

Engaging Volunteers – Tips from Recollection Wisconsin Content Partners Spring 2020

Attracting & Selecting Volunteers

- We post our volunteer positions on our city's employment webpage which keeps a steady stream of volunteers coming in. Word of mouth from other volunteers is also important. We're members of our local *Volunteer Center* which gives us access to a website where we can post volunteer positions. This helps when we want to recruit specific skills for a position.
- For teenaged volunteers, the high school National Honor Society advisors and/or guidance counselors have been helpful in getting the word out. Occasionally, we attend local volunteer recruitment fairs in the community or at colleges.
- Each spring, we put an announcement that we are opening for the summer season in the local newspaper that includes an open invitation to volunteer.
- Our best tool is our current volunteers who bring in friends or talk to visitors who they believe might be good potential volunteers.
- All volunteer candidates must complete an online application and an interview before they are assigned to work in an area. They also complete a volunteer orientation and training by staff in the specific position.
- When I interview volunteers, I ask them to commit to at least 10 hours a week to reduce the training curve – we don't have to retrain people who only come in for an hour or two per week.
- We try to get volunteers interested in specific projects. We ask what projects they would like to work on and try to match them with their interests.

Onboarding & Engaging Volunteers

- Our volunteers are trained and they have a supervisor. They are regularly in contact with that person and have assigned tasks and meaningful work. They do not sign an agreement but they know to follow a schedule and contact me if they deviate from it. They are also invited to department and library gatherings. We bring them treats and make them feel at home. They are a fully integrated part of the department.
- We don't take on more than we can manage well. We want a volunteer experience to be meaningful so if we can't train someone properly, we won't commit to hosting that volunteer.
- Volunteers can be highly motivated to help because they have a natural interest in local history or an interest in genealogy, so they love to contribute to the research work.
- I'm careful about which volunteers I assign to a project. I try to determine their interests and match it to the project.
- We spend time with each volunteer, starting them with simple tasks and then over time as we learn about them and their skill set let them naturally evolve into more complicated projects.
- I keep volunteers engaged by setting short term goals, listening to what the volunteer learns as they work with the documents, and encouraging them to bring a friend (or spouse) to help with the project.
- I try to communicate with the volunteers as a group so that even if they're not actively working on a specific project or task, they still feel like they're part of a volunteering community.
- I always try to reflect on each volunteer project so that I can adjust my approach with the next volunteer. Each volunteer project is an opportunity to move forward in a new way until all parties are satisfied.

- Asking “What does this person want out of this volunteering opportunity?” is important. Give them opportunities to grow in the direction they want. And, above all, the importance of getting to know your volunteers dictates how successful you will be in channeling their expertise.

Recognizing Volunteers

- We communicate through email to show appreciation. We email or send notes to volunteers on their birthdays.
- We rotate inviting volunteers in different library departments to volunteer appreciation lunches or our holiday staff breakfast.
- Anyone who volunteers with our library in any capacity more than once each year are sent thank-you notes and small gift cards to a local coffee shop at the end of the calendar year.
- Positive reinforcement is key. In our daily conversations we constantly point out the value of volunteer contributions and how their work, though sometimes tedious, can have an overall cumulative positive effect on our collections.
- Every April we have a volunteer luncheon and give out pins in appreciation of their work. We have recently started having a "volunteer of the year" award at that luncheon.
- Our volunteers love having nametags. Personalized and fun nametags. They are not just a volunteer. They have an identity.
- We host a “behind the scenes” event for our volunteers, for their families and friends to see what goes on at our museum and celebrate their contribution in this way.
- All of our volunteers are given lunch and a training session. We keep in contact with them throughout the year with updates on how their project is going.
- Immediately after people volunteer, we send them a thank you note. We also feed them, and for volunteers who need service-learning credits, we handle all the paperwork.
- We acknowledge our volunteers’ work in our newsletter and in occasional articles in the local newspaper. We have also gained the newspaper's support by providing stories, photos and information for their reporters.
- Developing a personal relationship with volunteers goes a long way. Because we usually see the volunteers on a weekly basis, we learn about their lives, families, hobbies, etc. and enjoy working together.
- Treat volunteers with respect, the more time you spend training and interacting the more you will get out of them over the long term. Be sure to maintain a friendly welcoming atmosphere in the workplace. Remember that once they leave the building, they are also ambassadors of your institution in the community.

Challenges & Lessons Learned

- It takes time to support volunteers and to organize yourself enough to give people meaningful work to do. Carving out that time is important. People who don't have a good experience or who feel like they're working in a black hole are not likely to return.
- Be willing to go with the flow! If you have a strict timetable on getting a project done, don't rely on volunteers alone. Having a staff person working with the volunteer keeps things consistent and moving along.
- I put together a volunteer advisory committee. It has been extremely valuable to me to get their input and gives them a voice in the process and on specific projects.

- I think that working with volunteers is a mentoring opportunity. It benefits us to be sure, but it also really takes a lot of time and training and planning. I really enjoy giving people the opportunity to hone their skills, to develop skills that they may not have, or to learn about specific workflows.
- I always want volunteers to enjoy themselves and communicate that to them. As soon as they are no longer enjoying their project it begins to feel more like “unpaid work” and not a volunteer experience where they feel their contributions are valued. I check-in with them regularly and will switch volunteers to new projects when they have become overwhelmed or otherwise lost in the project they are working on.
- One of the best things about working with local history volunteers is what we learn from them! Volunteers bring their knowledge and experiences with them which benefits our organization.
- A few years ago, we started using *SignUp Genius*, which is an online program that allows us to send an email to volunteers with a signup sheet that lists the spots that we need to fill.
- A challenge I’ve faced working with volunteers is the range of comfort and ability with technology. Some have no problem learning a new program or can communicate easily through email, but others are less comfortable with using computers. I try to learn the strengths of each volunteer and cater to those strengths.
- One challenge we face is a lack of consistency in practices from one individual to the next. Writing down well defined guidelines and close supervision at first to ensure that the guidelines are adhered to has been helpful.
- It's very important to give the volunteers a voice in our organization. One of our volunteers sits on the Board of Directors. We regularly ask for their feedback through formal and informal channels.

THANK YOU!

Our gratitude to the following organizations and their staff for sharing their experiences.

- Appleton Public Library, Appleton, Wisconsin
- Ashland Historical Museum, Ashland, Wisconsin
- Barron County Historical Society, Cameron, Wisconsin
- Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin
- Elkhart Lake Public Library, Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin
- Langlade County Historical Society, Antigo, Wisconsin
- Madison Public Library, Madison, Wisconsin
- Marquette University Archives and Special Collections, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- Richard I Bong Veterans Historical Center, Superior, Wisconsin
- Rock County Historical Society, Janesville, Wisconsin
- St. Norbert College Archives, De Pere, Wisconsin
- University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Archives, Eau Claire, Wisconsin
- University of Wisconsin-Madison Archives, Madison, Wisconsin
- Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin