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# 'Don't have time to drain the swamp; too busy dealing with alligators': defining the governance skills sets that enhance volunteer retention and recruitment in small arts and cultural organisations

## Conference Paper

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**‘Don’t have time to drain the swamp; too busy dealing with alligators’: Defining the governance skills sets that enhance volunteer retention and recruitment in small arts and cultural organisations.**

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**Abstract**

Small arts and cultural organisations are facing a number of significant challenges through the on-going austerity programmes impacting on their funding and practices. These challenges are made more complex and problematic through the isolation and time poverty they experience as a result of small budgets, less paid staff and through primarily volunteer run governance. There is a contradiction inherent in the importance of recruiting and retaining volunteers and the on-going capacity of volunteer governance. This paper seeks to identify and explore these tensions and contradictions by identifying governance skills sets that can support the volunteer function, and inform a training process that is practice-based and overcomes the limitations of isolation, funding and time.

*Key words: governance, volunteer retention and recruitment, arts and cultural organisations*

## **Introduction**

The processes and practices involved in managing volunteers within small arts and cultural organisations (ACOs) are complex and diverse. There are contested approaches to practices such as motivation, outcomes, training and the development of specific roles for volunteer staff. This is made more complex by the sometimes fractitious relationship between paid and voluntary participants (Ashcraft and Kedrowicz, 2002, Lewis, 2005, Pearce, 1993). These organisations, usually with few if any paid staff and operating on smaller budgets, are considerably different to their larger, better funded cousins in terms of governance, with Rochester (2005) citing issues such as an inability to follow policy, difficulty in recruiting and maintaining members and the significant impact of time poverty. It can be argued that due to their reliance on public funding, these organisations are more exposed to the impact of the budgetary austerity measures being enacted globally, which places further pressures on their management practices (Hanfstaengl, 2010).

In 2010, Skills - Third Sector (UK) commissioned *Valuing Volunteer Management Skill*. The report suggests that whilst volunteer managers possess a high level of skills relevant to volunteering, they have a variable range of training and development access. The report also identified that in many cases smaller volunteer run arts organisations don't recognise the value or need for training and development, and are isolated from other organisations. This convergence of these two behaviours significantly impacts on an organisations ability to observe or share good practice (Brewis et al., 2010), and can lead to governance myopia and introspective and passive practices of volunteer recruitment and retention that often fail to deliver the appropriate number and quality of volunteer (Bryant, 2009, Bryant and Pozdeev, 2010).

## **Contests and conflict in volunteer management**

The means by which we understand and define a third sector organisation and its role in society has blurred considerably and constantly over the last forty years (Myers and Sacks, 2003, McGill and Wooten, 1975, Stoker, 1998, Goodin, 2003). Governments have increasingly relied on the third sector to bridge the gap between their remit and the demands of society, especially in areas such as welfare and the arts (Altman and Shore, 2010, Juritz, 2010). At the same time, governments as funders and regulators demand an increased level of accountability and compliance in order to hold third sector organisations to the same standards of probity they are (Clark, 1995, Weisbrod, 1997).

Sector wide policy and practice developments have resulted in significant and some would argue fundamental changes to the culture, output and operations of third sector organisations. This shift impact has impacted to a greater extent on smaller voluntary organisations, who don't have the resources or expertise to resist or comply and instead make only token efforts (Yeh and Taylor, 2008). Threats have emerged to the organisational mission of third sector organisations through the application of 'coercive, normative and mimetic pressures' (Dolnicar et al., 2008), that have resulted in significant concerns of mission drift (Dalton and Green, 2005) and an usurping of policies and practices that support 'creativity, immediacy and initiative' with ones that enshrine, 'authority, clarity and decisiveness' (Anheier, 2000, Mintzberg, 1983). Goodin (2003) notes that the blurring of lines between sector endangers the unique and democratic nature of third sector, although Moxham & Boaden (2007) argue that third sector organisations utilise the blurred space to exchange skills and knowledge to improve performance (Moxham and Boaden, 2007). This view is supported by Lewis (2005) and Dees and Anderson (2003) who argue that pressures to adopt for-profit practices have resulted in significant examples of collaborative practices and processes that resulting in enhanced experimentation and innovation.

The role of the volunteer is central to a number of these discourses, particularly where the organisation is primarily or totally volunteer run. Volunteers, who have '...given their time freely to benefit another person, group or activity' (Wilson, 2000), are not the same as paid workers. They have a different range of expectations, motivations and rewards. They possess a variable level of skills and training that may be supported with little or unfocused professional development and appraisal (Ashcraft and Kedrowicz, 2002, Lewis, 2005, Pearce, 1993). Managing volunteers requires a different skills set from paid staff management, across practices such as motivation, recruitment, retention, organisational culture development, remuneration management, feedback and evaluation and the role of the supervisor (Adams and Shepherd, 1996, Netting et al., 2004, Pearce, 1993, Lammers, 1991). The impact of these differences is more problematic in small ACOs, where the governance membership is often drawn from the volunteering pool (Lewis, 2005). Whilst bringing a strong and passionate commitment to the values of the organisation (Drucker, 1989), this practice draws attention to skills gaps of management practice and performance, many of which can compromise the effectiveness of the governance structures (Cornforth, 2001, Balduck et al., 2010, Herman and Renz, 2000).

Turning specifically to volunteer retention and recruitment, the challenges faced by small ACOs are complex and represent a critical pressure point in terms of success and achievement of organisational

objectives (Wilson and Pimm, 1996, Toepler, 2003). Whilst there is an extensive discourse in terms of arts and cultural participation centred on the notions of cultural production and consumption and the role of governance in supporting participation (Bourdieu, 1993, Schuster, 1991, O'Hagan, 1996), there is a dearth of research in relation to the impact that governance has on volunteer involvement in arts and cultural activity (Madden, 2005, McCarthy and Jinnett, 2001, Matarasso, 1997, Laaksonen, 2010). Further, supporting increased volunteer participation is fundamental to the on-going viability of the organisation, through enhancing the transformative potential of community interactivity (the duality of organisational and community involvement) and the development of professional partnerships with an engaged community (Olsson, 2010, Bathurst et al., 2006).

## **Methodology**

The research project is utilising a mixed methods qualitative approach, informed by the 'direct research' methodology posited by Mintzberg (1979). This approach supports the use of creative 'detective work' and exploratory data collection to identify organisational behaviours and responses to strategic decisions. Mintzberg suggests that the real experiences of organisations, measured by interpreting anecdotes and descriptions of practice, supported by a more rigorous systematic collection of data (literature review) acknowledges the role that personality plays in a process and more adequately represents the diversity inherent in the organisations under study (Mintzberg, 1979, pp. 587-589). The recognition of diversity in the process of theory building is important to the process of applying findings within the heterogeneous nature of the arts and cultural industries, which are rent with multiple meanings and purposes (Jackson & Herranz, 2002, p. 4).

We conducted ten semi-structured on-line and face-to-face interviews and two focus groups of eight participants in Australia and the United States in early 2011. The interviews sought to identify the current practices of managers and volunteer board members responsible for encouraging and supporting participation. Purposive sampling was used to identify respondents who managed small ACOs. The criteria for determining what constituted a small ACO was informed by Rochester (2005) who identified income, staffing and volunteer governance as key determinants of size. However, equally privileged was the notion of self-identification and self-determination, which is in line with the UNSECO definition of what constitutes an artist (UNESCO, 1980).

We utilised a two stage process in terms of data analysis. Firstly, using a model of management function as posited by Harris (1996) as a theoretical framework, we identified patterns and (in)consistencies in terms of the roles and skills of volunteer and their relation to the recruitment and

retention of volunteers. Whilst recognising the porous nature of these functions, we sought to counter-balance each answer with supporting questions and probes in order to appropriately position the data. Secondly, using a 'creative leap', we identified functions that may have needed to be aggregated, disaggregated or added to in order to better represent governance skills sets and most critically, identify the impact that these enhanced functions had on volunteer recruitment and retention within these organisations. This assisted the process of identifying both the scope (range of skills) and depth (level of impact) in terms of governance practices.

## **Theoretical framework**

Harris (1996) identified five key functions for volunteer boards. They are not directly linked to specific processes involved in volunteer retention and recruitment. However, the development and support of expertise within volunteer boards regarding these volunteer processes is critical to their ongoing survival, their training and development practices and their evaluation of organisational knowledge and performance (Adams and Shepherd, 1996, Bathurst et al., 2006, Bussell and Forbes, 2001, Mason and Royce, 2007, Wilson and Pimm, 1996).

In order to identify some of the criteria for coding the data, we utilised organisational terms as discussed by our respondents and linked those to our own practice. In order to identify both our positionality as insider-researchers and to provide a baseline or reference point for our data analysis, we developed a case study based on our nearly twenty years collective experience at a small volunteer run cultural organisation in Sydney, Australia. Through this initial case construction, we could, in an inductive way, challenge the assumptions underpinning Harris' (1996) functions (and our adaptations of it) and interpret and codify the responses from the interviews.

## **Data analysis**

### *Function 1: Point of Accountability for organisational actions*

Accountability is a function that encourages boards to be responsible for the conduct of volunteers (Harris, 1996). Identifying 'good' and 'bad' behaviours was seen by respondents as a critical process in terms of volunteer retention and recruitment. Some respondent organisations utilised internally focused structures (such as boards) and externally looking committees (sometimes comprised of volunteers outside the direct membership of the organisation) to evaluate and feedback on the conduct of volunteers.

Using a mix of regulation and policy, formal and informal feedback structures (including post and pre volunteer activity) and informal networking, the performance and experiences of the volunteer were made explicit and fed into evaluative processes. One respondent connected the ability to manage the conduct of volunteers with the confidence to do so. This distinction is important in the context of the significant differences between staff and volunteer management, and in the light of the wider discussions in the literature around the ability to volunteer boards to implement real decisions (Harris, 1996, Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Another respondent identified these evaluative tools as being central to the formal and informal training processes, drawing on both the experiences of the volunteer and the clients they were working with. The use of policy to identify and support 'good' behaviours was matched in a number of instances with punitive measures to punish 'bad' behaviours, although one respondent noted that 'mentoring, follow-up feedback, advice and peer (support) were highly beneficial in promoting appropriate conduct.

#### *Case example*

The organisation had an inconsistent approach to both 'good' and 'bad' volunteer behaviours. There were numerous examples of 'bad' behaviour over the duration of the study. These included volunteers displaying bullying behaviours towards other volunteers and staff or through volunteers producing creative material that breached the regulatory requirements of the organisation. The response of management varied greatly. At one end of the scale, volunteers were expelled or suspended for significant periods of time. Alternately, many of the instances of 'bad' behaviour were not acknowledged or acted upon and the situation was not remedied in any way. 'Good' behaviours were acknowledged in a similarly inconsistent manner. One result of this lack of accountability was the normalisation of the 'bad' behaviours.

#### *Function 2: Staff and Volunteer Management*

The staff and volunteer management function represents the 'employer equivalent' of managing volunteers (Harris, 1996). This is a problematic definition, in line with the discourse that separates volunteer and paid staff management and the commensurate communications and interactivity issues (Adams and Shepherd, 1996). The interviews did not identify any specific impacts of this function on volunteer retention. One group noted the difficulty in appraising volunteers in order to support their development, or to evaluate their performance against desired standards. In one instance, an organisation began to pay the volunteers for their services, ostensibly to reward them, but primarily in order to require higher standards of performance and evaluation. One interviewee noted that the value proposition for volunteers in their organisation was significantly different from that of paid staff, stating 'for the participant, not "would you like to join us" but "we need you and here's what we will do for you"'

In terms of volunteer recruitment, this employer equivalent process is made more complex by how popular the volunteering tasks are. One organisation had a significant surplus of volunteers, which enabled them to operate more formal recruitment processes, involving formal training, evaluation and selection. Other organisations operating with a surfeit of volunteers spread the work of committed, competent or engaged volunteers thinly, which directly impacts on their ability to manage the less engaged volunteers and equally on the ability to keep the committed ones who experience burnout.

Across all interviews there was a clear indication that time poverty was central to their ability to manage volunteers. A number of respondents noted that although they sought volunteers, it was easier to load an existing volunteer simply because you didn't have to train them, or manage the lower productivity whilst they learnt. The cost of this training in terms of both time and more importantly money was a significant factor in shaping the way the organisation recruited their volunteers. As one interviewee noted 'don't have time to drain the swamp; too busy dealing with alligators'. Other respondents noted similar stories in terms of the inability to nurture or develop volunteers because they were worried where the next grant was coming or how to make sure they had electricity to keep their office heated.

#### *Case example*

Within the organisation, there were two primary volunteer roles; those that were involved with program creation and broadcast, and those that were involved in the 'off-air' operations of the organisation. The recruitment processes varied depending on whether the volunteer wished to be primarily responsible for program creation. There was a formalised training program for programming volunteers, whilst most other volunteers were recruited in less formal, more passive ways, with their training practice-based, rather than formalised.

Generally, there were no stated criteria for recruitment of broadcast volunteers. Potential volunteers would put in a 'program proposal' which would then be evaluated in an inconsistent way, if at all. The impact was a general feeling of unfairness around program allocation, with many potential volunteers leaving prior to getting the opportunity to participate. There were more volunteer positions available than people to fill them, and most significantly, there were four volunteer board members who had held their positions for over ten years, whilst the average service duration of the other board positions was around one year. These inconsistencies has a number of serious impacts on the paid staff and their ability to do their jobs and on important processes such as fundraising and marketing which were ignored.

### *Function 3: Policy formulation*

Policy formation is central to the operations of any board of governance, whether it be led by the volunteer membership generating democratic policymaking (Barakso, 2005) or delegated to staff, which may lead to a blurring of governance roles and delivery practices, especially where there are differing task management levels within the one organisation (Schulz et al., 2011). Only a small number of respondents commented on the relevance of policy formation to the processes of volunteer retention and recruitment, although the slightly larger organisations noted that policy formulation and review were almost a 'given' in terms of volunteer recruitment and retention.

The respondents did provide a number of examples where a broader, mission driven approach to volunteer participation utilised policy development as part of the toolkit. This suggests that there is a potential relationship between aspirational and attitudinal management dimensions and the development of policy, with one interviewee stating 'we actively seek and encourage involvement. This is backed up policies and procedures'. This was supported by the experiences of respondents who had also volunteered within other organisations, identifying a positive recruitment experience not equating to a positive volunteering experience. One respondent discussed where they were promised an interactive experience with art fans and other artists and instead ended up sweeping the floor and being asked to work on the door collecting takings for hours, whilst other volunteers were experiencing the promised interaction.

The tensions between action and aspiration, or promise and experiences may be attributed to gate keeping roles played by management, applying a policy framework to decide which volunteers undertake specific roles. One respondent noted they used a recognition process, where the volunteer serves their time waiting for a role to open by perhaps doing lower skills tasks or perhaps even by not participating. Arguably, this is more the case where there is a surplus of volunteer activity and the organisations needs to have a policy framework in place to allocate scarce resources.

### *Case example*

There was a general tendency on the part of the board to avoid organisation policy that was published and easily accessible for review by volunteers and potential volunteers. This was in conflict with the organisations legislative requirements. The board, through successive memberships, viewed written policies as irrelevant to the daily operations of the organisation. As such, policy development was inconsistently delegated to interested board members, staff, or most recently, to a new member of the organisation who had limited understanding of the complexities of the station operations, but was 'keen'. Spurious reasons were often used to block the adoption of policy. For example, one policy was voted down on the basis of the job title given to a specific member of the organisation staff.

Post-adoption, policies were then rarely referred to, and often contradicted by the board.

#### *Function 4: Securing of Resources*

This function influences the recruitment of volunteers in the context of ensuring the organisation has the required resources to undertake its activities (Harris, 1998). Across the interviews there was scant discussion about the relevance of this function. However, when issues of volunteer skill were probed in relation to securing the services of specific volunteers or volunteer skills, the respondents noted a number of tensions. The notion of finding the 'right' volunteer as opposed to any volunteer became a value judgement on behalf of the organisation. Did the volunteer need to have the skills before they came to the organisation, or was the motivation of volunteering to gain that skill (finance was a common example) less valued? One volunteer noted both in her own behaviours and in her experience as a manager, a resistance to skills sharing within organisations citing expendability and the competitive nature of gaining positions of management or authority within some organisations stating 'don't ask me how to do something, go get the skill yourself'. The value judgement also manifested itself in terms of power relationships between volunteers and the organisation, which was also noted in earlier responses. There was some discussion in one group about the competition between organisations working in the same area. Training and skills acquisition represented a significant investment on behalf of the organisation and with volunteers being free to move between organisations, they were sometimes pre-emptively 'judged' on whether they may move organisations or start their own organisation in direct competition. This resulted in tensions, gate-keeping and inequitable access to the organisation.

#### *Case example*

The development of volunteer skills in the organisation was approached in an ad hoc manner. Although there was a formalised training course for broadcast volunteers, all other volunteer roles were recruited with the expectation that the volunteer would be able to complete all aspects of their role without training. This was particularly evident in the election of board directors to specific skilled portfolios, such as broadcast technologies or finance. These volunteers created roadblocks in order to discourage new participants from seeking their roles, by adding additional artificial and time consuming responsibilities to the role. Additionally, there was very little mentoring of new volunteers, with handovers and transitions occurring sporadically and mainly informally. When volunteers moved on to other organisations, there was a culture of resentment amongst some of the board, as if by leaving the volunteer was being traitorous and disloyal.

#### *Function 5: Boundary spanning*

Harris defines boundary spanning as the process of bridging the organisation and its environment (Harris, 1996). This may involve the organisation acting as a conduit between the volunteers and regulatory authorities, the wider community or the patrons/audiences. In terms of volunteer retention and recruitment, the role of feedback from the community was discussed extensively by most respondents. This included formal and informal processes for feedback from participants. Examples included evaluation of volunteer performance, measurement by sales and traffic (which was the case with arts organisations based on exhibiting and selling visual art) and audience engagement in programme selection.

A number of respondents believed that their organisations constructed a barrier between the outside world and the organisation, with one respondent stating that the community should have little or no influence over the performance of the volunteers who provide the service. Alternately, there were an equal number of respondents who placed the community at the centre of the process of evaluating the performance and suitability of volunteers. This is a complex discourse located in the competing perspectives of access, identity, power and belonging. A number of respondents who had observed these power and identity struggles in their own organisations have moved away from participating in formal volunteer led organisations and have begun to form grassroots collectives to achieve the same personal and professional outcomes in terms of skills development, training, promotion awareness and community building. Altering the social and governance structures of the organisation in this way made some impact on the volunteer activity in that the participants were selected and granted equal (in theory) access to the purpose and practice of the collective.

#### *Case example*

The organisation had a legislated responsibility to seek community input into its allocation of programming. This requirement was poorly understood by the volunteers, including those involved in governance. There were significant tensions over who should be involved in these decisions, and whether internal or external community members should play a role. The definition of community was misunderstood and contentious, with one director believing that in order to be a community member, you had to reside in a specific postcode. Although the central role of community is clearly stated in the mission statement of the organisation, this didn't influence the vastly differing views and practices of volunteers. Access was a misunderstood concept, centred mainly on the ability to pay, whether you had an elected position or sometimes whether you had the key to the organisation's post box.

## **A creative leap?**

Whilst we could argue that these processes are heterogeneous and mutually exclusive, the analysis of the data and our own experiences within the case study strongly suggest otherwise. We were not convinced that these broad functional areas adequately explained the responses nor represented the wider skills sets. Using a simple content analysis, the phrases that kept re-appearing in the data through each question set were ‘volunteer experience’ and ‘volunteer expectation’. There is support in the literature regarding the importance of these factors to volunteer recruitment and retention (Lammers, 1991, Skoglund, 2006). We suggest that based on the data we have collected that there are two further functions that could be added to the Harris model;

### *Function 6: Inclusive organisational culture*

### *Function 7: Expectation and experience management*

Inclusive organisational culture was discussed by almost all of the respondents both in reference to their organisations and their own volunteer experiences. Some of the earlier analysis pointed to issues of access, gate keeping and time. Constructing this function was problematic as it represents what many respondents saw as aspirational as opposed to measurable activity. This aspirational activity included value statements as ensuring volunteers feel ‘a part of something’ and changing the culture of the organisation to ‘minimise the club atmosphere and ego-driven (activity)’.

Inclusivity represents a more practical set of processes for some respondents who identified volunteer networking as a fundamental component of their approach to retention and recruitment. This included managing the interactions between volunteers, allowing for opportunities to engage with similarly motivated and interested volunteers, learning and mentoring others, sharing experiences and making friends and contacts. To encourage this required the organisations to support the social processes amongst volunteers and to value the relationships between volunteers. One respondent suggested that recognising volunteers as part of a wider collective provided for multiple points of interaction and the ability to measure and evaluate your own successes.

There is a strong link between inclusivity and managing volunteer expectations and experiences. There is a temptation to view volunteers in terms of their skill and what they bring to the organisation, as opposed to as one respondent indicated taking the chance to learn from each other and identify best practices to be shared. There was a process driven approach used by a number of organisations in

terms of managing expectations ranging from identifying the organisations own expectations and matching them against those of the volunteer. This manifested itself in terms of providing job descriptions, undertaking needs and skills analysis, identifying the ‘pay-off’ for the volunteer and providing clear definitions of what is required. Training, induction, open access, facilitating and following up contacts and managing diversity were identified by a number of respondents as organisational processes that they used to enhance the volunteer experience in relation to both retention and recruitment.

## **Conclusion**

It is interesting to note that most of the respondents were both volunteers and volunteer managers, and there is a significant cross-over between the two roles and their answers. We argue that the experiences are difficult to separate, as their own on-going participation is partly predicated on their interactions with the organisations retention practices. The duration of their participation was also an issue, with a number of respondents citing lack of respect, isolation from other volunteers and a belief that they were being used and then under-appreciated as reasons for ending their volunteer participation.

Emerging from the literature, the data and our own experiences, the isolation experienced by small ACOs has clearly had a number of impacts on their ability to recruit and retain volunteers. This has manifested itself in a number of behaviours that either through necessity or simply not knowing any better, have entrenched themselves in their governance. The impact of skills gaps in terms of volunteer governance cannot be under-estimated. Whatever the cause, the volunteer experience is compromised by the lack of targeted training and development for both the volunteer and the manager. The proliferation of ‘bad’ behaviours is supported by the isolation from mentoring and collaborating with other organisations with which they could share practice. One volunteer manager suggested that instead of seeing other small ACOs as part of the same community, the funding and governance environment has in fact has led them to perceive other organisations as competitors, further contributing to their isolation.

The identification of the governance functions and requisite skills that support volunteer retention and recruitment is an important first stage in improving the capacity of small ACOs. However, by itself, it represents a ‘shopping list’ of skills without a mechanism to identify and then deliver the required training and development, nor does it suggest a strategy to overcome the tacit or explicit resistance to training that has been identified as a general principle. We argue that any mode of training would need to stimulate mentoring and practice sharing within the organisation first, drawing on models of

good practice and skills sets, along with ensuring that the skills the volunteer and governance already has are identified, contextualised and utilised for their volunteer practice.

As the case study has clearly shown, the long-term ramifications of organisational isolation and skills deficits are significant and have lasting effects on the viability of an organisation. The case organisation is currently experiencing a number of significant issues that compromise its ability to sustain its core services. The next stage of this research will seek to firstly aggregate and rank the skills and functions discussed in this paper, and further to inform the development of a practice-based, organisation centred learning set that can support the on-going development and sharing of these skills, through the utilisation of communities of practice, action learning and practice-based projects.

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