

The stronger your volunteer program, the stronger your nonprofit will be in fulfilling its mission.

By: Laura Steurer

As nonprofit leaders, we know that volunteers are the backbone of our work. We know that they contribute countless hours of time and commitment to our organization, making projects possible that our budgets otherwise simply can't afford. Currently, the national average value of one volunteer hour is \$25.63 (more than three times the \$7.25 federal minimum wage and about comparable to the average \$29.80 of a nonprofit employee).

Nonprofits everywhere are desperate to find volunteers, and it's easy to see the tremendous economic benefit your volunteers bring to your organization. Yet so often, especially in small to midsize nonprofits, we are unsure about effective ways to find and manage quality volunteer cohorts. And given the post-pandemic decrease in volunteering nationwide, it's crucial for us to keep those volunteers that we already have.

We tend to shy away from this key concept: *A volunteer is really like an employee, just unpaid.* For years, effective for-profit companies have had numerous, specific processes to recruit, train, onboard, mentor, develop, and appreciate their employees. While the nonprofit sector has also been getting onboard with the importance of training its employees, the reality is that we should do no less for our volunteers.

What Do We Need: Processes!

To recruit, train, mentor, and appreciate our volunteers, we need standardized processes that can be repeated, iterated, and scaled. Why? Because no one wants to reinvent the wheel every time they need a new volunteer. Think of it as part of your succession plan. Someday you may step down from your nonprofit (yes, truly), and your successor needs a clear roadmap on how to get (and keep!) volunteers. If you must suddenly fly to the moon, how will your colleagues know how to recruit and manage volunteers?

Standardized, documented processes also enable you to consistently focus on your cause rather than constantly reinvent logistics. They show volunteers (and donors) that you are maximizing time and talent through an organized system.

Consider the following to kickstart your process-driven guide to a best practices volunteer program. Feel free to comment below with any tactics you've found successful!

Area 1: Recruiting

Consider how you find volunteers. Here are a few strategies you might already be using:

- **Advertising** — Advertising is good, and free advertising is better. Create a short post about your need for volunteers with an email and phone number for their reply. Be specific, answering the following questions:
 - How many hours per week or month is the volunteer commitment?
 - What exactly will volunteers do?
 - How will they be trained and mentored?
- **Neighborhood Sites** — You and your board members can post in your own neighborhood sites (like NextDoor).

- **Social Media** — Set up and link your nonprofit’s Facebook and LinkedIn pages. You, your board members, and your staff can also post on personal social pages (as long as everyone is comfortable with this — do NOT pressure your staff to recruit volunteers).
- **Volunteer Matching Sites** — These sites (like VolunteerMatch and All for Good) link prospective volunteers with opportunities.

How to Document Your Recruitment Process

Write down every step that you do to recruit your volunteers — in detail, like your high school English teacher taught you. Imagine that you fly off to the moon one day and another staff member has to step into your role. What do they need to know so that they can recruit capable and committed volunteers? Give this document a title (like “Volunteer Recruiting Process”) so it’s easy to find in your online files.

Area 2: Screening

Consider how you vet your volunteers. Your vetting process depends on the work your volunteers will be doing. Volunteers who work with children or the elderly, for example, will need far more screening than those who are planting gardens or sorting food banks.

Here are some ways to solidify your screening practices:

- **Look Around** — Find out how similar nonprofits vet their volunteers (background checks, Livescan fingerprinting, etc.)
 - As an example, our nonprofit uses VolunteerMatch’s [Sterling Volunteers](#), a nationwide online background check platform. It’s particularly easy for volunteers to complete online from home without going to a location. You can select the type of check you want to run: criminal history, sex offender, and so forth. It’s about \$19 per volunteer, so you might ask your volunteers to pay for their online background check and reimburse them when they start the work.
- **Application Form** — Do you want volunteers to fill one out? Determine what type of info you want to gather on the form. This might include demographic data, contact info, how they found you, and probably why they’re interested in your organization.
- **Reference Check** — You might ask volunteers for personal or professional references who can comment on their integrity, ability to follow-through, and other traits. Again, this will depend on the type of work your volunteers will be doing.

How to Document Your Screening Process

Write down every step that you do to screen your volunteers. Put the steps in order (for example, will the interview come before or after the background check?) — see above for your English teacher’s reminder. Use a spreadsheet, CRM, or other method to track each person as they progress through each step from prospective volunteer to accepted applicant. Give the document a title (like “Volunteer Screening Process”) so it’s easy to find in your online files.

Area 3: Training

Consider how to ensure your volunteers know what to do. Think about workplaces that provide employee training and onboarding — and companies that *don’t*. Your volunteers need and deserve the same high-touch instruction, so they know exactly what to do as well as how what they’re doing aligns with your mission and policies.

Some things to specify:

- **Parameters** — Decide whether the training be in-person or via Zoom (or possibly hybrid). You should articulate how long the training will be as well as exactly who is going to be training your volunteers. Lastly, what kind of training is needed — a hands-on demonstration, a small group info session, or potentially a combination of the two?
- **Manual** — It can be very helpful to provide a handbook or, at the very least, a sheet of guidelines with all the volunteer tasks, expectations, policies, and procedures written in one place. Think through whether they should receive the handbook before, during, or after the training session(s). Are there any contracts or agreements that volunteers must sign, such as confidentiality protocols for information on clients and donors? If so, make sure part of your training includes the review and signature of these documents.
- **Onboarding** — Think through how much training your volunteers will need before they can become independent, so to speak. Are your new volunteers given small tasks as they get started so you can assess them? Can they jump right into the main work alongside your experienced volunteers? Again, this will depend on your nonprofit. And if you have volunteers that perform a variety of tasks, the level of onboarding might even be specific to the difficulty and/or intensity of the tasks themselves.

How to Document Your Training Process

Documentation of training can be simple or elaborate. What matters is that it includes each of the steps involved. For example, document the names and backgrounds of the training leaders, whether they are internal staff or outside trainers, location/length of training, any materials distributed to volunteers (before, during, or after training), and the topics covered at training. Think of it as a recipe you can follow, time after time, and tweak as needed.

After your training is complete, make sure you transfer the contact information (perhaps from the [“Volunteer Screening Process”](#) document) for all fully trained volunteers into a separate spreadsheet, indicating their responsibilities at the organization as well. Give the document a title (like [“Volunteer Database”](#)) so it’s easy to find in your online files.

Area 4: Supervision & Mentoring

Consider how to keep your volunteers on track with their assignments and tasks. Ensuring that volunteers do — and enjoy — what they are supposed to requires having a clear process for coaching them. Again, think of successful for-profit supervision models that you’ve experienced.

Your processes should include the following:

- **Who will mentor them** — Will new volunteers be mentored by staff or by experienced volunteers?
- **How will they communicate** — How will volunteers communicate with their mentor/coach (phone, email, text, video call, or in-person)? Will volunteers and their mentors have a structured check-in time (e.g. once per month or quarter) or will they connect casually as needed?
- **What are important metrics** — How will the mentor/coach know whether the volunteer is on track...or, potentially more importantly, know whether the volunteer is struggling or unhappy?
- **Are there advancement opportunities** — Can volunteers navigate to more complex volunteer roles? Can they become leaders of other volunteers?

How to Document Your Supervision & Mentoring Processes

Here again, you’ll want to capture the steps involved. You might want to describe how mentors/supervisors are assigned to the volunteer; outline the mentor/supervisor role and boundaries; provide a method for

the volunteer to give feedback to, and receive feedback from, their mentor/supervisor; establish and track deadlines or timeframes (i.e. Volunteer *and* Mentor meet every quarter to review successes and discuss questions); and outline steps for re-assigning or removing a volunteer. Give the document a title (like “Volunteer Mentor Process” and “Mentoring Spreadsheet”) so it’s easy to find in your online files.

Area 5: Appreciation — Keeping Your Volunteers Motivated

Consider how to keep your volunteers engaged and motivated. The research is pretty clear: [volunteers stay when they feel valued, appreciated, and useful.](#)

Here are some ways that you can show appreciation for your volunteers (if you’re not already doing so). Depending on your ability (including time and funding), it might be helpful to implement several (or all) of these strategies!

- Thank your volunteers in every interaction. Their mentors/coaches can do the same.
- Email appreciative (and usually free or low-cost) e-cards or mail handwritten notes. If you decide to go the latter route, make sure you have the budget, staff, and/or volunteer resources to do a mailing.
- Text a brief word of thanks. And more than just once. You might turn this into a note in your operations calendar: *Volunteer thank-you every quarter.*
- Give gift cards at holiday time. A \$5 Starbucks card goes a long way in making a volunteer feel noticed. Alternatively, if the volunteers have just put together a huge fundraiser or spent several hours stuffing envelopes, it might be a good idea to take them out to lunch. In either case, make sure you budget for this, both in terms of staff time and fiscal resources!
- Give your volunteers a voice. Continuously ask them for ideas, comments, and feedback on your program and processes. Often, they’ll see things that nonprofit leaders miss. Be sure to implement their ideas (if relevant) or, at the very least, to let them know some of the current challenges for implementation.
- Ensure that your volunteers are an integrated presence, not just an afterthought, within your organization. You can selectively consider inviting them to board meetings and mention them in newsletters. Get to know them as individuals — what motivates them, what they enjoy or loathe, how they came to volunteer, and where they see themselves in the future of their volunteering. After all, the more integrated and invested your volunteers are, the more helpful they will be.

How to Document Your Appreciation Process

To document our appreciation process, our nonprofit uses an operations calendar — just a simple spreadsheet that’s organized by month and topic. This helps us plan, and balance, volunteer appreciation events that require budgeting (such as our annual coffee shop gathering) and those that require personal messaging (such as thank-you texts or e-cards). In our daily race to fulfill our mission, it’s easy to forget appreciation, but putting this task on our calendar ensures that it happens.

Remember, Document Everything!

Ultimately, keeping track of all your processes requires an online organizational system that both staff and volunteers can access. Having just a binder in your office may be too limiting. We use Google Drive, starting from a master folder and branching into numerous sub-folders. When new volunteers are onboarded, we show them how the Google Drive folders look on their computer or phone screen and point out where they can find information. We also share the link frequently, in our weekly volunteer memo, just in case someone loses access or the link has broken. This brings us back to a core question: Why? Why should we expend this effort to create and document processes?

In the long run, documentation saves you time, money, and energy. On the other hand, processes serve as a practical guide through the maze of nonprofit work, keeping both staff and volunteers on the same page and clarifying what needs to get done. When that happens, your nonprofit mission is all the easier to realize.

Final Thought: Getting Help

Managing a volunteer program is not only a lot of work but also an area that requires specialized expertise. Consider investing in volunteer management software that can automate various aspects of the volunteer lifecycle, from recruitment to training and recognition. You may also want to consider if some of your volunteers can help. After you have set up the program, volunteers can help train new volunteers and offer ongoing support to ensure that your volunteer program is a resounding success. Remember, seeking help is not a sign of weakness; it's a sign of smart leadership. The stronger your volunteer program, the more robust your nonprofit will be in fulfilling its mission.