

THE ROLE OF THE VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR

The volunteer coordinator is one of the most important people in the entire organization. Volunteers are busy — too busy to waste time on something they are not sure is important to them. For this reason, getting people to take on specific projects before they have had a chance to get their feet wet with an organization scares them off.

Therefore, the key is to offer new volunteers an opportunity to work on one small task in the effort before you ask them to take on a big project. This means that at some point big projects need to be broken down into the smaller tasks. I believe that this is the job of the committee chairs or project leaders.

The other basic issue is that people contribute to causes they believe in for more than altruistic reasons. Often it is a social reason, they want to associate and work closely with people with whom they agree. Another common reason is to get experience in a particular area in which they have held a long-standing interest, or in which they would like to grow professionally or personally. For this reason, it is critical to understand just where people would like to fit in to a project.

Once you know where they would like to fit, and understand that people are more likely to take on a small task rather than a big project, you have the basis for making matches.

The process that the volunteer coordinator goes through is something like this:

1. Get a list of projects from the various committee chairs and project leaders that need volunteers. Work with them to break down the projects into reasonable tasks — tasks of varying size and complexity that would appeal to someone. For newer groups, having more than a couple of key projects may be difficult until the volunteer base is built up.
2. Make a list of these various tasks, combining tasks that require similar experience, knowledge, interests. Think of the perfect person to do each of these tasks, and try to keep that picture in your mind as you combine tasks into different lists.
3. Highlight the easy and “sexy” tasks that will especially appeal to new people. Also identify tasks that groups can take on.
4. Create a “People Wanted” flyer or list that highlights a few of the representative and appealing projects. Use this as a recruiting tool to be used in getting new volunteers involved. Ask the people to contact you directly.
5. Identify potential sources of volunteers. This is a list that is literally limited only by the imagination. Send the list to any potential source, asking them to announce at one of their meetings or to publish in their newsletter. The nature of the tasks will also suggest potential sources for the work (i.e. photos for a slide show could be taken by members of the photo club.)

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6. As people come to you with their interest, probe a little to see just what it is they want to get and expect to do. Confirm that this is really the project for them.
7. Refer the volunteer to the project captain or committee chair. Explain to the leader exactly your understanding of the scope of work, as communicated to the volunteer.
8. Follow-up after a short time to see if the fit is right. Perhaps the volunteer would like to take on another project. Perhaps the volunteer flaked out and someone else needs to be recruited. Follow-up accordingly.

The role of the volunteer coordinator is a pretty big project itself. I think the process works here, too. The volunteer coordinator can break this down into small tasks, and farm out some of this to someone else. Working together with someone is almost always better than working alone.

This is a model that has been successful for many groups. However, as needed the model can be modified to fit your specific situation and the needs of your volunteers. Overall, this is a role that requires someone who will keep at it **consistently** — though it doesn't necessarily take a large amount of time. Above all, it takes someone who is interested in helping people find a place within the organization.