The "Volunteer's Obstacle Course"

(Why even good Volunteers can stop Volunteering)

Gordon Matthews

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Introduction

I am trying to understand **local shortages of Volunteers**. Many voluntary groups believe that they have a **Recruitment Problem** – they cannot get enough suitable Volunteers. But I wonder whether they might also have a **Retention Problem** – they cannot keep their Volunteers for as long as they would wish.

I have been listening to Volunteers, former Volunteers, Volunteer Co-ordinators and Trustees. Everyone has their own ideas as to what **discourages Volunteers**; for instance:-

- Delays because of **security checks**;
- Problems with **expenses**;
- No-one ever saying '**Thank You**'.

They seemed to be describing a "**Volunteer's Obstacle Course**" – with, perhaps, a dozen 'hurdles' at which Volunteers might 'fall' – or, perhaps, 'wobble' a bit! So, like in the Grand National, might there be, say, 40 'runners and riders' at the start but far fewer at the end?

This paper introduces **14** "Obstacles to Volunteering" that might affect both individual Volunteers and contribute to the Volunteer shortages that so many local groups experience.

BARRIER ONE: FIRST CONTACTS WITH VOLUNTARY AGENCIES

Voluntary organisations often lose potential Volunteers before they even meet them, because of:-

- Poor websites.
- Shabby leaflets
- Dated posters, etc.

The First Phone Call:

Important phone calls are often taken in noisy offices by the least experienced worker or the person nearest to the phone. A potential Volunteer summarised her experiences with agencies, some of whom claimed to be "desperately seeking volunteers":-

"My initial enquiry was often greeted in a rude or abrupt manner."

"The receptionist / telephone operator was either not focused on my call or not knowledgeable about their organisation."

"If I did succeed in being connected to a recruitment extension, my call was often met with Voicemail, or just left to ring unanswered."

The Answerphone:

"It took 16 rings before the message kicked in and it seemed to have been recorded by someone in a hurry to leave the office. I didn't feel encouraged to ring back."

Responding Promptly to Enquiries:

In this electronic age some Volunteers will put out feelers to a number of agencies simultaneously — and they may follow up the first one to respond. Yet a local youth group leader who was complaining about a shortage of Volunteers deliberately made people wait for a response:-

"It sorts the men from the boys!"

Volunteers frequently complain about **slow responses**. The sector has many more vacancies than prospective Volunteers, yet agencies seem to ignore the fact that they are effectively '**competing**' for Volunteers.

BARRIER TWO: INTERVIEW DAY

"The first thing I saw as I walked through the door was a sign saying 'Please Wipe Your Feet!'"

On Interview Day the prospective Volunteer may, for the first time, see the building in which he/she might work and meet the staff who could be future colleagues.

There will be a series of crucial '**Brief Encounters**' and '**First Impressions**'.

- Of the **building**.
- At the **door**.
- At **reception**.
- With the **interviewer**.

Strong, and possibly decisive, impressions of the agency are made in the **first 60 seconds** of each of these encounters.

The terms "**Customer Service**" and "**Voluntary Sector**" are seldom used in the same sentence, but agencies' customer service skills will be tested on this day:-

- How are visitors **greeted**?
- Are prospective Volunteers **welcomed**?
- Do reception staff make **eye contact**?

- Do they ask how they like their **coffee**?
- Do Interviews **start on time**?
- Are their interviews **private**?

The Interview is obviously a "Barrier" in the sense that some people may get turned down – but this is surprisingly unusual. Probably more potential Volunteers drift away disillusioned than are actually refused by agencies!

BARRIER THREE: TOO MUCH BUREAUCRACY?

     Too many **questions**
+ Too much **paperwork**
+ Too many **delays**
     _____

     = **Too few Volunteers**?

Some potential Volunteers approach the Voluntary Sector as if it is a "haven" from the bureaucracy of, for instance, local authorities - only to discover they are working in regulated charities and limited liability companies.

A Case Study – Security Checks

DBS checks are seen in some quarters as essential, but the emotional reactions of people on different sides of the debate border on the hysterical:-

"Whenever anyone queries DBS checks, other, self-righteous people round on them with a preachy fervour. Some people believe that all adults should be treated as possible paedophiles, while other storm off "insulted" that their integrity has been questioned."

(2)

DBS checks present agencies with some practical problems - they can delay Volunteers for several weeks. But agencies can take damage limitation measures, for instance:-

- **Not everyone** needs to be checked
- Potential Volunteers can be used in **holding roles** until their check is complete
- The **emotional temperatures** around checks can be reduced

Would security checks be less of a barrier if they were treated as a **fact of life** that needed calm management – rather than an **Article of Faith** around which people take up emotional positions?

BARRIER FOUR: THE FIRST WORKING SESSION

"We never saw them again after their first session."

More Volunteers are probably lost to agencies on this day than any other. Yet agencies report, not that Volunteers "leave", but that they "**Disappear**" or "**Don't come back**" or "**Creep Away**"!

Striking a Balance

Volunteers need to be given **appropriate responsibility**. If they are given too little they may feel abandoned:-

"All I did was sit around."

But if they are overwhelmed with responsibility they may complain:-

"I was thrown in at the deep end."

Do some agencies provide a macho initiation test for Volunteers?

"If they can't survive the first day, they'll be no use to us anyway"

If the Volunteer has a particularly hard day – with a few clients 'kicking off', perhaps – they may blame themselves and retreat, defeated – not just from that agency, but from the sector as a whole, saying to themselves:-

"I ought to have been able to cope with that."

BARRIER FIVE: INDUCTION

Otherwise known as a Trial Period, Probationary Period or Orientation Phase, the Induction can serve **two quite distinct purposes**:-

- It can complete the **Selection** process
- It offers a gradual and systematic **Introduction** to the agency.

A one-month Induction will give both potential Volunteers and the agencies a useful opportunity to **assess** each other – then to **commit to** each other, or amicably **part company**.

But the Induction is too often **foreshortened** – some groups just follow the Interview with a 30-minute walk around the project, pointing to panic buttons and making a few introductions.

Instead, groups should allow sufficient time to explain – and discuss – the **philosophy** of the agencies, key **policies** and the **roles** of all parties:-

"During the Induction I realised that a substantial group of clients had learning disabilities. I'm sure they didn't say that in the Interview."

Entering "Another World"?

Some projects are, appropriately, conventional, but others may constitute "another world" to new, inexperienced Volunteers:-

e.g. Night Shelters
e.g. Psychiatric Wards
e.g. Street Work

Such settings may seem very attractive to new Volunteers wanting to "prove themselves" or "test themselves", but it might be wise to **introduce them gently**. Otherwise, a verbal assault by a drunken client or disturbed patient might be very painful - and even end a volunteering 'career'.

BARRIER SIX: ROLE PROBLEMS

If a Volunteer is to stay with an agency they will expect a role that is **appropriate** and **comfortable**, though this role may change over time.

Some Recurrent Role Problems

Some Roles are poorly designed or supported:-

(i)   **No Role At All**

"So many Office Volunteers were recruited that most of us had nothing to do."

(ii)   **Roles Without Resources**

"They wanted me to edit the Newsletter but didn't offer enough computer access."

(iii)   **Role Creep**:

"Could you just …?"

(iv)   **Role Diversification**

"I joined to do I.T. work but they keep on at me to help with fundraising."

Volunteers can make 'heavy weather' of their Roles:-

e.g.   The "**Indispensable Volunteer**" is never out of the project, and knows where everything is, but never shares with or delegates to anyone else.

e.g.   The "**Volunteer Who knows Best**" used to have an alcohol problem himself and now tells clients:-

"Look mate, I know exactly what you're feeling. I've been there myself. If I were you…"

Volunteer Managers will want to monitor and review these developments or risk losing their Volunteers.

BARRIER SEVEN: THE VOLUNTEER'S FIRST CRISIS

An early, stressful incident may threaten a Volunteer's career in an agency:-

e.g., verbal abuse from a client
e.g. a breakdown of communication with paid staff

Such incidents are, perhaps, more likely in certain sorts of projects:-

e.g. Night Shelters
e.g. Dementia Wards
e.g. Street Work

"Incidents" or "Crises"?

Some '**incidents**' will be '**crises**' only if the Volunteers are not properly **prepared** for them, by:-

- Thorough **Induction**
- Appropriate **training**
- Sufficient **co-staffing**
- Intelligent **policies and procedures**

The Impact of Crises

The impact of such crises may well be reduced if Volunteers have already established:

- A good relationship with their **Line Manager**
- A clear understanding of **why they are with the agency**
- A **secure home life**

Even so, a distressed Volunteer may need a thorough **Debriefing** - immediately after the incident, not a few days later. This will mean, for instance, sensitive attention from their Line Manager - not just a few drinks down the pub!

(4)

Volunteers Who Blame Themselves:

Even if all the above systems are in place, there is a danger of the Volunteer walking away blaming themself. In extreme cases, they may leave the project or even stop volunteering altogether.

But the Volunteer may appropriately decide that they would prefer a **different sort of volunteering** or a **different sort of project**. For instance, a project for drinking alcoholics may not be a safe environment for the thin-skinned. And Volunteers might need reassurance that lots of **alternative roles** are available in the sector.

BARRIER EIGHT: EXPENSES PROBLEMS

Some agencies simply do not cover their Volunteers' expenses. While some Volunteers can afford not to claim expenses - that is their decision - many others cannot afford not to claim them, because they rely on benefits or pensions, for instance. Is this one reason why employed people volunteer more than unemployed people? Others Volunteers claim perfectly legitimately, because they do not see why their volunteering should leave them 'out of pocket'.

Other "Expenses Problems" are more Complex:-

e.g. some agencies cover **certain sorts** of expenses (e.g. travel) but not others (e.g. childcare).
e.g. some agencies pay their expenses **belatedly**, leaving Volunteers 'out of pocket' in the meantime.
e.g. some agencies have poor "financial climates" that leave people **embarrassed** to claim:-

"Oh, we don't claim!"

The end result may be that only middle-class people can afford to volunteer!

For many Volunteers, "expenses problems" go well beyond the often small sums of money involved, important though they are. They come to symbolise a lack of respect for Volunteers - or their low status within the agency. As a result, what might at first appear to be

a **financial** issue becomes for many Volunteers an **emotional** or **moral** one.

BARRIER NINE: ETHICAL PROBLEMS AND PERSONALITY TRAPS

There are certain sorts of behaviour by Volunteers that agencies will regard as inappropriate and which might jeopardise their "careers". We might easily understand that it is 'bad behaviour' to go drinking with a recovering alcoholic, but even the High Street 'Chugger' will be bound by certain standards of behaviour in their dealing with the public.

Professional Standards:

Many voluntary organisations set out standards that they expect their Volunteers to maintain, for example:-

- confidentiality
- emotional detachment
- unconditional regard for the clients
- respect for clients' autonomy

Failure to do so could result in disciplinary action for the Volunteer, or even dismissal from the agency.

Personality Traps

These may be less serious than breaches of professional standards, but, because they amount to 'stuck' ways of relating to clients, they have to be addressed:

e.g. the "**Too Busy Volunteer**" - who is too busy hiding in 'useful activity' to be accessible to clients.
e.g. the "**Evangelical Volunteer**" — who wants to convert clients to his way of seeing the world or God.
e.g. the "**Put-Upon Volunteer**" — who complains about the demands made of him.
e.g. the "**Over-Friendly Volunteer**" - who gets inappropriately close to clients
e.g. the "**Over-Committed Volunteer**" - who spends too much time at the project for anyone's good.

Line Managers will try to address these problems so that Volunteers are more available to their clients.

BARRIER TEN: VOLUNTEERS AND PAID STAFF

In many agencies the Volunteers' crucial relationships will be with their paid staff. The Status of Volunteers varies greatly between projects. There seem to be **five key ways** in which Volunteers are '**defined**' by their organisations:-

1   "**Neglect**" - Volunteers may be given boring and unpleasant jobs, without proper management and support. Or no work at all.

2   "**Cheap Labour**" - Summarised by the phrase "Volunteers are expendable". In a capitalist society, some people believe that no-one ever does anything useful for nothing.

3   "**Sanctification**" - Some agencies treat Volunteers as if they are 'heroic', 'wonderful' or 'amazing', so that rational discussion or criticism of them become impossible.

4   "**Unpaid Employees**" - Some managers deny the real differences between Volunteers and paid workers – despite the fact that Volunteers are unpaid and often provide important 'extras'.

5   "**Parity of Esteem**" - Some agencies see Volunteers as providing services that are quite distinct from those of paid staff but equally deserving of respect.

Some Tensions That May Never Go Away?

Whatever the formal definitions of the status of Volunteers, some underlying tensions may remain between them and the paid staff: -

The **paid** staff may think:-

"We can't trust them with important policies like confidentiality."

The **Volunteers** may think: -

"We do all the mucky jobs, but only get expenses."

Should Volunteers Ever 'Replace' Paid Staff?

Ethical and political debates continue in the sector as to whether Volunteers should ever be used to 'replace' paid staff. Many voluntary organisations have policy papers which rule out such a possibility, but in these troubled times it might become an increasing temptation. What if an agency is forced by funding problems to use Volunteers instead of paid staff, but uses them in a very different way?

A Possible Result

It is 'commonsense' that, when Volunteers do not get on with paid staff, they are more likely to leave their agencies prematurely. However, research indicates that in these circumstances the paid staff also tend to leave early. So agencies which neglect this sensitive relationship may be making an expensive error.

BARRIER ELEVEN: "NO THANKS"

As Volunteers are not paid for their work, they may need to be **rewarded in other ways**:-

- Feedback
- Appreciation
- Validation
- Recognition
- Acknowledgement, etc.

The Volunteer who is not thanked at the end of their first session may not promptly head for the exit, but if it continues for months then their commitment to the agency may decline. This is not an 'Obstacle' at which Volunteers abruptly 'fall', but might be likened to a long hill which might eventually wear them out.

Some Ways of Saying 'Thank You':

"Always make sure they are offered a cup of tea."

As well as a number of **informal** ways of appreciating Volunteers, there are a variety of **formal** methods including:-

- Certificates of Achievement
- Presents
- Formal lunches
- Christmas presents

'Thanks' and 'Good Management':

Agencies may believe that they manage their Volunteers well – which, of course, they should - but 'Good Management' does not reduce the need for 'Thanks'. 'Thanks' will not replace 'Good Management', but will be an essential contribution to a "Quality Volunteering Experience".

Finally:

"Thank You" may come to symbolise for Volunteers their underlying relationships with their agencies, and even, on occasions, a deeper malaise.

"Good manners cost nothing?"

BARRIER TWELVE: THE MANAGEMENT OF VOLUNTEERS

A Different Sort of Management?

The management of Volunteers has to be distinct to that of salaried staff because they receive no payments for their work and are under no contractual obligations. So their management may depend, to a greater degree, on qualities like diplomacy, tact and goodwill. Many Volunteers come to the voluntary sector in anticipation of a very different sort of management to that provided in the statutory or private sectors. More '**Soft**' than '**Hard**' management may be needed.

Some Myths About Managing Volunteers

There are a few 'commonsense' assumptions about managing Volunteers that do not stand up to examination:-

e.g. "The longer Volunteers stay the less support they need."
e.g. "Appointing Volunteers will save us time."

The Right to Manage Volunteers

Because Volunteers work for no financial reward, some groups even doubt their **Right** to manage them:-

"They're Volunteers - we can hardly boss them about."

In fact, proper training, roles, support and advice will **enhance the Volunteer's experience**.

The Use Of Volunteer Co-ordinators:

A growing number of charities — with complex roles and large numbers of Volunteers — appoint specialist Volunteer Co-ordinators who can offer Volunteers:-

- More time
- Personalised support
- Specialist training

'General purpose' Managers, by contrast, may lack the time to give Volunteers the attention they want and deserve.

BARRIER THIRTEEN: THE VOLUNTEER CULTURE AND THE VOLUNTEERS' VOICE

The Volunteers' Culture:

"We'd have no trouble absorbing the new Volunteers if it wasn't for the experienced Volunteers!"

Some Volunteer teams are welcoming, supportive and inclusive, but others seem not to welcome new Volunteers :-

e.g. they are 'cliquey' and exclusive
e.g. they are grumbling and critical.

Some prospective Volunteers - particularly those from disadvantaged groups - feel that they will '**not fit in**' to Volunteer teams that are imbalanced in terms of age, gender, class or ethnicity.

The Volunteers' Voice

Ironically, though Volunteers are supposedly recruited to bring '**freshness**' and new ideas to voluntary organisations, they are not always properly **consulted**. Instead, Volunteer's meetings are too often "top-down", and friendly critics get labelled as "whingers". But there are all sorts of mechanisms for 'hearing' Volunteers:-

- Accessible salaried staff
- Newsletter spots
- Committee representation
- Suggestion boxes

None of them will work, of course, unless the Volunteers are regarded with respect throughout the agency, rather than treated as 'Cheap Labour', for instance.

BARRIER FOURTEEN: TIME PRESSURES

'Time Pressures' comprise the most important reason people give for not starting to volunteer in the first place. They seem to believe:
- That all voluntary groups are **over-demanding** and as a consequence:-
- All Volunteers are **over-worked**

In fact, it appears that the more important 'time problem' is in the **personal lives of Volunteers** - who feel busier than ever and are wary of committing themselves to voluntary groups – at least, for indefinite periods.

FINALLY

My research is continuing and I would greatly welcome your thoughts.

I am now preparing three separate papers that examine the "Volunteer's Obstacle Course" from **three quite different perspectives**:-

- From the **Volunteers' perspectives**
- From the **Volunteer Co-ordinators' viewpoints**
- From the **Trustees' points of view**

So, if you have any experiences or ideas from any of those angles, I would be particularly glad to hear from you – in confidence, of course.

Gordon Matthews
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Some Other Time Problems:

There are a number of **less obvious Time Problems**; for instance:-

(i)   Some agencies are "**Fast**" (Crisis Centres, emergency services etc.) while others are "**Slow**" (some alcohol recovery and psychotherapy services.)

So Volunteers might want to **match their pace** to that of the agency. Volunteers 'in a hurry' might want different sorts of agencies from those who like to 'take their time'.

(ii) Some agencies "**cling**" to their Volunteers while others help them **move on**, often to paid work. Pensioner Volunteers might be happy with the former and young unemployed people with the latter.

(iii) When Volunteers join some agencies, they feel that they have **signed up for life**! Instead, Time - Limited Volunteering Opportunities seem to attract different sorts of Volunteers and perhaps use them more productively than groups which do not have an 'escape clause'.

(iv) Some groups do not **manage their Volunteers time effectively**.

**The Canterbury & Herne Bay
Volunteer Centre**

Tower Works
Simmonds Road
Wincheap Business Park
Canterbury
Kent. CT1 3RA

Charity Registered No. 1090620
Company Registered in England & Wales No. 4176994

Tel: 01227 452278
Fax: 01227 768546
Email: enquiries@chbvc.org
Facebook.com/volvoice

**The Canterbury & Herne Bay
Volunteer Centre**

16 Reculver road
Herne Bay
Kent. CT6 6LE