Seen in isolation this may seem like quite an ordinary task: important in respect to collection management practices but not that outwardly focussed. If, however, the volunteer understands that the images are attached to the catalogue and therefore electronically accessible to a wide audience, they can see that the potential for research and interpretation of the objects increases exponentially. The work that they are doing assumes more significance for it can be seen to be directly contributing to the organisation's broader goal of providing increased access to its collections. Similarly, through the digital imaging project, the preservation of the collections is furthered as the fragile scientific artefacts will not need to be accessed as frequently. Through what might appear to be regular, housekeeping tasks, the volunteer can learn that they are contributing to organisational goals of which they might not have been aware. Increasing this awareness translates to greater personal satisfaction and a better learning experience (benefits to the volunteer) which in turn may inspire them to take greater pride in the work that they do, increase their productivity and continue volunteering with the collection (benefits to the museum).

*Productive and value adding to both the ... Archive [collection] and myself.*

Volunteer exit review comment

A mutually advantageous relationship requires a well-thought-out volunteer role. From the volunteer's perspective it should promote an opportunity for their personal growth; this could be through the learning of new skills, the widening of their social networks or the feeling that they are 'doing something worthwhile'. For the organisation that successfully integrates volunteers into its operations the benefits are also significant. Some of the advantages from the cultural institution's perspective may include: support and extension of its programs, volunteers taking on an ambassadorial role in the community for the organisation, an increased audience and anchoring to the community, ongoing commitment and loyalty, not to mention the fresh enthusiasm that volunteers often bring to their roles which resonates well with other staff and the public. These are just some of the potential benefits that can arise as a result of this partnership between organisation and volunteer. There can be much synergy between the two, and when both needs are being met through the volunteer placement, the results will be most rewarding.

If, through the deployment of your volunteers, you realise that you are only accommodating one side of this equation, regardless of whether it is the organisation or the volunteer, then you need to reconsider the roles that volunteers are being assigned. The best outcomes can only be achieved when this equation is equal. Once the right balance is in place, there is the opportunity to achieve and in some cases exceed original expectations.

To fully utilise the volunteer resource, and ensure that a mutually advantageous relationship exists, volunteer engagement needs to be thoroughly planned. The methods that have been covered earlier in this book, including the creation of sound position descriptions, matching the right person to the position and understanding your organisation's objectives and how volunteers can best interact with these, are all important steps to encourage a successful exchange. From time

to time, with these basic systems in place, it is possible to go beyond these expectations and achieve even better outcomes. A recent example of this involved a student volunteer working with the cultural collections in a university library. For the project and under expert instruction, the student volunteer was required to carry out basic preventative conservation measures on an orchestral ledger that dated from 1905. The ledger contained important information relating to orchestral performances in early twentieth century Melbourne and as such would be of great interest to music scholars. As a primary resource the ledger was an untapped source of research data and interpretative potential. The problem with this historic ledger was that it was in an extremely poor state of preservation largely due to water damage that it had sustained during its lifetime. The volunteer assigned to the project had a history background and a keen interest in early music in Melbourne (this was not by chance), which had inspired her to choose a project that was mainly conservation in nature. After the volunteer had undergone specialist conservation training, she commenced work on the project. As part of the role she was required to carefully remove each page from the ledger, brush vacuum each sheet and then rehouse the pages in Mylar sleeves. At the initiative of the student, who was inspired by the information contained in the ledger, as each page was conserved it was also digitally photographed and its content recorded onto an electronic spreadsheet.

The benefits of this volunteer project were twofold, and demonstrate how a role can be mutually beneficial for both the volunteer and the collection. The volunteer was keen to gain object handling and conservation skills, which she did through the day-to-day conservation work on the ledger. Simultaneously, and because she had a specific interest in the information contained in the ledger, she was in the unique position of being able to work closely with this significant cultural item, an opportunity that otherwise would not have been available to her. Further, the student volunteer went on to utilise the primary information contained within the orchestral ledger to complete her own independent, scholarly research and an article for publication. The benefits to the collection were also significant, for through the volunteer's conservation work on the ledger its vulnerable condition was stabilised and its future longevity ensured. Information contained in the ledger was recorded electronically which made it a more accessible resource for future researchers. Further, as a result of the peer-reviewed article that the student subsequently wrote and published, the object and the University's cultural collections generally were brought to the attention of a wider audience and benefitted from increased public awareness.

You should not underestimate how important it is for any volunteer work completed in your organisation to be developed within a framework that encourages a mutually beneficial exchange. To do any less may mean that you are limiting the potential of your volunteer program. While it may not always be possible to achieve the exemplary outcomes outlined in the example above, by creating volunteer roles that take into account the needs of both the organisation and volunteer (and as the volunteer program manager you are accountable to both), you will facilitate a successful and mutually beneficial partnership.

## Notes

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- 1 Noble, et. al. identify as one of the principles of volunteering that it is a 'reciprocal arrangement', and that while assisting others is an undeniable basic principle of volunteering it should not be forgotten that both the giver and the receiver need to benefit from the relationship. See *Volunteer management*, p. 17.
- 2 See Paul J. Ilesley, *Enhancing the volunteer experience: new insights on strengthening volunteer participation, learning and commitment*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990, pp. 130–134.



## CHAPTER FOUR

# 4 You need clearly defined, quality volunteer projects with a degree of flexibility

*I think that the parameters of the placement were very well outlined at the beginning and the amount of work that I could achieve within the semester was well thought out.*

Volunteer exit review comment

To ensure that the volunteer and the organisation will benefit from the association you need to develop clearly defined, worthwhile projects. A volunteer working with your collection should feel confident that they are undertaking their task within a structured, well-conceived framework. The best way to achieve this is to make sure that each volunteer assignment has at its core a thoughtful and well-defined role statement. A role statement, in the form of a position description, is a document that you will regularly return to, as it clearly establishes what the task involves and how that task adds value to the organisation as a whole. However, before you are able to get to this level of detail and map out the specifics of a good volunteer assignment, you first need to reflect on what the volunteer role will mean to your organisation on a general level. Here, we return to the idea of professionalising the volunteer role, and the necessity of taking a global perspective of your organisation and exploring how you think volunteers may best fit. As part of this review you should examine how the volunteer role can help achieve the organisation's mission and objectives. At this formative stage, the development of a volunteer policy for the organisation may be useful in articulating how the volunteer role will be incorporated with the museum's operations.<sup>1</sup> Once the broader vision for the volunteer role has been defined through a volunteer policy, it is possible to turn your attention to the actual work assignments that volunteers will be undertaking to help accomplish this mission.

*The objectives of the project were well defined, and the orientation addressed the details of the task.*

Volunteer feedback session comment

How then do you ensure that you create quality volunteer projects and roles that have real value? It is one thing to understand that an organisation needs to have clearly defined projects complete with position descriptions, but what are the features and characteristics that make a good volunteer assignment?

Once equipped with a clear understanding of how the volunteer role will help further your organisation's objectives, it is important to think about the tasks that need to be done and consider how they may be able to be developed into a quality volunteer project that will have appeal. Effective volunteer projects are not about identifying tasks that no-one else in the organisation wishes to work on. Venturing down that path is unlikely to produce volunteer satisfaction. Further, you may end up orchestrating activities that will in the long term be detrimental to your organisation as a whole. Assigning volunteers to work on unpopular, thankless tasks can give rise

to problems that have ramifications beyond the volunteer program, such as raising questions about funding arrangements, or causing other staff roles to be devalued through volunteers working on what should be paid positions. Consequently, these situations could generate low staff morale, negative publicity in the community, and high volunteer turnover rates — undesirable outcomes for any cultural collecting institution. Position descriptions are an important counter to this, for they keep you focussed and with a definite sense of purpose when designing volunteer roles. Writing detailed position descriptions obliges you to consider the goals of the position, how it will relate to organisational objectives, what the responsibilities will be, the training and skills needed, and importantly from the volunteers' perspective, what the benefits will be to them. (See Figure 2, sample position description, page 33.) If you are required to think about these factors when you are designing volunteer projects you become more accountable to their content and more likely to identify any shortcomings in the roles. Similarly, seeing a description of the task written down with its responsibilities outlined, renders the position more real and makes you consider 'would I want to work in that position?'

It is important not to underestimate the role that clearly defined volunteer positions play in influencing the successful incorporation of volunteers within your organisation. In 2006 a national survey of volunteering issues identified as one of its key findings that 42 per cent of the volunteers surveyed did not have a clear, written job description for their role, which regularly led to conflict and uncertainty between the responsibilities of paid and unpaid staff.<sup>2</sup> From the organisational perspective, carefully considered volunteer involvement makes good business sense as it can help ensure a trouble-free relationship amongst volunteers and paid employees. From the volunteers' perspective having a clearly defined position can make a significant difference in how they feel about their role within the organisation. The national survey on volunteering revealed that sound job descriptions promoted volunteer recruitment, encouraged retention and led to volunteers feeling supported and empowered in their roles.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of whether a volunteer is motivated by a desire to increase their job skills, make social acquaintances or make a difference, all volunteers will benefit from having a clearly defined role within the museum or gallery.

*I didn't expect that I would be given such meaningful tasks.*

Volunteer exit review comment

A quality volunteer project is one that is in step with organisational objectives, is conceived with a clear purpose and direction, presents the volunteer with learning opportunities, has attainable goals and is meaningful to the organisation. For a potential volunteer the prospect of learning something new is an attractive option, and as such learning opportunities should feature strongly in your design of volunteer roles. This is because volunteering is often viewed as a way of continuing education.<sup>4</sup> Having an educative component is usually considered to be an important aspect of volunteer projects that involve students, however often the importance of education is underestimated or forgotten in regard to other categories of volunteers. This should not be the case. Regardless of the type of work involved in a project, there should always be varied opportunities available for education in all its guises, of which learning a new skill is the most obvious. Mastering a new skill gives people of all ages a sense of satisfaction and achievement. Other types of learning may include personal development, social interaction and something as simple as seeing behind-the-scenes operations. Similarly, a well-designed volunteer role should involve a thinking component. This may sound obvious but it is often overlooked in the desire to get a particular job done. A thinking component may necessitate a broadening of the volunteer

Figure 2

**Volunteer Position Description  
Photographic Collection  
Cultural Collecting Institution**

**Cultural  
Collecting  
Institution**

<b>Position Title:</b>	Collection Management Assistant, Photographic Collection
<b>Supervisor:</b>	Curator, Photographic Collection Volunteer Program Manager
<b>Position Goal:</b>	The primary goal of this position will be to generate additional information for the catalogue and re-house a small collection of historic photographs.
<b>Responsibilities:</b>	The volunteer will work closely with the Photographic Collection and under the guidance of the curator will complete research on the photographs in the collection with new information to be added to the catalogue. Further, the photographs will need to be re-housed in archival enclosures. It will be necessary to match the photographs with existing prints and scans to determine which photographs in the collection have been digitised.
<b>Qualifications:</b>	<p>Ideally the volunteer will have a basic understanding of the documentation of museum objects (progress towards a degree in Museum Studies or previous volunteer experience in an archive, museum or historical society is desirable).</p> <p>Knowledge of the correct procedures for the safe handling of objects would be an advantage as this position requires the close inspection of vulnerable photographs.</p> <p>An interest in photographic collections.</p> <p>A methodical, prudent approach with a keen eye for detail is required with the ability to work independently and as part of a small team.</p>
<b>Training and Supervision:</b>	<p>On-the-job training specific to the task will be provided.</p> <p>The volunteer will work under the supervision of the Curator, Photographic Collections</p> <p>Regular meetings with the Volunteer Program Manager to review how the volunteer work is progressing and discuss any ideas or problems encountered.</p>
<b>Benefits:</b>	<p>Opportunity to work at close hand with one of the Cultural Collecting Institution's extensive collections.</p> <p>The opportunity for personal/professional development through experience gained in collection management procedures and practice.</p> <p>Satisfaction in focusing on a specific area of the Cultural Collecting Institution's significant collections and seeing it fully catalogued and re-housed to conservation standards. The application of collection management principles to the Institution's collections is necessary to enhance our long-term understanding, management and appreciation of these collections.</p> <p>For more information on this position please contact: Volunteer Program Manager Cultural Collecting Institution Email: <a href="mailto:vpm@culturalcollectinginstitution.com.au">vpm@culturalcollectinginstitution.com.au</a> or telephone: .....</p>

assignment so that it includes for the volunteer the opportunity to reflect on the role and have input, which in turn serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it gives the volunteer a sense of ownership and empowerment about the project on which they are working. Secondly, it validates the volunteer as an important asset to the organisation who is able to participate in the direction the work takes. A volunteer assignment that has a thinking component will be more likely to provide a balance for the other duties that define the role. For example, within a museum or collecting institution much of the work that is related to collection management is time-consuming and at times repetitive (think inventories, re-housing). The question is how you can incorporate within your volunteer projects a sense of balance so that any of the more repetitive (yet necessary) tasks are offset by work that will enable the volunteer to utilise a different set of skills. If for example you have a volunteer project that requires the re-housing of a photographic collection to meet conservation standards, then this alone could be a somewhat repetitive task. As soon as the volunteer has mastered the handling and technical skills necessary to carry out the work, they may not be actively learning. Thus, the work is no longer challenging, and has the potential to become boring. By adding an additional responsibility to the position, such as getting the volunteer to work on a conservation plan for the collection, or to research its history and write an article for the newsletter, you are able to create variety and opportunity. The volunteer will be encouraged to utilise different skills and they can reflect on this related work as they undertake the more routine project tasks, in turn making them seem less tedious. Further, enabling a volunteer to organise their own priorities and determine how they spend their time while on the assignment reinforces a sense of autonomy, responsibility and ownership of the project to which most volunteers respond enthusiastically.

Once a volunteer is no longer actively learning in the position, it may be time to reconsider their role. Again it is useful to refer to the position description as it will enable you to see whether you have been fulfilling your commitment to the responsibilities of the position. If the project has run its course with all goals met or with the volunteer no longer actively learning through the assignment, then it may be time to move them into another suitable volunteer position. You should not let someone get ‘stuck’ in a particular role just because it suits or is easier for the organisation. If the task is an ongoing one, however, a fresh volunteer may be suitable and may benefit from it for a set period of time.

It makes good sense from an organisational perspective to nurture a volunteer’s sense of ownership and to create an environment that encourages contribution. If for example volunteers have been working on a particular aspect of a collection or service, they are often in the best position to evaluate how that work is progressing. The importance of fostering in volunteers a sense of ownership over their work will be explored in more detail in a later chapter. Another indicator of a well-defined role is one that gives the volunteer an understanding of how their work contributes to organisational goals.<sup>5</sup>

*It was a large project and I was informed I only needed to work on as much as I felt I could manage. However I felt I needed to complete it for personal satisfaction.*

Volunteer exit review comment

Another factor to consider when designing quality volunteer roles is to make sure that the task, and this should be a standard part of the position description, has clearly defined benchmarks and end goals. If a project turns out to be too large, and if after working on it for some time a volunteer feels as though they have not made any progress, it can make for an unsatisfying experience. To

avoid this, a large task should be broken down into smaller attainable goals, where each one represents a discreet project in its own right and together they form a greater whole. This is particularly relevant if you want to involve students as volunteers with your museum or collection, as often they will have a prescribed amount of time available in which they wish to achieve certain outcomes. In order not to miss out on the opportunities that these students represent, projects need to have achievable end goals that can be completed within a specified timeframe. Even for non-student volunteers who do not have a set timeframe in which to operate, it is important to commission a schedule over an amount of time as it helps volunteers to feel focussed and purposeful in the work they are carrying out. If a volunteer finishes the first assignment and they want to continue working in a particular area, they can always undertake the next project in the series but this would be by choice rather than being weighed down by a vast project that has unachievable outcomes.

While it is important to create the above framework to help ensure that volunteer roles are clearly developed, once you have this structure in place it is desirable to maintain some flexibility in the way that you approach these positions. Flexibility within this arrangement will enable you to take advantage of unexpected opportunities that may arise and allow a project to extend beyond its initial brief.<sup>6</sup> Be prepared to capitalise on opportunities. This could be something as simple as allowing a volunteer to advise about a particular area of expertise, or to assist in training a new volunteer who may be commencing work in a related area. A recent project in an art museum had a volunteer assigned to a conservation position that required her to flatten a collection of twentieth century posters through a humidification process. After initial training in the process from a conservator, this newly acquired knowledge was strengthened by her regular contact with the collection, where on a weekly basis she was able to apply these skills, and over the ensuing months the volunteer became a resident expert in the conservation process. Later on, when more volunteers were recruited to assist in the conservation flattening of the collection, the original volunteer, still working on the project, was ideally placed to provide the training and mentoring of the new volunteers beginning work on the project. This broadened her volunteer role and allowed for personal development. It also empowered her and demonstrated to the new volunteers the trust and esteem in which the museum regarded its volunteers. This broadening of the volunteer role may not have been something originally envisaged when the task was conceived, but given the right circumstances (an enthusiastic and capable volunteer) it became an option that was too good not to explore. This is where you need to have a flexibility built into your system that allows you to make the most of such an opportunity.

By thinking carefully about the volunteer projects that your organisation offers and taking the time to create positions that are well defined and worthwhile, you are well on the way to successfully incorporating volunteers into your operations. Further, by building a level of flexibility into your systems, you will have prepared yourself to be able to pursue unexpected opportunities that may arise and add a further dimension to your volunteer program. This will enable your volunteer positions to evolve into new and positive directions that you may not have known were possible at the outset.

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## Notes

1 See Appendix 1, Sample Volunteer Policy, p. 67.

2 See *National survey of volunteering issues 2006*, Volunteering Australia, p. 2. Survey available from Volunteering Australia's website.

- 3 See *National survey of volunteering issues 2006*, Volunteering Australia, pp. 3–4.
- 4 See Ilsley, *Enhancing the volunteer experience*, p. 57.
- 5 Fisher and Cole have identified that there are four important factors that contribute to effective design of volunteer roles and these are: firstly, providing the volunteer with a sense of ‘turf’. Secondly, ensuring that the volunteer has the opportunity and authority to think about their position as well as performing the role. Thirdly, that position descriptions should communicate the responsibility for achieving the results which should be directly linked to the organisation’s missions and goals. And lastly, that there must be measurement of performance and results. See Fisher and Cole, *Leadership and management of volunteer programs*, p. 34.
- 6 The need for an organisation to be flexible has been identified as very important if it wishes to successfully involve volunteers in its activities. Fryar asserts that in the current climate flexibility must be structured into the workplace if an organisation wants to optimise its attractiveness to volunteers. For him the focus on flexibility is in three key areas: 1. flexibility in activity choice, 2. flexibility in process, and 3. flexibility in assignment. See Andy Fryar, ‘Yoga for the volunteer manager: the practicalities of remaining flexible’, *Australian journal on volunteering*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2007, pp. 89–93.

## 5

## Volunteers are not 'free' ...

*Prior to and during our time working with the art we had thorough training and supervision and were able to make ongoing queries as to procedures and techniques.*

Volunteer exit review comment

Contrary to what some people may think, volunteers are not free. While volunteers give their time without seeking monetary reward, this does not mean that for the organisation there is no cost involved in supporting them. Actually, the opposite is true. For a volunteer to have a positive experience and to add value to your museum there are numerous costs involved and these costs need to be considered *before* you involve volunteers with your collection.

One of the persistent misconceptions about volunteering is the idea that there are no costs incurred by an organisation that utilises volunteers.<sup>1</sup> This myth must be dispelled and replaced with a more accurate idea of what volunteering means in the present day. The reality is that there is a cost in successfully involving volunteers with an organisation and that these costs should be expected, as volunteering is not about free labour. If an organisation regards volunteering simply as 'free labour' it is heading into problematic territory. One of the guiding principles of volunteering is that it should not replace paid positions but rather extend and support existing services. This needs to be fully understood by any organisation considering involving volunteers, because if this difference is not respected then potential problems can arise between volunteers and paid staff, where the latter can begin to feel threatened in their positions within the organisation. This does not make for an equitable or pleasant work environment in the long run. Being aware from the outset, that 'volunteers are not free', will enable an organisation to objectively consider whether it is able to support the costs associated with involving volunteers. If, after weighing up potential costs, the organisation believes it to be a feasible direction in which to head, it can then proceed to work out how many volunteers it would be able to support.

What then are the costs involved in having volunteers working in your museum? The actual expenditure will vary depending on the specifics of each organisation, the number of volunteers you wish to involve and the type of work they will be assigned. However, the overall costs can generally be broken down into two main categories. The first category includes the 'tangible' costs, and by these I refer to the more obvious physical costs that can be readily assessed and calculated. These costs include the actual materials that volunteers will need to carry out their assignments. For example, if they are working in the public domain as visitor guides it may include badges and uniforms. If they are working in a behind the scenes capacity it could include the conservation materials and supplies they need to carry out their task such as acid-free tissue paper and archival card for rehousing objects. Under this category I would also include the costs incurred from the logistics of space, that is, a place for the volunteer to carry out the task: a work desk, computer facilities, a telephone if needed, etc. In many museums, galleries and heritage

organisations it is not uncommon for basics such as desk space and office equipment to be in short supply and high demand even with paid staff. If this is the case, you can imagine that it would not make for a very welcoming or professional experience to have a volunteer ready to start work on their assignment only to find that there is no workspace available for them to undertake their task. Other tangible costs to be taken into account may include anything from the reimbursement of work-related out-of-pocket expenses through to having a budget for volunteer recognition events.<sup>2</sup>

*Regular meetings with the ... collections manager throughout the semester ...  
assisted me in progressing with the project.*

Volunteer exit review comment

The second category of costs are those that are 'intangible', and by this I mean those still very real costs that occur as a result of including volunteers in your museum that are not immediately apparent. This category may include the investment of time from a volunteer program manager in the recruitment of the volunteers, training sessions and ongoing mentoring and also includes the time of other staff who will be working directly with the volunteers. The investment of staff time with volunteers is essential and as such should be included in all staff position descriptions. The issue of the costs associated with staff time is an important one to take into account. The failure to factor in the cost of this ongoing time commitment required from other staff to support the volunteers can have serious consequences to the program. To be successful, the volunteers need to be fully supported by other staff within the museum and not having this support may result in the volunteer role being devalued. Often, it is this category of 'intangible' costs that can initially be overlooked when organisations engage volunteers with their operations. Yet these intangible costs are real (and considerable) and therefore as important as the tangible costs that are budgeted for. The commitment that the museum shows to volunteers in these areas will ultimately make the difference as to the kind of experiences they have and the quality of the work they complete for the organisation.

While it is generally accepted by museum managers that it will take time to recruit and hire volunteers, they often do not take into account that there will be an ongoing time commitment (and therefore cost) involved in keeping those volunteers motivated, supervised and mentored once they start work with the organisation. In order to facilitate a volunteer placement that is mutually beneficial and continues to have value to the volunteer and the museum, it is vital to maintain training and developmental opportunities, feedback sessions and, importantly, provide ongoing support for volunteers in their general day-to-day activities.<sup>3</sup>

It has been suggested that in order to calculate the costs that will be associated with involving volunteers with your organisation, you can carry out an 'organisational cost/benefit analysis'. This exercise requires you to place an estimated but real monetary figure against expected tangible and intangible costs such as staff time. Further, it requires you to assign a dollar value to what the expected volunteer labour will be worth in real terms. You then proceed to calculate the difference between the costs and benefits to work out what the contribution from volunteers will actually mean to your organisation in dollar value. From this you can then weigh up whether the financial investment required when involving volunteers with your museum is a sound one.<sup>4</sup> Care needs to be taken when applying these criteria too literally, for many of the benefits associated with volunteering cannot be assigned an economic value. As mentioned in a previous chapter, beyond the more obvious benefits of work being supported and extended in particular areas of your museum, other positive benefits from volunteer involvement that might not so easily be

quantified on a balance sheet include increased morale of staff who may be re-invigorated in their roles through their work with the volunteers, not to mention the ambassadorial and supporter role that many volunteers assume for the museum in the wider community. A further benefit beyond the immediate volunteer experience that has been shown to exist is that volunteers often nurture a life-long loyalty to that organisation which may lead to them becoming a potential benefactor in the future.

By taking these steps and thinking through the processes, the organisation is demonstrating to all stakeholders, including the volunteers, its commitment in wanting to involve volunteers in its operations in a purposeful and productive way. It is a positive exercise for museum management to plan for the real and ongoing costs associated in supporting volunteers, for sometimes if something is perceived as 'free' it can be undervalued. By assigning a dollar value to the costs incurred in involving volunteers with your organisation, it affirms and strengthens the volunteer role, as it incorporates it in future planning along with other organisational operations. On the other side of the equation, a museum should be aware of the value that volunteer involvement can add to an organisation in dollar terms. While care needs to be taken to ensure that volunteer contribution is not seen in purely monetary terms, again somewhat conversely, assigning a real value to the volunteers within the organisation structure, testifies to their worth and means that they are less likely to be taken for granted.<sup>5</sup>

An organisation needs to realise that there is a real cost involved in properly incorporating volunteers within its operations, and accept that this is a necessary component of volunteer management. Volunteers need, and are entitled to, similar support, training, infrastructure and ongoing management as paid staff members, and this does not come without a monetary cost to an organisation. However, it should be noted that any costs are significantly outweighed by the potential benefits that occur when volunteers are properly integrated into your museum.

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#### Notes

- 1 See Noble, et. al., *Volunteer management*, p. 18.
- 2 The findings in ABS, *Voluntary work, Australia*, show that in the course of carrying out their voluntary work, 58 per cent of volunteers incur expenses and of them, only 23 per cent advised that their organisation reimbursed them for these specific costs. See 'Summary of findings', *Voluntary work, Australia*, p. 10.
- 3 While applicable for all volunteers this is particularly the case with student volunteer placements, where it has been noted that the placements that were most likely to be unsuccessful were those that demonstrated a lack of commitment to training the student. Further, once having started their placements within their organisations, students felt that the most important asset was their supervisor's time. The students felt that far more important than equipment or resources was time spent with their supervisor and that this was the factor that had the most influence on how they felt about their placement. See Joanne Reidy, *Learning to work: students' experiences during work placements*, Melbourne University Press, 2006, pp. 107–108 and pp. 125–126.
- 4 See Noble, et. al., *Volunteer management*, pp. 44–45. The authors demonstrate through an organisational cost/benefit analysis how to calculate these intangible costs of staff time along with the more tangible costs involved. Noble, et. al. maintain that while funding to support a volunteer program should be seen as an investment rather than a cost, they warn that if the program is poorly managed it can compromise these positive outcomes. It is also worth noting that they do identify that there is a danger in trying to value all work in terms of monetary gain, as not all benefits can be assessed in these terms. However, the exercise does have a purpose, for at the very least it alerts the organisation to potential costs and the need to be realistic about these when considering volunteer involvement, which is not a bad thing.
- 5 See Noble, et. al., *Volunteer management*, p. 45.



## 6 The value of having a Volunteer Program Manager

*I think [the Volunteer Program Manager] provides her volunteers with incredible support and enthusiasm that provides us with a sense of purpose and achievement.*

Volunteer exit review comment

In an ideal world, any museum, gallery or other collecting institution that engages volunteers would employ a volunteer program manager, whose primary, or preferably only responsibility would be to manage the volunteers within the organisation.<sup>1</sup> In reality, this is seldom the case. Many museums that depend on volunteers do not have a person employed whose main responsibility is to oversee a volunteer program, and in these situations it is normal for an existing staff member to be assigned responsibility for the volunteers on top of their regular duties. If this is the case, the person assigned to this role should at least be allocated a certain amount of time to work on the volunteer program. They should also be encouraged to give high priority to the volunteers within their overall workload so as to obtain more positive results. While this will not be as satisfactory as having a dedicated volunteer manager position, if the person assigned to do this task has the skills, experience and time to take on the challenging role they can still make it succeed. And, if a museum does have the resources for supporting the position of volunteer program manager, it is something that they should pursue with the same care and support systems that would apply to any other position for which they budget.

As we have explored in earlier chapters, there are many factors that contribute to making the volunteer role within a museum a productive and effective one. In order to do all these ‘things’ well it takes time, expertise and commitment from the volunteer program manager (or person assigned to oversee the volunteers) and the organisation itself. Incorporating and being aware of these ‘things’ where possible within your own museum will have a positive impact on the relationship you have with your volunteers. These ‘things’ however, are more readily achievable if you have a volunteer program manager on staff whose responsibility it is to ensure that the volunteers are smoothly integrated into your museum, working out the best way that they can assist the organisation in meeting its objectives.

A volunteer program manager is responsible for a variety of tasks and responsibilities which cannot easily be assigned to an employee already working in a separate role. If these responsibilities are simply added on to another staff member’s job description without them being given the necessary support and time to carry them out, both sets of duties may be compromised. The volunteer manager role within an organisation is a comprehensive one, and the skills needed for the day-to-day management of volunteers are broad. In the past, often there has been a somewhat organic growth of the volunteer manager position. This has meant that rather than it having been fully considered as a role with a carefully conceived set of objectives, it has instead developed in response to a prevailing situation. For example, a museum director decides that engaging volunteer guides will be good for the museum’s public interface. Once these volunteer

guides commence in these roles it seems most logical that they should be managed under the direction of information desk staff. As volunteer numbers grow, rather than this situation being addressed, more responsibilities are gradually added to the paid staff member who has to 'manage' these volunteers on a daily basis. There are many potential problems with this situation, not least the fact that the volunteers are not properly supervised and supported in their roles. Even with the best of intentions, the paid staff member will be unable to take on the new tasks required of volunteer management without it impacting on their regular role and on the volunteers' experiences. This undesirable situation devalues the roles of the volunteers and the paid staff and may give rise to future problems.

If a museum has decided, and is in the position to invest resources to support a volunteer program manager position, the creation of a new role within the organisation does present some initial challenges. This is because the establishment of the volunteer manager position will most likely be uncharted territory, with no clear precedent within the organisation. Quite often, before the newly appointed incumbent can go about developing the role of volunteers within the museum, they will first have to define their own role within a pre-existing organisational culture. Therefore, the role of the volunteer program manager is not only about managing volunteers, but also about creating a space within the organisation for their own position as well as the volunteer program. They will need to work out how it can engage and integrate with pre-existing structures. Unlike other positions within the organisation that do not have to justify and endorse their roles, often the volunteer manager is regularly required to promote their own role and to educate other staff about the value and necessity of volunteer program management.<sup>2</sup>

As well as this 'promotional' angle, managing volunteers is a complex role requiring a broad range of skills, such as the ability to plan and organise; be a good communicator; counsel volunteers and staff; have an in-depth knowledge of human resource management (recruiting, interviews, inductions, evaluations, etc.); have business acumen; and be outwardly focussed. Further, in a small organisation this role will most likely be responsible for the ongoing training and supervision of volunteers. As you can see from this list, being a volunteer program manager is a demanding role that to be carried out effectively requires a suitably qualified person with the right skills base. It is unreasonable to expect that the requirements of this position can simply be added onto another person's workload. While the day-to-day realities of a volunteer program manager position will vary depending on the specifics of the individual organisation, most of them will be responsible to some degree for the areas listed above.

There are reasons that the volunteer manager position is so all encompassing. Even if you put to one side the time invested and work involved in developing quality volunteer positions and then recruiting suitable people for these positions, the work does not stop there. It is important to keep these volunteers motivated and interested in their work. If we reflect back on the professionalising of the volunteer role within the museum, it is clear to see that in order to be able to carry this out successfully, you need a person whose primary role it is to pursue these ends. A volunteer who is not supported in their assignment, or does not feel that the role is meeting their needs, before long will lose interest in the position. Further, ongoing training, supervision and mentoring of volunteers is a time-consuming yet necessary practice if you want to ensure that volunteers feel supported in their assignments and understand how their role relates to the museum's broader goals. As has been mentioned previously, volunteers want a quality experience and to feel as though their time is well spent. They do not appreciate an ad hoc experience that suggests that the investment of their time with your museum may have been better spent elsewhere. In order to

administer this kind of program it is necessary to have a volunteer manager who can maintain a high level of professionalism and ensure the volunteers are deployed in ways that further organisational objectives and the volunteers' own personal ambitions. Depending on the size of an organisation, it may be that the volunteers are for the most part working under the supervision and guidance of other paid staff. If this is the case, then these staff as well as the volunteers will require the leadership of the volunteer program manager to oversee the administration of the program in its entirety. A volunteer manager will be able to stay abreast of developments elsewhere in the field and build up networks with their peers across other organisations. They will also be able to keep up with the literature, attend relevant training and conferences and belong to formal organisations (such as Volunteering Australia) and related special interest groups, all activities likely to have direct benefits for the volunteers that they manage. From the creating of positions, initial recruitment and training processes through to staff relations, retention initiatives, feedback sessions and the facilitation of future development opportunities, the responsibilities of the volunteer program manager are extensive.

From an organisational perspective, the creation of a volunteer program manager role demonstrates to the various stakeholders that the organisation takes its commitment to volunteers seriously and is prepared to invest in ensuring the relationship is a productive one. In contrast, to enlist volunteers without the right management structures in place suggests that the organisation may see the situation as a somewhat one-sided arrangement that is about what the volunteers can do for them rather than it being a mutually advantageous relationship. Not all museums and galleries will have the resources to support a volunteer manager position, even though they realise there would be a benefit in doing so. However, a commitment to the process and understanding of the importance of the role of volunteer program manager is a good starting point. If resources are an issue, then perhaps the role could be piloted as a part-time position at first, where volunteer activities are approached on a smaller, more manageable scale. Where this is not possible, serious consideration should be given before adding volunteer manager responsibilities to existing roles; it is better to avoid the short-term convenience of an 'office manager' becoming an 'office and volunteer manager' if they are not given the administrative backing and time that they need to be able to do both roles well. If everything stays the same except for an additional duty being added to an already full workload, the employee will be unlikely to be able to fulfil either position satisfactorily. Similarly, neither the volunteers nor the museum will benefit from this short-sighted arrangement. It is infinitely preferable to acknowledge the real circumstances of your organisation's current situation and only take volunteers on when you are sure that you have the systems in place that will allow for their best management.

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## Notes

- 1 In recent times there has been considerable discussion regarding the correct title for the person whose role it is to supervise volunteers. Possibilities discussed have included Volunteer Co-ordinator, Director of Volunteer Services, Volunteer Manager, Volunteer Administrator, Volunteer Program Manager and various combinations of these. Discrepancies in the position's title are mainly due to a dialogue around just what the responsibilities of the role actually are and what is being managed. See Noble, et. al., *Volunteer management*, p. 30. In this text I have decided to use the term 'Volunteer Program Manager' as I feel that it best reflects the nature of the work generally involved with the position.
- 2 See Noble, et. al., *Volunteer management*, pp. 29–30.



# 7

## Volunteers need ownership of their work and a defined space in the organisation

*I really liked on the first week I went in and [the collection manager] had a schedule organised for me ... so I knew where I stood from the beginning.*

Volunteer exit review comment

For a volunteer to get the most out of their position in a museum, gallery or collecting institution, it is important that they feel they have ownership over their work and a defined space within the organisation in which to carry out that work. The idea of ‘space’ refers both to the physical surrounds in which the volunteer will work, but also and just as importantly, includes the organisational culture and the intellectual ‘space’ that they will need to be given if they are to have a positive experience and feel ownership over their work.

To determine the ‘space’ that volunteers will occupy within your museum it is useful to start with the basics and consider how volunteers will best be able to engage with the core business of your organisation. Ideally this should be done before volunteers become involved with your museum, and as mentioned in a previous chapter you will need to consider where they will fit in and how they will help accomplish your organisation’s objectives. Once this has been determined, a volunteer policy can be created and suitable volunteer positions developed. By establishing from the outset an organisational culture that understands how volunteers fit into the bigger picture of the museum, you are creating an environment where volunteers and other staff will feel confident in their positions and the work they carry out. This clear vision for the volunteer role should subsequently be conveyed through the recruitment and induction phases for it sends a positive and reassuring message to potential volunteers. You should not underestimate the importance of volunteers from the outset having a full understanding of their role and how it relates to the rest of the museum. Most volunteers when they commence work with an organisation will subconsciously be seeking some form of validation that they have made the right decision. If they can immediately see and understand the importance of their role within the organisation it will help make for a rewarding transition that confirms they have made a good choice.

Assuming that there is a defined space for the volunteer role within the organisational culture, it is useful to turn our attention to what having a ‘defined space’ for the volunteer actually encompasses. There are two main types of ‘space’ that are relevant here. Firstly, there is the concept of space in the physical sense; that is the availability of a suitable space where the volunteer can carry out their tasks. In this category space can also consist of associated work equipment including use of computers, designated desk space to complete their work, access to tearooms, lockers and other necessary supplies. This brings us back to the concept that was discussed previously, namely that volunteers are not ‘free’ and that there are costs involved if you wish to have them working effectively in your museum. There is nothing more disheartening for a volunteer than to arrive ready to start work, only to find that they have not been allocated any space to do so. It sends a negative message (even though it may be unintentional) that their work

is not valued enough to have warranted a work space. It also wastes a lot of valuable time and may create ill feelings if other staff and systems are shuffled around to try to make space in front of a new volunteer. For a newly appointed volunteer who is seeking confirmation that they have made the right choice in working in a particular museum this can make for a disappointing, even humiliating experience. While it is relatively easy to declare that your organisation values its volunteers, this claim can sound quite hollow if the realities of the work environment do not demonstrate this. By comparison, a volunteer who arrives at work on their first day to be allocated a space with all associated physical details worked out receives a positive message. Ensuring the provision of adequate physical spaces for volunteers to carry out their tasks is not only a mandatory requirement from an occupational health and safety perspective, but also necessary if you want your volunteers to be fully integrated into the organisation and to feel as though their work has as much value as that of other staff in the museum. If your organisation is unable to afford the physical space necessary to support volunteers in their tasks, then maybe it is not currently in a position to enlist their services.

*I certainly began to feel like a member of the team.*

Volunteer exit review comment

The second concept of ‘space’ for volunteers is ‘intellectual space’. This is as important as the volunteer having the physical space in which to work. The idea of ‘intellectual space’ refers to volunteers having a sense of ownership over the work or projects they are assigned. It is essential for the volunteer to feel that their work is important, that they are able to have input into how that work is undertaken, and that they will have the ability to influence the direction that the work takes. While tasks will vary, where possible volunteers should be encouraged to have the autonomy to prioritise their own duties, determine their weekly focus and work plans, and perhaps most importantly be included in any discussions and meetings that will affect the work.<sup>1</sup> It is vital that volunteers participate in discussions that concern their role and other related issues, for if they are excluded from these processes they are likely to feel disempowered and not valued by the organisation. Further, because they are undertaking these duties on a regular basis and because changes to a particular area may directly affect what they do, they often have the best suggestions on how to improve current systems and procedures. Remember also that most volunteers bring to their positions an extensive and varied skills base and experience and to ignore this knowledge may mean that your museum misses out on tapping into a rich resource. This issue is important in regard to the retention of volunteers as well, for as explored in a previous chapter on volunteer motivation, volunteers are more likely to be satisfied and stimulated by their volunteer work if they feel they are valued by the organisation and can have influence on the direction that their work takes. Volunteers who feel ownership of the ‘intellectual space’ of their project will be interested and committed to their work. Further, it encourages them to bring to and utilise within the museum their full range of life skills and experiences.<sup>2</sup>

Within the organisation, another way that ‘intellectual’ space can be secured for the volunteers is to pursue publicity and raise the profile of the volunteer role through regularly writing articles for newsletters and journals that integrate the volunteer program with other facets of the museum’s operations. Volunteers themselves should be encouraged to contribute to these in-house publications. Once ‘space’ has been secured for the volunteers within the organisation turn your attention outwards and garner more intellectual space for your volunteers through external promotions, publicity and writing. By doing this you are reinforcing the status of volunteers within the consciousness of the museum (and the public) as an integral part of its activities which

is connected to all areas of its operations, rather than as an isolated activity.

It is a minimum requirement that volunteers be provided with the necessary physical space to carry out their tasks successfully. When volunteers are also provided with the intellectual space to go about this work the results will speak for themselves. An understanding of the purpose of their tasks, and the opportunity to see how their work relates to the larger organisational picture, can only enhance their commitment to the volunteer role. While providing space is a necessity that allows these things to happen, encouraging volunteers to contribute to discussions that affect the nature of their work and influence its direction has significant benefit. Ultimately this will give rise to a more productive and rewarding work environment where volunteers have the ‘space’ that they need to do their task well.

## Notes

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- 1 See Ilsley, *Enhancing the volunteer experience*, p. 130. Ilsley suggests that volunteers should also be involved in organisational decision-making beyond their own specific area.
- 2 See Emma Anderson and Grant Cairncross, ‘Understanding and managing volunteer motivation: two regional tourism cases’, *Australian journal on volunteering*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2005, pp. 14–16.



## 8 Involvement with other staff — getting the right balance

*All the staff were lovely and interested in why I was there ... they all went out of their way to make me feel welcome and explain what they do.*

Volunteer exit review comment

When involving volunteers with your organisation, it is important that good relationships and camaraderie are encouraged between the volunteers and the paid staff. However, parameters need to be established. A balance needs to be struck, so that while volunteers should be welcomed and treated as part of the team, at the same time, certain protocols need to be observed by existing staff to ensure that the volunteer experience is not compromised. There are many circumstances and issues which would be inappropriate for volunteers to be exposed to, and paid museum staff need to be aware of this boundary. At times, there can be a fine line between being inclusive of the volunteers and fully embracing them within the organisation while simultaneously being aware that there is a distinction between volunteers and paid staff. It is up to the volunteer program manager to navigate this path and make other staff members aware of this line.

To be successful in engaging volunteers with other staff you need to encourage support for the volunteer program across all sectors of the museum. The best way to do this is to ensure that from the outset paid staff have the opportunity to participate in the development of volunteer roles within the organisation, and that they are regularly briefed on the program's progress. This should help generate a culture within the museum that is open and supportive of the volunteers. In addition to the insight that other staff may be able to bring to the volunteer program, having them involved in the process makes good sense, as it is likely that they will frequently come into contact with them. A positive environment where all staff are supportive of the volunteer program will produce the best outcomes.

There are many good reasons why it is important to have staff invested in the volunteer process: some are practical and make good business sense, while others are more about creating the right culture. Most importantly you want to create an organisational climate that is welcoming to the volunteer, and to do this it is necessary for paid staff to understand just what these volunteer roles will be and how they will relate to and interact with their own positions. Clearly defined volunteer roles (as discussed in a previous chapter) will aid this process, for they demonstrate just what each volunteer position will entail: its responsibilities and objectives. If paid staff have a sound understanding of the parameters of each volunteer role they will be less likely to feel threatened by volunteers and therefore more likely to be able to embrace the volunteer role. This is important, for the lack of understanding and clarity around volunteering issues can cause very real problems in the organisation. A 2006 national survey on volunteering issues identified that as many as 28 per cent of volunteers were aware of 'confusion, uncertainty or conflict' between the roles of paid employees and volunteers within an organisation. Such issues can surface because of staff perceptions that volunteers are doing for free work that should be paid, thus replacing,

undermining or devaluing their salaried positions. Paid staff may also feel threatened by volunteers' skills and experience and how these roles will interact with their own positions. This can also go the other way with volunteers resenting being managed by paid staff.<sup>1</sup> Without the necessary framework in place for paid staff and volunteers to feel confident in their respective roles, you run the real risk of creating a strained and inefficient work environment that may compromise the volunteer experience.

*I worked with a small group of people and was made to feel welcome by everyone. I felt as if I had been there much longer than I had by the end of the placement and this was due to the supervisors and staff.*

Volunteer exit review comment

If the work culture is well prepared and equipped to accept the volunteers, and roles are clearly articulated so people know where they fit, then you will be creating a solid foundation that will encourage a positive interaction between volunteers and paid staff. In turn, this should lead to a productive work environment, and importantly from your perspective, volunteers who feel supported in their positions. A significant factor influencing how a volunteer responds to their work is linked to how they feel about the work environment, and more specifically their relations with other colleagues. While their enthusiasm for their task is obviously important, how they feel about the museum may ultimately be determined by how well they feel they mesh with the organisation, believe they are part of a team and how they interact with staff. This sense of belonging is especially important for students undertaking volunteer placements or internships. It has been identified that if a student is to get the most out of their placement, have a professional learning experience and have the confidence to be able to carry out their work effectively, they need to feel supported in their work and accepted by other staff.<sup>2</sup> Also, if we consider what motivates volunteers to work for an organisation in the first place, some of the key motivators are learning new skills and increased social opportunities. These volunteer needs are more likely to be met in an environment in which they feel comfortable and able to relate to work colleagues. If these factors are absent or work relationships are strained, it will have a definite impact on how a volunteer will feel about their assignment and perhaps even their longevity with your organisation.

Integration of volunteers with paid staff should be an ongoing process. Once the important groundwork has been prepared and staff have actively participated in developing the volunteer program, it is a good idea to arrange semi-regular informal events where staff and volunteers can mix as equals. This could include meetings (where appropriate), afternoon teas, professional development sessions and conferences. Through these sessions, paid and volunteer staff will have an opportunity to socialise outside their usual work environment and this should help encourage a positive, non-hierarchical work atmosphere. It is also a good idea for the volunteer program manager in general staff meetings to regularly report on volunteer activities, ask for feedback and also to use these forums to diplomatically remind staff of their responsibilities to the volunteers. All these activities will help carve out a place for the volunteer program within the museum and demonstrate it as being part of the organisation's core operations rather than as an adjunct to them.

While it is important that staff from across the whole museum have ongoing interaction with the volunteers (for through this dialogue volunteers learn about issues that may be pertinent to the organisation and the sector as a whole), it is necessary that the right professional balance is maintained in the relationship. By this, I mean that while it is essential that staff provide a warm

and welcoming environment for volunteers, it is equally important that certain boundaries are not crossed. For example, volunteers do not need to be weighed down with the unnecessary politics that are common to most organisations. It is important to be as open as possible when it comes to including them in the real issues that challenge the museum, as these may affect their role within it. However, it is just as important to practice some discretion when it comes to revealing to them more sensitive information, or issues with which they do not need to be encumbered. This is where commonsense needs to be exercised, and staff should be guided in what is appropriate information for volunteers to know versus information that is unnecessary, inappropriate or that places an unfair burden on them. In this last category I would include any internal office politics, grudges or sensitive issues between staff. Volunteers for the most part do not need to be, nor benefit from being included in these kinds of discussions that have a reductive quality. If volunteers are exposed to this kind of negative information they may inadvertently be drawn into situations and placed in compromising positions. There may also be at times sensitive operational information that it is not appropriate for them to know. Therefore, while it is good to include volunteers where possible in discussions that concern their work, there may be times when it is not suitable for them to attend staff meetings and you should use your judgment to ascertain when this would be. So, while you should encourage paid staff to make volunteers feel at home within the organisation, there is a balance that should be maintained as not all information is desirable or necessary for them to know.

Another area to consider when you have volunteers working alongside paid staff is that they may at times be exposed to inappropriate practices that could compromise what you are trying to teach them. While relevant to all types of volunteers, this is particularly pertinent to student volunteers who are most likely working in your museum in an effort to gain professional skills. Be aware that for volunteers learning new skills, they will only be as good as the culture into which they are placed. This means that they will absorb the existing work culture as it is presented.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, if volunteers see or are taught practices that fall short of professional standards, they will develop behaviours and approaches to work that may not meet industry standards. Wherever possible you should ensure that the methods and practices that your volunteers are being exposed to are of the highest possible standard. If some deviation from these standards is necessary, a probable occurrence given that many collecting institutions have limited resources, make sure that it is explained to the volunteer why the application is different in your museum. If you have a volunteer who will be required to work closely with artefacts in a collection, make sure that they are fully trained in object handling skills before they commence the work. Also, ensure that the person who gives the training or other staff with whom they may be working are fully versed in the correct skills. Beyond the immediate obvious importance this will have to the collection that they are working with, you have to remember that many of these volunteers, students in particular, will proceed to paid employment within the museum sector and will take with them the skills they have developed within your museum. As such you have a responsibility to them to ensure their skills are readily transferable and meet industry standards. Further, you should also want them to be a positive ambassador for your museum in the sector, confident that the skills they have acquired will promote your museum in the best possible light.

For volunteer programs within museums and galleries to work they need the support of staff across the whole organisation. This does not happen without thorough planning and preparation. Volunteers need to be welcomed and included across all sectors of the museum, for this acceptance by staff will help ensure they have an enriching volunteer experience as they go about their work. At the same time, caution needs to be practised to guarantee that volunteers are not

unduly exposed to situations and issues that are not in their professional interest. A commonsense approach that understands the difference between being ‘one of the team’ versus being exposed to unnecessary politics or unsuitable practices which are potentially damaging is needed. It is part of a volunteer program manager’s role to see that these parameters are put into place and a healthy relationship between paid and volunteer staff is maintained.

## Notes

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- 1 See *National survey of volunteering issues 2006*, Volunteering Australia, pp. 4–5.
- 2 See Reidy, *Learning to work*, pp. 65–99 and pp. 127–134. In particular students noted that the peers that they turned to for support in the workplace had four main characteristics; they needed to be friendly, salient, accessible and competent. See p. 133.
- 3 Although writing specifically about workplace learning for students and new graduates, Stephen Billett’s comments are also directly relevant to volunteers. He identifies that while the workplace can be a rich resource for individuals to learn about their chosen area, often times they can be exposed to ‘inappropriate knowledge’ in the workplace which can have a detrimental outcome as novices are likely to be influenced by practices that they see around them. See Stephen Billett, ‘Workplace learning: its potential and limitations’, *Education and training*, vol. 37, no. 5, 1995, pp. 20–27.

## 9

## The importance of evaluations, feedback and open communication

*Apart from initial instruction when commencing any new activity I was encouraged to ask any questions, or clarify instructions, at any time if I had any concerns about activities undertaken or the processes involved.*

Volunteer exit review comment

When working with volunteers in your museum it is important to establish ways in which you can evaluate the volunteer experience, the work that is being completed and the volunteer program itself. All of this can be achieved in an environment that encourages feedback and open communication and that is flexible enough to respond to, use and interpret information generated by the evaluation processes. Evaluation of a volunteer program comprises two separate (but related) areas. Firstly, there is the evaluation of individual volunteers. This relates to reviewing how a volunteer is performing in their assignment, how they feel about the task, the organisation, work colleagues and any other associated issues. These evaluations would usually be conducted through a specially arranged one-on-one meeting. It is important to note that feedback and evaluation sessions should always be a two-way process. This means that while you advise a volunteer on how you think they are performing the task, it is equally important that you receive feedback from the volunteer on how they think the work is progressing. The true value of an evaluation session resides in a reciprocated exchange of information. The second type of evaluation is your self-evaluation of the volunteer program as a whole. This type of evaluation should regularly be carried out and take into account feedback from volunteers, staff, visitors and your own assessments. In these evaluations of the volunteer program, you should review your original objectives for including volunteers in the organisation to see if these objectives are continuing to be met. You may also choose to appraise systems and consider new methods that might improve the deployment of volunteers within the organisation.

The whole area of evaluations is a large and encompassing one and should never be seen as having been ‘completed’. Rather, evaluations of both individual volunteers and the program as a whole should be a regular and ongoing process. When they are used correctly over time, they will enable your volunteer program to evolve and develop while fulfilling its guiding objectives.

While most people would acknowledge that evaluations are a necessary part of managing paid staff, they are more likely to be cautious in applying this kind of management practice to their volunteer staff. Perhaps they fear that the idea of evaluating volunteers through regular reviews may be wrongly construed by the volunteers as being overly bureaucratic. Further, they may think that volunteers are not comfortable with the idea of being ‘evaluated’ and see it as a disagreeable process. In fact the opposite is true. Evaluating the work that your volunteers are doing, while simultaneously gathering feedback from them on how they feel about this work is actually a very empowering process for them. It illustrates to the volunteers that, similar to paid staff, who have regular performance reviews, their work is also valued by the organisation. As such, it should be

subject to similar management practices. Far from alienating them, conducting regular evaluation sessions with volunteer staff actually demonstrates that their roles are important and that the museum is prepared to invest time in pursuing these objectives. Once again we return to the concept of professionalising the volunteer role, and these actions demonstrate and support this professional approach. In the case of student volunteers, the evaluation process is especially necessary. For many students who volunteer at a museum, one of their main motivators is likely to be to gain new skills and broaden their professional development. An important part of skills development is for them to receive constructive feedback on their work, as this information will assist them in their future professional endeavours.

The other important factor to stress in this equation is that evaluations and feedback sessions must be a two-way process. So that while the volunteer's work will be evaluated, any good review sessions should also provide the opportunity for the volunteer to give feedback on how they feel about their assignment and the work in general. This could include comments on how they believe their work is progressing, the environment, staff they are working with, whether the assignment is meeting their expectations and importantly, any problems they may be experiencing. While the feedback that you give volunteers should help them to carry out their work more effectively, similarly, their comments about the work are an excellent resource for you. This feedback provides you with information about the volunteer program from this insider perspective. Some of the simplest and most apt observations happen at 'ground level' and can offer interesting insights and innovative methods that you may be able to utilise to improve on current practices.

How then do you proceed to implement evaluation sessions that are well received and productive? Ideally the concept of regular evaluation sessions should be introduced to potential volunteers at the earliest possible time. That way, a volunteer can see from the outset that it is part of the usual process and that they are not being unduly singled out. It is something they should be encouraged to look forward to: explain to them that it is an opportunity to have input into the issues that directly affect them. Further, a dedicated meeting time with the volunteer manager demonstrates to them that their role within the museum is valued. It is important to point out to the volunteer that these sessions are about a mutual exchange of information and aim to encourage an open environment of communication where they will receive feedback on their work but also have the opportunity to contribute their own views as well. Setting up a specific timeframe in advance as to when these evaluations will take place is also reassuring to the volunteer as they know when they will have occasion to provide feedback and they have time to think about what they want to discuss. A useful model of timeframes for evaluations may be to have a 'one month in' evaluation session, followed by a 'three month in' and then a six monthly session. It is desirable to have a set of questions that you revisit and to stagger these timeframes because the issues that affect a volunteer when they first start in a role will most likely change as they become more familiar with the organisation. It is also worth explaining to volunteers that while these are the official evaluation sessions, at any time between these occasions if issues arise that they would like to discuss, they can do so without having to wait.

Another important tool in evaluations, particularly from the organisation's perspective, is to utilise 'exit reviews' or 'exit interviews'. An exit review/interview should be carried out with all volunteers just before they leave your museum. The review can take the form of a personal interview or written questionnaire and is usually a list of questions that encourages the volunteer to reflect on their time spent with your organisation. Questions to be included could be how they feel about their work, why they are leaving, what they liked, what they did not like, and perhaps

most importantly suggestions for improvement. (See Figure 3, sample exit review form, page 57.) As a management device an exit review can be very revealing, as the volunteer will often give an honest account of their feelings about your organisation. Their responses can help you see your program and organisation from their perspective and can be a valuable source of information for future planning of your volunteer program. In my experience, it has often been these uninhibited suggestions and insights about the volunteer experience that have been the most enlightening and resulted in some of the best improvements.

Having evaluation sessions and exit reviews in place is important but is only the first step in the process. If you want your volunteer program to develop, once this feedback information has been gathered, it is essential that the information is reviewed and applied where appropriate. The focus now turns to interpreting this feedback so you can improve your volunteer program. So, if for example your evaluation sessions and exit reviews reveal that while enjoying the work that they do, your volunteers feel isolated in their roles, then you need to develop strategies for changing this perceived or real isolation. Maybe you can set up a network where the volunteers (who may be spread throughout different areas of your museum) have the opportunity to mix with one another and find out about what other volunteers do. This could be facilitated through the provision of an online volunteer section on your website where they can contact one another, or a calendar of social events could be arranged to encourage interaction.

*While I worked without supervision for most of the time I felt that I could always seek guidance when necessary.*

Volunteer exit review comment

Actively listening to the insightful comments and themes that emerge from these volunteer feedback sessions and then, where feasible, acting on the suggestions, once again sends the message to the volunteers that their input is valued by the organisation. If we revisit the previously discussed concept of volunteer motivation, it was identified that for some volunteers, satisfaction with their role was directly related to whether they felt they had a voice in the organisation and the amount that they felt they could influence the outcomes of their work. One of the best ways to give volunteers this voice is through incorporating their feedback from the evaluation sessions. This illustrates that you support open communication and an environment where all volunteers feel that their contribution to your organisation extends beyond the actual day-to-day work that they do. In the case of student volunteers, creating a dialogue is essential, as it is probable that they will be less confident and less inclined to ask about how to access the information they need. Older volunteers who have worked in other professions are more likely to ask for what they require in order to get the task done. In regard to productivity and ensuring the collections are not jeopardised, it is in your best interests for the volunteers to feel confident that they can ask for any information they need. If there is something they are unsure of, you should want your volunteers to feel comfortable requesting help and guidance. It is far better for them to seek clarification and advice than to continue to do something incorrectly until it is noticed, or damage is caused.

To be successful, evaluations have to be done regularly and the information that they generate needs to be reviewed and utilised. If your organisation involves a large number of volunteers this is a time-consuming yet worthwhile process. Providing the systems that allow for evaluations of volunteer work and also of the volunteer program itself is vital if you want to be able to optimise this valuable resource and ensure that volunteers feel empowered in their roles. It is important for

volunteers to see that they have a genuine contribution to make to your organisation beyond the actual physical work. Systems that allow you to review your program, where it is going, and whether it is meeting its goals, are vital if you wish to oversee a dynamic program. In both instances sound and open communication will help you to reach these very attainable goals.

Figure 3

## Exit Review Form

Cultural  
Collecting  
Institution

By way of evaluating and improving our Volunteer Program at the Cultural Collecting Institution, we ask that you answer the following questions:

1. *What volunteer project were you working on?*  
.....
2. *How do you feel about your time spent working with the collections of the Cultural Collecting Institution?*  
.....  
.....
3. *Do you feel you received adequate training and supervision?*  
.....  
.....
4. *Do you feel your volunteer experience was rewarding? (Please comment on)*  
.....  
.....  
.....
5. *Did you have a good relationship with your supervisor and other staff? (Please comment on)*  
.....  
.....
6. *Were you in any way dissatisfied by your volunteer work? (Please comment on)*  
.....  
.....
7. *Could you offer any suggestions that you think would have improved your volunteer experience?*  
.....  
.....
8. *Any additional comments?*  
.....  
.....

Name:..... Date: .....

Thank you for completing this review. It will be used to improve the Volunteer Program.

Please forward it to: Volunteer Program Manager  
Cultural Collecting Institution  
Melbourne 3000



# 10 Student placements have their own special 'things' ...

*Working in an area that you are new to could very easily result in feeling that you were a liability but with supervisors and staff always prepared to give their time this was not the case. I found that they were also prepared to answer all my questions on anything about the collection, rather than just on the tasks that were allocated.*

Volunteer exit review comment

Student volunteers are a particularly interesting and dynamic part of the volunteer sector. In addition to the issues that apply to volunteers generally, student volunteers present their own set of challenges and as such it is useful to consider them in more detail. All of the 'things' that have been previously explored in relation to involving volunteers with your organisation are relevant to the student volunteer population. In fact within this area, the issues as they relate to the volunteer student experience are heightened. If any shortcomings exist within your volunteer program they are likely to be amplified within this sphere. To be able to make the most out of the energetic resource that is student volunteers and to minimise any potential problems, it is necessary to have a sound understanding of the issues that are relevant to them. Usually the inclusion of student volunteers within your organisation will require a more comprehensive level of management and outlay of time. However, this is time well spent. It is likely that in return for your investment in student volunteers, your collection will benefit in myriad ways and you will have some of your most rewarding volunteer experiences.

Statistics show that an increasing number of young people are seeking to volunteer their time.<sup>1</sup> This rise reflects the general growth in volunteer numbers across the population. Within the 18–24 age bracket, the increase may be related to changing employment situations, where in many career fields volunteer work experiences can make a person infinitely more employable. Employers are looking for well-rounded graduates who have academic qualifications but who also exhibit initiative, leadership skills and community/social awareness: all attributes that can be achieved through volunteer assignment. Specifically within the cultural collections sector there is increased competition for a limited number of entry level positions. And while more people may be undertaking professional qualifications to prepare them for work in museums and collections, the sector is under-resourced which means that there are a limited number of job opportunities. This is where volunteering can make all the difference. It is not uncommon for students to have completed a course in museum studies or similar and not had any physical contact with an actual museum object. While the academic study provides a necessary theoretical framework, there is no substitute for the practical skills to be gained through actively working with a collection on a regular basis. Volunteering can provide the all important link between study and the workplace and thus better prepare the student for their chosen career. Educational facilitators of related courses now recognise the need for their students to have tangible and real work experiences as part of their degree structure, and it is becoming more common for museum courses to include an internship or placement subject. This gaining of a real practical experience within a relevant

workplace is held in high regard by potential employers as well, as they see the difference that it makes to a student's professional development.<sup>2</sup>

*The practical experience of working with archives is essential to complement the theory in the textbooks and lectures of my course.*

Volunteer exit review comment

When using the term 'student volunteers' in this chapter, I am referring to tertiary students who are undertaking a placement with a museum or cultural collection. They are generally doing so as a volunteer in the purest sense of the word: to gain extra-curricular experiences to supplement their studies or to fulfil an interest. I also include under this umbrella term those students who are pursuing a volunteer placement to fulfil a course requirement such as an internship subject. The experiences that the students require from the placements are so similar in essence that regardless of whether they are undertaking the placement with a collection to fulfil subject requirements or on their own volition, the volunteer management issues remain the same.<sup>3</sup>

*It proved to give a very good insight into what it might be like to be a historian working in the field. I think it was a useful experience, something that I will be able to draw on down the track.*

Volunteer exit review comment

One of the most notable differences between student volunteers and other types of volunteers is that the student group will often be seeking a short-term experience with specific goals to be achieved over a predetermined timeframe. This type of volunteering is frequently referred to in the literature as 'episodic' volunteering.<sup>4</sup> Episodic volunteering is defined by short bursts of activity where volunteers (usually students but not limited only to them) wish to work on specific projects for a set period of time rather than offer an ongoing commitment. Often they will be seeking short-term assignments which will fulfil specific goals: learning new skills, refreshing skills they already have, professional networking or road-testing a particular vocation. Once they have achieved this defined outcome, it is likely they will move on to their next challenge. While this pattern is particularly applicable to students, people between jobs, looking for a career change, fitting in with family obligations or just seeking a different challenge may also fall into this category.

Some organisations may perceive the episodic or short-term volunteering sought particularly by students to be undesirable due to its limited timeframes. After all, regardless of how long a volunteer stays with an organisation, recruiting, inducting, training and subsequent supervising all take the same amount of time. So, from a management perspective the longer a volunteer stays once this time has been invested the better. However, short-term volunteering does in fact offer many benefits that are unique to these types of placements which make them worthwhile. Student volunteers and short-term placements generally, are more labour intensive than traditional volunteer placements. Often student roles require more staff time as some students may be undertaking work with a collection or even be in a workplace for the first time, so that in itself will have associated challenges. These potential drawbacks need to be offset with the many important advantages that student volunteer placements can offer. Because the student volunteer will often be operating within a predetermined timeframe, for example the length of a semester, they will be motivated to complete the work within the agreed time. Further, while training and ongoing mentoring will be required (akin to other volunteers), students are generally very keen to

make a good impression and bring much enthusiasm, energy and freshness to their tasks. Consequently, these tasks are often completed to a very high standard. Student volunteers also tend to be very responsive to directions and instructions because they are in an active learning phase of their life and are eager to please. The benefits that this can bring to your work environment are many, not least the invigoration of other staff members as they are inspired by the fresh approach and inquisitiveness of the student which may in turn encourage them to see their own work in a different light. Further, if you provide the student with a positive and meaningful volunteer experience, you are likely to engender in them a sense of loyalty to your organisation which subsequently they take with them into the wider community as they continue with their studies and later careers.

As mentioned previously, for student volunteers the nine ‘things’ that have been explored in the preceding chapters are accentuated and assume even more importance. The requirements that volunteers should have a professional experience, work on a quality project of real value, be given sound orientation to the work environment, are provided with comprehensive training so that they have confidence to carry out their tasks, are encouraged to communicate through feedback sessions and are given access to networking opportunities, all assume paramount importance when working and placing students with your collections. Knowing that there is a heightened sense of responsibility when you enlist student volunteers to work with your collections, how then does this affect the way that you structure the volunteer roles within your organisation? For the benefit of all the volunteers whom you manage, you need to ensure that your volunteer program is administered well and able to offer a sound and effective volunteer experience. A student volunteer, in particular, is more likely to be apprehensive about the skills needed to carry out an assignment. A well-planned position description is the perfect remedy here. This is because on this document you will have already listed the skills that are required to perform the task and noted the training that will be provided. Often a student may just need reassurance that they are suitable and that with appropriate training they will be able to competently complete the task. The position description will enable them to see this. As discussed previously, if when you create your volunteer positions, you ensure that they are well considered, of real value to the organisation and factor in training, then you are halfway there. These quality assignments will automatically be ideal for student volunteers.

*It was very rewarding. I learn and retain information better if I can apply it to a situation so it was a great learning experience. It was also beneficial to see the working environment and to meet people who work in the field. It's a good way to test the waters — to see if you want to work in that particular area.*

Volunteer exit review comment

In student volunteer placements the emphasis on and importance of learning processes cannot be overstated and includes all aspects of learning associated with the project. The most obvious learning process is the training involved in preparing the student so that they are able to undertake the task. It is vital that the student receives full training in all facets of the work so that they feel confident when they are left to work on the project. Another key issue, given student volunteers’ limited work experiences within the sector, is that it is likely they will have nothing against which to compare the standard of training. This makes it all the more important to ensure that they are trained in practices that reflect the highest industry standards. You want to help them develop skills that they will utilise beyond your organisation and throughout their careers in the collections field. Therefore, it is vital that they are taught the correct way of doing something.

Remember, the student will also reflect your organisation when they venture into the sector at the start of their careers so you want them to demonstrate sound skills. This may be more complicated if the student is working under the direction of another staff member and you are not in control of the training yourself. You have an obligation to the student to ensure that they are taught professional skills that meet industry standards, so you need to be confident that any staff working closely with the collections and training the volunteers are demonstrating best practice. Tact and diplomacy will be needed here, and if you are not satisfied with the ‘accepted’ way things are done it may be necessary to organise training sessions for relevant staff. Students are likely to be more impressionable than older, more seasoned volunteers who usually will have a range of past experiences on which to draw. Due to their professional inexperience, students are very susceptible to outside influences be they good or bad.

*I also found out about the realities of resources/funding and how that can result in modifications to the processes and levels of detail but while still recognising the best practices for archiving.*

Volunteer exit review comment

If there is a deviation from accepted industry standards, then every attempt should be made to educate the student in the correct way and an explanation should be offered as to why there is variation. For example, if a student is working in a small museum that has limited resources, they may see storage facilities that are not of the highest standard but that have been adapted to achieve the best possible results within the current situation. It is not bad for a student to be exposed to the reality of a less than perfect situation due to shortfalls in resources, and for them to see how an organisation copes with these limitations. This in fact can present a very good learning opportunity, for the student can see that while in their textbooks collections are demonstrated in ‘ideal’ storage environments, the reality for many museums operating on shoestring budgets may preclude them from the ideal. So, the student is instead exposed to the realities that many collections face and how collections can best be managed given these limitations. It is important to instruct the student in what best practice is and then always be accountable and explain why something may be done differently in the current environment. That way you are building on their knowledge base and giving them a better understanding of what they see.

While training is the most obvious area of learning that is understood to be part of the student volunteer experience, the learning phase extends well beyond the training session. Other types of learning for the student volunteer will come about through their interaction with other staff who will have an important influence on them. Students actively learn through many facets of their placements; even through the experience of being immersed in a work environment completely different from their normal student life. Student volunteers will also be learning through their interactions and informal conversations with other staff and the public and from seeing behind the scenes how things are done even if they do not directly relate to their own volunteer project. Further, students will learn when they have the opportunity to analyse problems and to make decisions about the work they are doing.<sup>5</sup> The situations outlined above provide them with the opportunity to learn actively, so in reality they are constantly learning while working within your organisation.

For a student volunteer, his or her relationship with their primary supervisor is a particularly important one, and has perhaps the strongest influence on how they will feel about their time spent with an organisation.<sup>6</sup> Further, it is through this relationship that the best opportunities for

learning are presented as the student feels empowered by the supervisor and as such gets the most out of the experience.<sup>7</sup> As mentioned above, it is also important for student volunteers to have good working relationships with other staff, as they will help to shape the experience that the student ultimately has with the organisation. It has been suggested that in order for the student to gain the most from the placement that the staff with whom they will be working must be competent and non-threatening so that the student feels comfortable to approach them to find out any information they need.<sup>8</sup>

One of the foremost reasons students have for wanting to work with a particular collection is to learn new skills and increase their professional development. If you involve student volunteers with your collections you should always be aware of this motivation and try where possible to give the student opportunities that will enhance and broaden their learning experiences. This may involve providing additional training beyond their project, or letting them attend workshop sessions and meetings where appropriate. It may also mean giving them the chance for professional development and greater exposure through writing an article for publication on the collection or their experience. If they want to enhance their résumé the opportunity to write something that is published on a website or distributed within the museum would be a desirable outcome. Students often regard their volunteer placement as a means to an end. That is, they are keen to undertake a volunteer assignment in the hope that it may lead to paid work down the track, increased networking opportunities and of course to broaden their skills base.

The role of feedback sessions also is invaluable to both sides when working with student volunteers. Sometimes the best suggestions for improvements stem from these open communication sessions. From the student's perspective, especially if they are new to the workforce, constructive comments can really help them adjust and get the most out of the volunteer experience. It is important to let them know how they are progressing and what they are doing well as this adds to the student's confidence which in turn leads to them being more competent in their role.

The involvement of student volunteers with short-term projects does require a significant investment of time and energy. However, the structures that all volunteers require should already be in place so that involving students is really just an extension of the good, professional procedures that you already practise. The more condensed timeframes may initially be discouraging to collecting institutions accustomed to longer-serving volunteers. While some organisations may find the higher turnover rate amongst younger volunteers to be an inconvenience, you should really regard it as a good thing as it often means that the student has successfully completed the duties required of the placement or maybe even secured a job in the industry. This means that you have fulfilled your objectives and responsibilities to the student by providing them with a professionally valid work experience. Simultaneously, you have also been able to complete a particular project within a defined timeframe to a high standard. Further, you should not forget the enduring benefits of having these students acting as advocates for your organisation in the wider community. This is clearly a mutually beneficial arrangement for all involved. Even though the time that student volunteers are prepared to offer to your museum may be limited, the energy and dynamism they often bring to the work environment is not. Given today's somewhat tight volunteer market and the difficulties that some cultural organisations have in securing good volunteers, the student volunteer may prove to be a resource that your organisation cannot do without.

- 1 In the 'Summary of findings' in ABS, *Voluntary work, Australia*, it is noted that between the two surveys taken in 2000 and 2006 increases in volunteer rates occurred across all age groups. In the 18–24 age bracket volunteering rates have steadily grown from 16.6 per cent in 1995 to 26.8 per cent in 2000 and to 31.8 per cent in 2006, see 'Appendix A2 volunteering, by age and sex 1995, 2000, 2006', p. 74. Also of interest, the survey shows that 42.6 per cent of students engage in volunteer work. See Table 3 'Volunteering, by selected demographic and socio-economic characteristics', p. 20.
- 2 See Edwards and Graham, 'Museum volunteers', esp. pp. 22–23. The authors outline the importance of volunteering for the next generation of museum workers and the role that it plays in their career development.
- 3 I have already discussed in an earlier footnote the various types of student volunteers that you may encounter so I will not repeat them here. While there is some disparity in the definitions as to what constitutes a 'true' student volunteer, the issues that are pertinent to these student placements are so similar that I have included them all under the category of 'student volunteerism'. I believe that the prevailing issues are consistent across the different types of student volunteers even if the traditional definition of volunteer needs to be flexed a little to accommodate these types.
- 4 See Noble, et. al., *Volunteer management*, pp. 57–58.
- 5 See Ilsley, *Enhancing the volunteer experience*, p. 70.
- 6 Reidy examines work-related placements as part of courses for students across several professions (e.g., nursing and teaching). The issues that she explores, as raised by the case studies, have resonance with student volunteer placements within the cultural collections sector. Reidy identifies that a common theme that arose for the students was that time spent with their supervisor was seen as the most important asset. All of the students valued the role of their supervisor and wanted to feel that they were committed to their well-being and professional development. See Reidy, *Learning to work*, esp. Chapter 3, 'Becoming, negotiating, scaffolded', pp. 100–126.
- 7 Reidy, *Learning to work*, pp. 125–126.
- 8 Reidy identifies that within the workplace the peers with whom students felt most comfortable shared four main characteristics of being friendly, salient, accessible and competent. See Reidy, *Learning to work*, p. 133.

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## appendix 1

### sample volunteer policy

A volunteer policy should take the organisation's mission as its starting point and from there explore how the volunteer program can interact with this vision. The example cited below is the volunteer policy from the Student Projects Program, Cultural Collections at the University of Melbourne:

As a custodian and manager of cultural resources, the University is committed to the propositions that its cultural inventory should be documented and preserved, accessible to students and the general community, illuminated by research and teaching, and engaged with the community as widely as possible. (Cultural Policy Statement, University of Melbourne, October 2006)

The Guiding Principles for the University of Melbourne's cultural resources as set out in its Cultural Policy are to conserve, document and coherently develop the University's cultural collections and programs; to facilitate access to them for staff, students and the public; to advocate research on them within and without the University; to support educational understanding of them for students and the public; to maximise support for them from external partners and public participation; to coordinate plans and programs to optimise benefit for the whole University and to celebrate and promote the University as a distinctive cultural centre.

How then does the Student Projects Program, Cultural Collections engage with this policy?

The Student Projects Program is one of the dynamic ways that the University fulfils some of these guiding principles by ensuring that the cultural collections are accessible to the students, staff and the general community. The Program is uniquely positioned to create strong links between the University's cultural collections and volunteers by encouraging access, participation and support through the facilitation of student placements, projects and voluntary work experiences with the cultural collections.

Through the placement of student volunteers with the collections, the Student Projects Program aims to equip suitable volunteers with the skills necessary to work on quality collection management projects. The Program is conceived as a mutually advantageous arrangement between the University and the student volunteers. Through the valued resource of volunteers, the University extends and supports collection management programs in areas such as documentation and cataloguing, research, significance assessment and the application of preventative conservation measures. In return, the student volunteers develop valuable vocational skills, have the unique opportunity of working closely with a collection and its professional custodians, and enjoy an enriched learning experience.

See Helen Arnoldi, *Volunteer policy, Student Projects Program, Cultural Collections*, The University of Melbourne (in-house policy document), 2008.

