Innovative Human Capital Strategies

As important as volunteering continues to be, America is still experiencing a "leaky bucket" effect as far too many people drop out of volunteering from one year to the next. Last year, for the second straight year, 1 in 3 American volunteers dropped out. This is a huge loss of valuable human capital – about $30 billion a year.

The *Volunteering in America 2008* report cites some reasons that volunteers are dropping out, including:

- Volunteer opportunities aren't challenging or meaningful enough
- Volunteering is too rigid and needs to be more flexible to meet the demands of today's volunteers. New models need to be weekends, nights, virtual, family, employee-supported, voluntourism, etc.

To help decrease the volunteer dropout rate, nonprofit organizations should implement innovative strategies to maximize the human capital available in their communities. Organizations can:

- Provide volunteers with social networking opportunities through their volunteering experience
- Create volunteer leadership positions for volunteers
- Offer a menu or volunteering options
- Provide personal and professional development opportunities for volunteers

Social Networking through Volunteering

People in transition, such as recent retirees or empty nesters, may drop out of volunteering as their social networks decrease. Likewise, new residents in a community might not have established networks. Still other potential volunteers might be looking to expand their networks. The key is to find ways to offer ways for all these volunteers to plug in and stay strongly connected.

Here are some examples of innovative social networking opportunities for volunteers of all types:

The Team Approach

Engage volunteers in team-based projects. You may work with teams that already exist, such as youth groups or corporate volunteers, or you can create teams from community members who might not normally interact with one another.

If you are creating new teams, it's important to help volunteers get to know one another and move successfully through the stages of group process (forming, norming, storming, performing, and transforming). Build a team culture that is identifiable and easily explained to those outside the team.

If the volunteer group is made up of an existing team, you may find that this is a much more difficult team to create. It will be important to redefine the focus of the team as well as the team roles and leadership structure. As with newly formed teams, existing teams will go through the stages of group process; however, you should be aware of potentially greater challenges. You may need to play a greater role in facilitating the process of breaking down old standards of leadership, creating new group norms, and establishing new methods for agreed-upon means of communication.

- Many HandsOn Network affiliate organizations utilize a unique approach to group volunteering called *TeamWorks*. TeamWorks fuses volunteer service projects, community issue education, and teambuilding activities to produce a unique, team-based service learning program. A team of 8-12 TeamWorks volunteers participate in a kickoff event followed by a round of meaningful service projects and structured reflection sessions. TeamWorks volunteers build strong relationships with their fellow team members as they learn about community issues and how they together can address the underlying problems of social issues.

  Organizations that offer TeamWorks:

  - Increase volunteerism
  - Introduce community members to a variety of volunteer opportunities
  - Increase awareness of community issues through service learning
  - Develop service leaders

- Raise social, political, and community awareness and help overcome misconceptions and prejudices
- Expand volunteers' social networks through engaging

Volunteers who participate in TeamWorks:

- Expand social networks
- Build relationships with other concerned citizens
- Reflect on service and civic participation
- Learn more about community issues
- Engage in constructive, meaningful community service activities
- Develop leadership skills

Skills-based Volunteering

Nonprofits face growing challenges recruiting, developing and retaining the talent they need, particularly at the leadership level, and the current resources available to address this challenge are not sufficient. Research from the Taproot Foundation (www.doitprobono.org) suggests one promising solution: to reach outside the organization, even outside the sector, to leverage existing skills with pro bono support.

Many volunteers and potential volunteers are looking to offer their unique skills to the community. Skills-based volunteering, the contribution of business knowledge and experience to help nonprofits increase their capacity, is a growing trend among Corporate America. Not only does skills-based volunteering provide much-needed support to local nonprofits, but it also helps foster meaningful business and leadership skills among employees (Deloitte Volunteer IMPACT Survey 2008).

Skills-based volunteering is one way for retirees and Baby Boomers to plug into their communities.

- Capital One's Brand Marketing team helped reinvigorate the District of Columbia College Access Program's (DC-CAP) brand to elevate the organization's profile among competing nonprofits. To help achieve these goals, Capital One's Brand Marketing team consulted with DC-CAP on visual identity and collateral development.

  Thanks to the help of the Capital One Brand Corps team, DC-CAP had a new portfolio of marketing materials including a brochure for DC-CAP's workplace giving program, business cards and letterhead, a direct mail invite for spring fundraiser and donor outreach materials. DC-CAP was able to immediately incorporate the new branding to create a consistent look and feel for all their materials.

- The GE Foundation Developing Futures™ in Education program takes a new, comprehensive approach to supporting entire school districts in sustainable and scalable ways that increase impact, with the goal of improving student learning in math and science, improving college readiness, and closing achievement gaps. Developing Futures seeks to create positive change using a systemic approach that begins with collaboration among key constituencies and integrates its grant-making with leveraging the expertise and deep resources within GE's talented workforce to give specific school districts

access to resources and knowledge it otherwise could not afford.

GE's investment in professional training for the leaders of both Jefferson County and Stamford Public Schools has already started to pay off. The partnerships, forged through the GE Foundation's flexibility, have allowed districts to be innovative and accomplish more than they would have otherwise, and they have established the basis for long-term sustainability. There is now a structure and timeframe around addressing issues like effective leadership training and human resources, which provides crucial opportunities to develop a sense of trust within the districts' leadership teams.

Connecting Social Networking and Volunteerism Online

Online social networking tools are a great resource for volunteers to connect to organizations, social issues, and other volunteers. A quick internet search will reveal networking sites such as:

- Facebook Causes
- MySpace
- SE7EN (Social and Environmental Volunteer Exchange Network)
- Local groups such as FUEL in St. Louis, MO

About.com provides an article on tips for nonprofits interested in getting started with social networking online. Citing Sarah DiJulio and Marc Ruben's work in *People to People Fundraising: Social Networking and Web 2.0 for Charitie* (Wiley, 2007), the article offers these tips:

- Pick the right social networks.
- Find an "expert" to help you.
- Extend your reach.
- Prepare to lose control.
- Know who's already pretending to be you.
- Make a good first impression.
- Post your edgiest, most viral content.
- Find out which of your supporters are already on social networks.
- Communicate with your social network friends on a regular basis.
- Devote staff time to making your social networking effort a success.
- Activate your social network supporters.
- Think of social networking as an investment in the future.

Read the entire article at
http://nonprofit.about.com/od/socialmedia/tp/Tipsstartsocialnetworking.htm.

Volunteer Leadership

Volunteers can serve in a variety of leadership positions within your organization. Volunteer leaders who are properly trained and supported can strengthen your program and expand the work you are able to do in the community. Volunteers can serve on boards, lead committees, head recruitment efforts, manage other volunteers. They can also serve as *volunteer project leaders*, who:

- Take charge of a project by coordinating it and taking accountability for its successful completion
- Communicate the details of the project and serve as a resource for other volunteers
- Organize, lead, and inspire a group of volunteers before, during, and after the project
- May initiate new projects
- Represent the organization to other volunteers and to the community

An important step in establishing a solid volunteer project leadership program is determining how volunteers can best support your organization and the broader community. Before you can begin utilizing volunteers as project leaders, first develop the framework for how they will fit into your organization. This includes determining your needs, the roles they will fill, and goals and objectives.

Making a Commitment to Project Leadership

Before beginning a project leadership effort, you must make an organizational commitment to project leadership. Be clear about your reasons for building the program. Consider these things:

- Your community is full of potential leaders.
- Project leaders can expand your program's capacity.
- You can create a community of committed leaders who care about and understand your work.

Make sure that staff at all levels of the organization are prepared to support project leaders, from recruitment and training to placement and recognition. Prepare staff to respond knowledgeably to volunteers interested in serving as leaders. Ensure that policies and procedures are in place to effectively manage a project leadership program. Make an organizational commitment to expanding volunteers' capacity.

Assessing Your Needs

Once you have made a commitment to project leadership, you need to develop a framework for how the leaders will fit into your organization. The first step of developing a project leadership framework is to determine your program needs. As you define your volunteer engagement goals and objectives, consider your current program, how you want to expand your work, and how you can utilize volunteers in leadership positions. Take time to think about these questions:

- What are the goals of our national service program?
- Are we able to meet those goals with our current staff capacity? Why or why not?
- How do we want to expand the work we do in the community?
- What types of volunteer projects do we want to undertake?
- How can project leaders help us enhance our current work, take on new projects, and accomplish our goals?
- What specific needs do we have that project leaders can fulfill?

It is important to define clear goals and objectives for your project leadership program. Equally important, your organization must have the capacity (i.e., supervision, space) to support project leaders. Conducting a needs analysis will help you determine where leaders can be used productively.

Outline specific program needs, the tasks involved, and the support needed. Once you have identified the major needs, answer these questions:

- Is the need genuine or contrived?
- Can we give the project leader ownership of this project?
- Can we provide the essential support?
- Will the benefits be worth the investment of training and supporting the project leader?
- Would a project leader want to perform these tasks?

Defining Meaningful Leadership Roles

Once you know your program's needs in terms of project leaders, you should clearly outline what volunteers will do as project leaders, what skills are required, and the support/benefits they will receive. Develop a volunteer position description to define the role of the project leader.

For more on recruiting, supporting, and recognizing volunteer leaders, visit www.nationalserviceresources.org.

Volunteering Options

Volunteers are diverse, and they have a wide variety of interests and schedules. In order to engage and retain the highest number of volunteers, consider ways to coordinate service events for people with varying schedules, needs, and interests.

- Include volunteer efforts at different times of day and different days of the week.
- Have flexible hours or recruit volunteers to serve in shifts instead of an entire day.
- Plan projects around multiple impact areas or diverse opportunities within a single issue.
- Offer family-friendly projects in which parents and their children can serve together.
- Provide opportunities for first-time volunteers and for volunteers with more advanced skills.
- Plan projects for individuals and for groups.
- Include indoor and outdoor projects.
- Offer short-term and long-term projects.
- Engage virtual volunteers.
- Make service and leadership opportunities accessible for people living with disabilities.

The *project calendar* is another best practice utilized by many nonprofit organizations. A project calendar is a listing of available volunteer opportunities and other information about your program or projects. Project calendars are a great way to inform volunteers about upcoming service projects, recruit new volunteers, and engage new project sponsors.

In addition to an actual calendar outlining volunteer opportunities for the month, project calendars should include a brief description of projects listed. Sort project descriptions according to impact area (e.g., health, the elderly, education) and be sure to outline important details such as age requirements, times, locations, the number of volunteers needed, how to register, and the project leaders' contact information. Don't forget to specify who the project is appropriate for, such as families, first-time volunteers, or volunteers with specific skills.

Project calendars can be used for more than detailing the upcoming projects. You can also use the calendar as a newsletter to spotlight certain volunteers or projects, give updates on your national service program, share news flashes, and highlight special events. Other calendar items could be volunteer orientation and recognition events.

Personal and Professional Development Opportunities for Volunteers

Providing development opportunities is one way for your organization to recognize volunteers and increase your volunteer retention rate. Volunteers can utilize and/or develop specific skills that apply to both their personal and professional lives.

Skill Area	Volunteer Application
Budgeting and resource management	• Fundraising and solicitation skills • Creating and working within a budget
Communication	• Corresponding with community agencies and partners • Communicating service goals and tasks to volunteers
Cultural competence	• Volunteering with people of different cultures • Engaging with new populations in community
Delegation	• Identifying key project tasks • Determining leaders for specific tasks
Managing people	• Managing volunteers during the service activity • Coordinating an event
Marketing and recruitment	• Marketing service opportunities throughout the campus • Recruiting volunteers
Motivating others	• Keeping volunteers engaged in the service community • Helping volunteers to connect to a community issue
Planning	• Developing a project scope of work • Creating a project timeline
Presentation skills	• Leading the volunteer orientation • Facilitating the service learning and reflection activity
Problem-solving	• Troubleshooting during the service activity • Developing contingency plans for projects

By connecting with other nonprofits and schools in the community, you can increase the development opportunities for volunteers. Here are a few ideas:

- Connect volunteers with community agencies that work around specific issues of interest to volunteers.
- Plan joint projects with other organizations to broaden the scope of volunteers' experiences in the community.
- Connect volunteers with community leadership opportunities, such as serving on boards at local agencies.
- When working with college students, connect students with other academic departments to bridge gaps on campus and strengthen the service movement.
- Connect volunteers with training opportunities, such as seminars or conferences that are located in or near your town.
- Connect volunteers with professional associations, particularly nonprofit professional associations, so they have the opportunity to meet leaders in a field that interests them, become aware of important issues in that field, and may find other volunteer opportunities, internships, or jobs.

Other best practices:

- Outline development opportunities in volunteer position descriptions, so that potential volunteers understand this benefit from the beginning.
- Include development potential in marketing and recruitment efforts.
- Encourage volunteers to facilitate training and share their skills with other volunteers.

If you formalize volunteers' service with your organization, you validate their roles and provide them with future growth opportunities. In addition to developing volunteer position descriptions and helping them translate their service to their resume, consider utilizing forms for class credit, writing letters of recommendation, and conducting formal performance evaluations.

If you encourage volunteers to reference your organization when applying for future programs, internships, or jobs, make sure that your organization is prepared to keep records on the volunteers. This will ensure that volunteers receive an honest and prompt reference even if their immediate volunteer supervisor is no longer with the organization. Establish procedures for protecting the security of volunteers' information as you would for staff.