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Published First Online: 30.06.2023

Pages: 151-161

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.37075/JOMSA.2023.1.12>

COMMUNICATION WITH VOLUNTEERS: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION

ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the challenges facing civil organizations in communicating with volunteers. Areas for which communication is crucial are described. The author clarifies the advantages and disadvantages of working with volunteers and the difficulty of control, indicating the influence of the communication techniques used for management and information. The highlights are tracked and six key communication points to consider when developing a communication plan are presented. A model FLIGHT is proposed: it summarizes the communication process for organizations regarding volunteers. It is emphasizing the importance of each of these steps and that organizations should monitor and pay attention to them when working with volunteers.

A sample communication plan is offered that brings together communication practices for reaching potential volunteers and managing communication strategies for volunteers at the various stages - before, during and after volunteer participation.

KEYWORDS: volunteers, civil society organizations, communication, communication plan, management

JEL: H00, O19, M30

INTRODUCTION

Volunteering is a social practice that has developed in recent years mainly thanks to the efforts of civil society organization. At the same time, it is a European priority and therefore an important part of the national youth policies of both countries. Volunteering as a form of civic participation in community development processes is receiving increasing attention at global level. The European Union is paying great attention to volunteering. Youth activity through volunteering is particularly promoted as a way of involving young people in social change, opportunities for mobility, acquiring social and working knowledge and especially as a form of non-formal and lifelong learning.

Volunteers play an important role in the implementation of projects in the organisations of civil society. We could almost say that in civil society organization there is no activity that takes place without the involvement of volunteers. Working with volunteers differs in many ways from managing staff.

Working with volunteers is complex and requires clarifying the advantages and disadvantages for civil society organizations.

On the one hand, organisations attract volunteers because they have no financial resources and save money, but the costs associated with attracting, recruiting, training, supervising and evaluating volunteers should not be underestimated. It can be noted that through volunteer work, civil society organizations achieve cost efficiencies by creating more services for the community with less input. An essential point is bringing in expertise that would be costly to the organization. In addition, volunteers have been found to be the first to donate not only labour, energy and time, but also funds to the causes they are involved with because they realize the importance of even the smallest donation. However, the most important plus to attracting and working with volunteers is that the civil society organization builds relationships with the community, burns its image, raises awareness of its accomplishments and projects, and increases sensitivity to causes.

At the same time, working with volunteers has its downsides. The civil society organization does not have many ways to control the work of volunteers, nor does it have strong levers to impose sanctions or punishments for poor performance or in cases where volunteers bring the organization into disrepute. The organisation must be prepared to bear the costs of recruitment, task performance (transport, food), reimbursement, reward and recognition. A problem is the difficulty of finding a sufficient number or suitably qualified volunteers given the specific areas in which civil society organizations work. Volunteers are far more independent from the organization – they can leave it at any time and easily find another structure to donate their time and labour. As a result, organization's managers have much less leverage to control and influence volunteers. Conflicts may form, and the motivation of the staff may be lowered due to the liberal management of volunteers.

In summary, the only way to influence volunteers and influence their motivation, participation and performance is through building trust, teamwork, challenges, values, excitement and commitment. Since volunteering is based on goodwill. One of the most important elements of the relationship that is formed between civil society organizations and their volunteers is communication.

1. CoMmUNICATION Challenges

Good communication that equals good leadership and contributes significantly toward good management is very true when it comes to managing volunteers in the civil society organizations. Communication is a challenge and fundamental to the wellbeing of volunteers and the effectiveness of the organisation. The partnership between volunteers and the organisation is managed through communication, which should be direct, regular and reliable.

Several areas of volunteer work can be identified where communication is crucial:

- Attracting volunteers: inspiring messages, quality descriptions of the volunteer's role, commitment and help attract valuable volunteers.
- Volunteer recruitment: conducting interviews and a first meeting, clarifying rights and responsibilities, and introducing the mission and activities of the organisation.
- Understanding expectations: regular contact helps ensure that both parties understand their roles and responsibilities, which can prevent confusion, conflict and mistakes.
- Maintaining motivation: keeping in regular contact helps volunteers feel valued and recognised, which can increase their motivation and commitment to the organisation.

- Improving performance: Open feedback and guidance through communication can help volunteers to improve their skills, be creative and achieve results.

In addition:

- Creating and building trust: effective communication builds trust between the organisation and volunteers by creating a positive and supportive environment. It increases social capital and benefits communities.
- Conflict management and mediation: keeping in touch with volunteers provides an opportunity to address and resolve conflicts or misunderstandings that may arise, as well as to foster assertive communication, non-violent communication and clarification of positions.
- Fostering collaboration and teamwork: communication helps foster community and cooperation among volunteers by encouraging them to work together towards common goals.
- Promoting values and participation: communication with volunteers extends the reach of the organisation, building a positive image, a clear understanding of values, goals and achievements and attracting new supporters.

Volunteers are the heart of the organization and if it does not manage communication with them well, it risks increasing misunderstandings, a wave of disgruntled volunteers and also dropping volunteers and not being able to attract them again. It may even deter some volunteers from getting involved in such activities at all, even elsewhere!

Communicating effectively with a large group of people who may be involved in a variety of projects and scattered in different locations, each with their own personal characteristics, is difficult. Practitioners suggest a model of 6 key points to consider when creating a volunteer communication plan.

Figure 1. Six key communication points

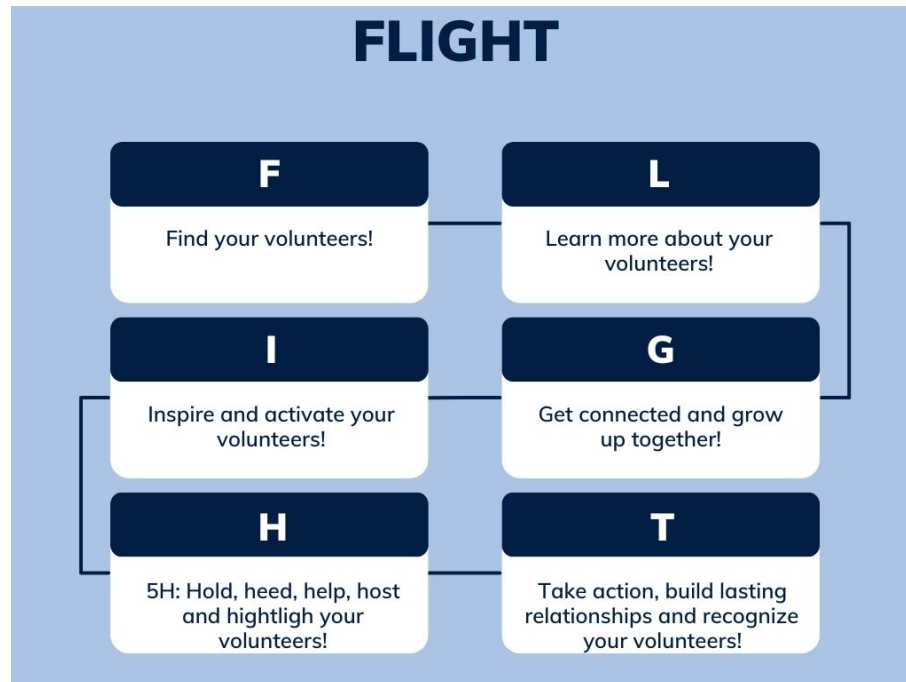


Source: Own (Adapted from the practical advice of various organizations actively working with volunteers.)

2. FLIGHT MODEL

Volunteer communications is the practice of reaching out to volunteers and potential volunteers, their activation and training, as well as participation and recognition of their importance. In an attempt to summarize, the author proposes a FLIGHT model to address all the important moments where the role of communication is essential for working with volunteers, and each step should be noted in the organization's communication plan regarding of the volunteers.

Figure 2. FLIGHT Model



Source: Own

The FLIGHT model contains the basic steps that need to be taken from finding volunteers, getting to know them, inspiring them to get involved to help achieve the organization's goals. It does not miss the constant connection, retention and joint learning and growth. In addition, the organization's commitments related to acceptance, assistance, event hosting, and giving special attention and significance are clearly defined. Continuous efforts in this direction to build lasting relationships and public recognition are described in the last step.

It can be noted that each step of this process can be intensified at certain times depending on the activities of the organization, or assume that in some cases they are carried out in parallel. The goal is to try to systematize and keep in mind each step as essential in terms of effective communication with volunteers.

3. Volunteer communication plan

A communication strategy for work with volunteers aims for targeted work and implies the creation of a serious plan for communication with volunteers that will yield highly engaged volunteers. A communication plan helps organizations develop a framework for intentional, consistent communication as each volunteer moves through the „volunteer life cycle“ (Bussell, H., & Forbes, D. (2003). The life cycle of a volunteer begins with the determinants associated with volunteering, continues with the decision to volunteer, moves on to the performance of the volunteering activity itself, and ends with either a committed volunteer who continues to participate or with the end of volunteer service and dropout from the cohort of active volunteers.

The volunteer communication process involves creating consistent messages using strategic communication channels. A well-planned communications strategy creates a cohesive volunteer experience through every stage of volunteer management. This ensures that volunteers know how to get involved, feel excited about volunteering at this particular organization and understand their impact.

A successful volunteer communication plan aims to:

- Increase the visibility of the organisation and boost the attraction and recruitment of volunteers;
- Get to know volunteers;
- Enhance the experience and/or exceed their expectations;
- Keep activities running smoothly;
- Reduce volunteer turnover and enable the organisation to have regular volunteers to rely on;
- Save time in relaying information and ensure transparency;
- Increase return on investment (ROI) across the organisation.

The volunteer communication plan can be developed with the participation of all team members. It is recommended that current volunteers are involved and if not it should be revised with their help at a later stage. Guided by the basic steps in working with volunteers, divided into three main chronological periods (before, during and after), the communication plan can be structured as follows:

Table 1. Volunteer communication plan

Activity	When to communicate with volunteers	What types of information to share	Where to communicate with volunteers	How to communicate with volunteers	Why
Volunteer Recruitment and Program Marketing (before) (Focus on building awareness about your organization and selling your volunteer program as a place where they will want to be.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Familiarize your audience with your organization • Inspire your audience to get involved • Invite your audience to learn more about volunteering opportunities • Turn interested potential volunteers into registered volunteers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mission and vision of the organisation • upcoming volunteer opportunities, needs and events • How volunteers impact your community • Why your organization needs volunteers • Calls to action to get involved • Instructions for getting involved 	Website and Blog	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Volunteer” is a bold, clear menu option. When users reach your website, they need to know where to go and how to get involved. • Add calls to action throughout your website to volunteer. • Optimize your website with these tips for a user-friendly website. • Ensure it is easy to find and register for opportunities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The website is hardest-working communication tools. • It is the place where anyone can go to learn more about your organization, make a donation, get in touch, or get involved. • It is often the last stop your volunteers will make before signing up. • Always your communications “should lead your audience back to your website”.
			Social Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post your seasonal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media is an invaluable

Activity	When to communicate with volunteers	What types of information to share	Where to communicate with volunteers	How to communicate with volunteers	Why
				volunteer campaign <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Put interesting hashtags • Invite your audience to reshare your posts. • Share photos of your volunteers in action and tag your photos! • Create exclusive Facebook groups just for volunteers and offer perks, and promote special opportunities. • Invite two-way conversation. Create polls in your social media channels, stories or ask volunteers to share their experiences. • Inspire others to get involved and show your appreciation by posting volunteer shoutouts. 	marketing tool for any type of organization. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A great way for people to get acquainted with your organization and get inspired. • It makes sharing upcoming events and volunteer opportunities easy. • The network grows while the supporters retweet and repost your messages.
			Flyers, Press Releases, and Print Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide business cards and pamphlets at your community volunteer fair, different events or meetings. • Post flyers and pamphlets at your local library, schools, community centers, and favorite coffee shop. • Write a press release calling for volunteers for your next big event. • Deliver welcome packages for new 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You can capture a wide-ranging audience with print media. • These are effective at catching the attention of “passersby” and inviting them to learn more. • By hand-delivering materials and goodies, there is a chance of catching your new neighbors while they are at home,

Activity	When to communicate with volunteers	What types of information to share	Where to communicate with volunteers	How to communicate with volunteers	Why
				families in your community.	facilitating deeper personal connections.
			Video	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep your videos under two minutes for maximum engagement. • Introduce your volunteer program. Briefly share your mission and discuss how volunteers are essential to this mission. Then talk about how to get involved! • Interview a volunteer or your volunteers. • Record a community member discussing the impact of your program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video is a great way to market your volunteer program and engage new audiences. • The viewers absorb 95% of a message when presented in video. • To get all the appropriate permissions (GDPR) • Feature your videos on your website, social media accounts, community partners' blogs and websites, local news websites, and other digital platforms that you are using to recruit volunteers.
<p>Organizing Volunteers (during)</p> <p>(Keeping your volunteers and their schedules organized requires strong, strategic communication and trustworthy communication tools. The communication is more</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build trust so volunteers come in and stay. • Learn more about your volunteers, their interests and goals. • Learn your organization's volunteers. Establish trust at this point so volunteers go into their first 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The mission and objectives of your volunteering programme • Warm welcome • How to register with your organization and sign up for an opportunity • Volunteer contact information 	Email	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct most of your communications with your established volunteers through email. • Attach training videos; send PDFs, share links to your online registration, and much more. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email is the most reliable way to communicate need-to-know information with your volunteers and begin building relationships with your volunteers. • Many of your volunteers use email and check their accounts regularly. • Email is also a dynamic tool.

Activity	When to communicate with volunteers	What types of information to share	Where to communicate with volunteers	How to communicate with volunteers	Why
practical and detailed. To give your volunteers information about what to expect when volunteering with your organization and how to perform their jobs well.)	shift enthusiastic. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare volunteers for their roles. • Give them the information they need to succeed. (orientation, training and getting volunteers involved.) • Manage volunteer expectations. • Organize volunteer schedules and tracking of hours. • Get volunteers excited about what is about to happen. 	and availability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer interests, passions and preferred roles • Prerequisites, paperwork and background checks • What to expect during the training and how to access the digital training materials • Training requirements and materials • Schedule confirmation and reminders • Pre-shift details • Other practical information, such as what to bring and where to park. 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A great way for volunteers to communicate with you. • Keep track of your communications much easier than phone calls.
			Texting and Mobile Apps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send text alerts the day of the event, such as for last-minute cancellations, location changes, and inclement weather plans. • Invite your contacts mass to volunteer for special events or initiatives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is easy for urgent communication. • Personal communication.
			Volunteer Management Software	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer Website • Communication Hub • Hours Tracking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is an all-in-one solution that does it all • Customized communication • Generate reports with the click of a button.
Following Up with Volunteers (after) (A critical step, often missed and with heavy damage. Follow-up communication generally occurs within a week of a volunteer's completed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrating appreciation to volunteers • Discuss next steps • Inspiring volunteers to stay in touch • Learn more about your volunteers' experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sending „thank you notes“ to volunteers for their participation and specifically their contributions • Share their impact and the results of the project. • Tell a story about how their work 	Email	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send a follow-up email to every volunteer after the participation. • Send a Certificate • Send a special Thank you letter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal communication. • Templates
			Volunteer Management Software	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your volunteer management software can automatically send follow-up emails with customized messages. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customized communication • Generate reports with the click of a button.

Activity	When to communicate with volunteers	What types of information to share	Where to communicate with volunteers	How to communicate with volunteers	Why
shift, event, or project. Acknowledging your volunteers' contributions can inspire them to come back again.		<p>has influenced the community or interview a community member about their experience.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send an evaluation form • Gather feedback about the volunteers' experiences. • Find out what the areas for improvement are. • Suggest more opportunities for involvement. • Present exciting events and upcoming opportunities that match their interests. 	Surveys and Forms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thoughtful volunteer programs include considering and tracking volunteer perspectives. • The follow-up is a great time to submit a survey or a form. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gather feedback to learn more about your volunteers, their motivations, experiences, and areas of improvement.

Source: Own (Adapted from the practical experience of various organizations actively working with volunteers.)

CONCLUSION

Communication is crucial to the work and management of volunteers for any civil society organization. It turns out to be a difficult task to manage the communication process due to the peculiarities and characteristics of the volunteers. An attempt has been made to summarize practical information to produce six key points to consider. A FLIGHT model is proposed, which brings together the important steps to keep an eye on, especially when starting the creation of a communication strategy and volunteer communication plan. Based on the analysis, systematization and summary of information about communication with volunteers (before, during and after), an example of communication plan is presented in a table, which describes the five main questions (When, Where, What, How and Why) and gives detailed information in which cases what information must be provided, in what way (channels) and what the advantages are to use exactly this. The suggestions have a practical application and can be used directly by the organizations that work with volunteers to manage the communication process. The models do not pretend to be exhaustive and can be supplemented and expanded, enriched with more steps and information.

Sponsorship

This article was developed as a result of research under the project "Volunteering as an Approach to Building Sustainable University Communities", funded by the National Science Fund (contract No KP-06-H65/3 of 12.12.2022).

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