

Volunteer Management Practices and Retention of Volunteers

**Mark A. Hager
Jeffrey L. Brudney**

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Volunteer Management Capacity Study Series

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The Urban Institute

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Volunteer Management Practices and the Retention of Volunteers

Executive Summary

This report is the second in a series of briefs reporting on findings from a 2003 survey of volunteer management capacity among charities and congregations. The findings in this report are based on conversations with a systematic sample of charities about their practices, challenges, and aspirations for their volunteer programs.

We focus on charities' adoption of nine recommended practices for volunteer management. Further, we explore the relationship between adoption of these practices, other organizational characteristics, and the retention of volunteers. The practices under study are supervision and communication with volunteers, liability coverage for volunteers, screening and matching volunteers to jobs, regular collection of information on volunteer involvement, written policies and job descriptions for volunteers, recognition activities, annual measurement of volunteer impact, training and professional development for volunteers, and training for paid staff in working with volunteers.

The findings provide new insight into volunteer management capacity and retention:

Adoption of Volunteer Management Practices Not Widespread. Of the nine practices, only regular supervision and communication with volunteers has been adopted to a large degree by a majority of charities. We were surprised to learn, for example, that only one-third of charities have adopted to a large degree the practice of publicly recognizing the work of their volunteers. Over 60 percent have adopted each of the practices to at least some degree, however. This finding suggests that the practices for volunteer management are known, if not always fully implemented, in America's charities.

Likelihood of Adoption Depends on Characteristics of the Charity. The likelihood that a charity adopts a particular management practice depends on its specific needs and characteristics, such as its size, level of volunteer involvement, predominant role for volunteers, and industry. For example, charities that emphasize episodic volunteer use adopt different management practices than

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charities that emphasize more sustained use of volunteers. Charities operating in the health field have generally adopted more of the practices as well. Larger charities are more likely to have adopted most, but not all, of the management practices under study.

Some Practices Tied to Greater Retention of Volunteers, Some Not. Charities interested in increasing retention of volunteers should invest in recognizing volunteers, providing training and professional development for them, and screening volunteers and matching them to organizational tasks. These practices all center on enriching the volunteer experience. Management practices that focus more on the needs of the organization, such as documentation of volunteer numbers and hours, are unrelated to retention of volunteers, even though they help the program to realize other benefits.

Charities Can Do Others Things as Well to Maximize Volunteer Retention. Volunteer management practices are only part of the picture. In addition to adopting certain management practices, charities can provide a culture that is welcoming to volunteers, allocate sufficient resources to support them, and enlist volunteers in recruiting other volunteers. All of these practices help charities to achieve higher rates of retention.

The research shows that adoption of volunteer management practices is important to the operations of most charities. By investing in these practices and by supporting volunteer involvement in other ways, charities enhance their volunteer management capacity and their ability to retain volunteers.

Adoption of Volunteer Management Practices by Charities

Introduction: What Management Practices Have Charities Adopted? What Practices or Characteristics Explain Volunteer Retention?

In 2003, with the backing of the UPS Foundation, the Corporation for National and Community Service, and the USA Freedom Corps, the Urban Institute undertook the first national study of volunteer management capacity. One purpose of the study was to document the extent to which charities use various practices in managing volunteers. The field of volunteer administration has long promoted a range of best practices, including supervision, data collection, recognition, and training.¹ However, until we undertook systematic research, we did not know the extent to which these practices have taken root in the nonprofit sector or their influence on retaining volunteers.

We drew a sample of nearly 3,000 charities that had filed Form 990 with the IRS in 2000, which excludes charities with less than \$25,000 in annual gross receipts. We conducted telephone interviews with volunteer administrators or executive managers in most of these charities, asking them about their volunteer activities and management practices, and the challenges and benefits that volunteers bring to their operations. We learned that four out of five charities use volunteers in their activities, either in service to others or in helping to run the organization. The results we present are based on those charities that engage volunteers; we exclude charities that do not use volunteers.

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Why focus on volunteer management? The prevailing wisdom is that unless organizations pay attention to issues of volunteer management, they will not do a good job of recruiting, satisfying, and retaining volunteers. The importance is underscored by the findings of a study commissioned by the UPS Foundation in 1998.² That study revealed that two-fifths of volunteers have stopped volunteering for an organization at some time because of one or more poor volunteer management practices. Reasons included the organization not making good use of a volunteer’s time or good use of their talents, or that volunteer tasks were not clearly defined. The study warned, “Poor volunteer management practices result in more lost volunteers than people losing interest because of changing personal or family needs.”

Administrators of volunteer programs are not without tools to recruit and retain volunteers. As volunteer administration has become more professionalized, public and nonprofit leaders, agency managers, and field experts have turned their attention to improving the capacity of host organizations to accommodate volunteers. In a report prepared in cooperation with the Points of Light Foundation and the Association for Volunteer Administration, the UPS Foundation advocated adoption of 23 volunteer management practices.³ In general, the practices center on providing funding to support volunteer involvement, especially for a designated leader or manager to oversee volunteers, and

having a set of appropriate practices and procedures to administer the volunteer program.

Other studies echo these views on effective means for supporting and retaining volunteers. Grossman and Furano identify three elements as crucial to the success of any volunteer program: screening potential volunteers to ensure appropriate entry and placement in the organization; orientation and training to provide volunteers with the skills and outlook needed; and management and ongoing support of volunteers by paid staff to ensure that volunteer time is not wasted.⁴ They conclude, “No matter how well intentioned volunteers are, unless there is an infrastructure in place to support and direct their efforts, they will remain ineffective at best or, worse, become disenchanted and withdraw, potentially damaging recipients of services in the process.”

A research report on volunteer service and community engagement in selected state agencies and organizations in Texas focuses on many of these same practices and procedures, including screening of volunteers and matching them to positions, training and orientation, management and communication, and recognition and evaluation.⁵ In another study, paid staff time allocated to the volunteer program, as well as an array of recommended practices for volunteer management, were related statistically to the benefits these programs realized from volunteer involvement.⁶ The accumulating evidence suggests that volunteer management capacity is a function of both staff support of volunteering and adoption of administrative practices necessary for the management of volunteers.

The current trend in the charitable sector is for organizations to adopt the efficiencies of management that have been developed in the business sector. Although many charities resist the culture of becoming more businesslike, funders and board members often demand that charities adopt modern management methods. As evidenced by the number of charities that are adopting

“Volunteer management capacity is a function of two things. One is staff support. The other is the adoption of relevant administrative practices necessary for the effective management of volunteers.”

volunteer management practices at least to some degree, the professionalization of volunteer management is clearly underway. The costs, benefits, and consequences of adoption of volunteer management practices should be a subject for managers and policymakers alike.

The next five pages document the degree of adoption of volunteer management practices by charities with different characteristics. Following that, we confront the issue of retention of volunteers. Although observers have been quick to advocate the adoption of volunteer management practices, little research to date has examined the relationship between these practices and the retention of volunteers. In this report, we present an analysis of the relationship between volunteer management capacity and retention.

¹See, for example, Susan Ellis (1996) *From the Top Down: The Executive Role in Volunteer Program Success*, and Steve McCurley and Rick Lynch (1996) *Volunteer Management: Mobilizing all the Resources in the Community*.

²UPS Foundation (1998) *Managing Volunteers: A Report from United Parcel Service*. Available at <http://www.community.ups.com>.

³UPS Foundation (2002) *A Guide To Investing In Volunteer Resources Management: Improve Your Philanthropic Portfolio*. Available at <http://www.community.ups.com>.

⁴Jean Baldwin Grossman and Kathryn Furano (2002) *Making the Most of Volunteers*. Public/Private Ventures. Available at <http://www.ppv.org>.

⁵Sarah Jane Rehnborg, Catherine K. Fallon, and Benjamin J. Hinerfeld (2002) *Investing in Volunteerism: The Impact of Service Initiatives in Selected Texas State Agencies*. Austin, TX: LBJ School of Public Affairs.

⁶Jeffrey L. Brudney (1999) “The Effective Use of Volunteers: Best Practices for the Public Sector.” *Law and Contemporary Problems*.

Volunteer Management Practices

Key Finding: Charities Are Receptive to Best Practices in Volunteer Management, but Commonly Adopt Them Only to Some Degree

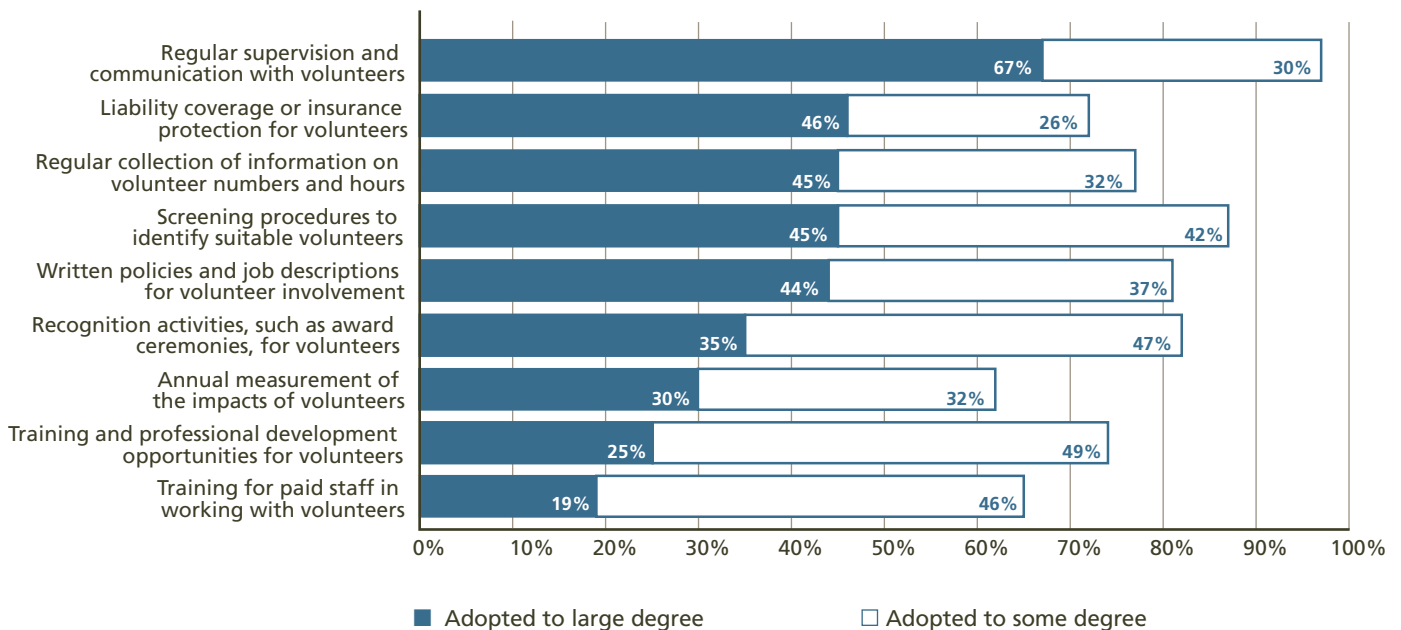
The nine management practices listed in Figure 1 are the ones that we presented to survey respondents who told us they involve volunteers in their operations. We asked them if they have adopted each practice to a large degree, to some degree, or not at all. The bars indicate the percentage of charities that say they have adopted to a large or some degree. The most striking finding is that only one practice, regular supervision and communication with volunteers, has been adopted to a large degree by more than half of charities. Large degree adoption of training for either volunteers or for paid staff in working with volunteers is particularly rare; these practices are more likely to have been adopted only to some degree, if at all.

The likelihood that a charity adopts a particular management practice depends on its specific needs and characteristics. Not all practices can or should be adopted by all charities. While the practice of screening volunteers and

matching them with appropriate tasks is important when volunteers are mentoring or tutoring children, such screening and matching may be unnecessary when a neighborhood association mobilizes residents to clean up a local park. Training paid staff in how to work effectively with volunteers may be a fruitful practice for many organizations, but it is not relevant to those charities that have no paid staff. The critical question is whether charities that *should* be adopting a particular practice have the resources and other institutional support necessary to put the practice in place.

The following four pages document how adoption of these nine practices vary by important organizational characteristics, such as the size of the organization or the way they use volunteers. These differences provide some clues into which conditions make certain practices particularly relevant, and suggest other kinds of circumstances that inhibit charities from adopting these practices.

Figure 1: Management Practices that Charities Say They Practice to a Large Degree or to Some Degree



Management Practices and Size of the Charity

Key Finding: Adoption Most Likely among Largest Charities

Figure 2 illustrates the average level of adoption of management practices by charities of different sizes. For each practice, we assign a value of 0 if a particular charity has not adopted the practice, a value of 1 if the charity has adopted the practice to some degree, and a value of 2 if the charity has adopted the practice to a large degree. We then calculate the average for all of the charities in a particular group.

As we might expect, the size of a charity matters in whether most practices have been adopted or not. The largest charities (those with over \$5 million in annual expenditures, denoted ▲) consistently fall furthest to the right on the scale, indicating highest average levels of adoption. In contrast, the smallest charities (those with less than \$100,000 in annual expenditures, denoted ◆) tend to fall furthest to the left, indicating lowest levels of adoption.

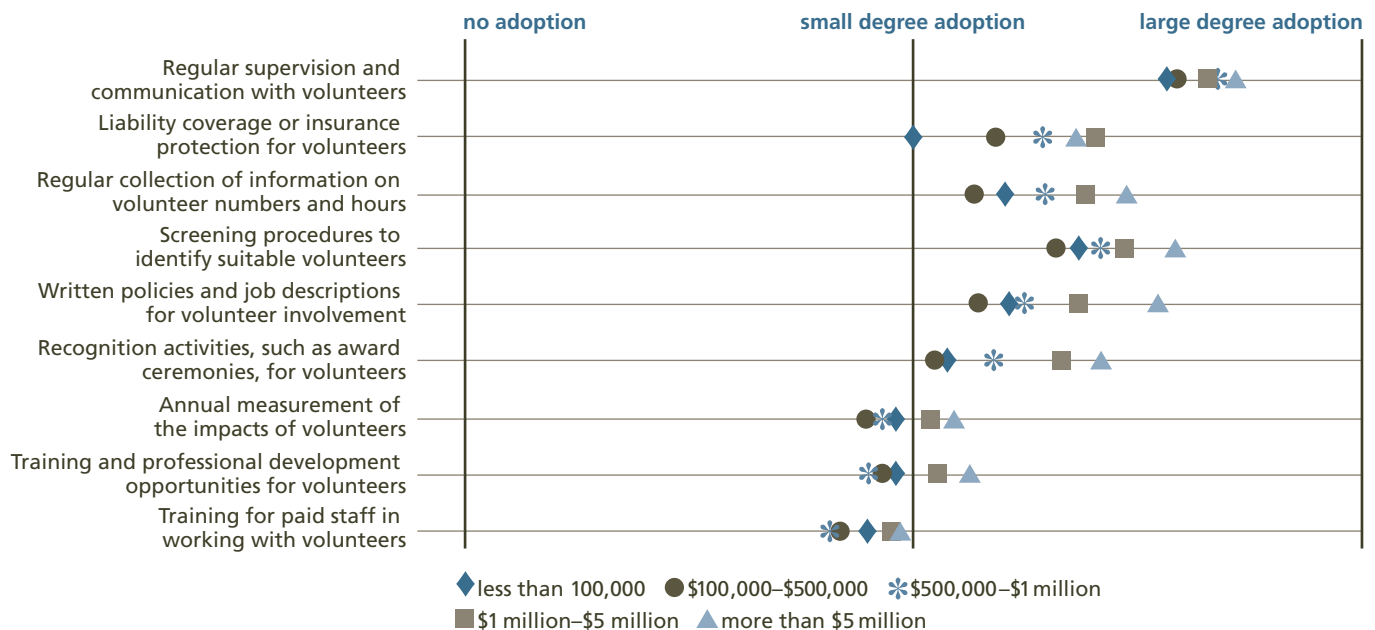
The bunching of symbols indicate little or no difference between charities of different size classes, while greater spreads indicate greater differences. For example, liability coverage or insurance protection for volunteers is

about equally likely for organizations in the top two size classes, but both are substantially more likely than the smallest charities to have adopted this practice.

On the other hand, the rare practice of training paid staff in working with volunteers is not influenced by organization size. That is, despite our expectation that this practice would be practiced more often by larger charities than by smaller ones, we observe no differences across size classes.⁷ All other management practices display differences in adoption level across categories of organization size. Even the apparent bunching of symbols on “regular supervision and communication with volunteers” represents a difference between the smallest and largest charities. This practice is by far the most commonly adopted practice among small charities, but the largest charities are still more likely to have adopted it.

⁷Claims about the differences or similarities between organizations with different characteristics are based on an analysis of variance, a statistical test that indicates whether the observed differences are large enough to be considered greater than chance ($p < 0.05$).

Figure 2. Average Level of Adoption of Volunteer Management Practices, by Size of Charity



We divided charities into size groups depending on how much total money they say they spent in a year. This figure is taken from Forms 990 reported to the IRS in 2000 by charities in the study.

Management Practices and Scope of Volunteer Use

Key Finding: Adoption of Different Management Practices Depends on How Volunteers Are Used

We divided charities into four groups based on their scope of volunteer use. Our groups are based on both the numbers of volunteers that charities engaged in the past year, as well as the number of hours that volunteers collectively worked in a typical week. If a charity engaged at least 50 volunteers over the course of the year, we defined them as having “many volunteers”; otherwise, we defined them as having “few volunteers.” If volunteers collectively worked at least 50 hours in a typical week, we defined a charity as representing “many hours”; otherwise we considered them to represent “few hours.”

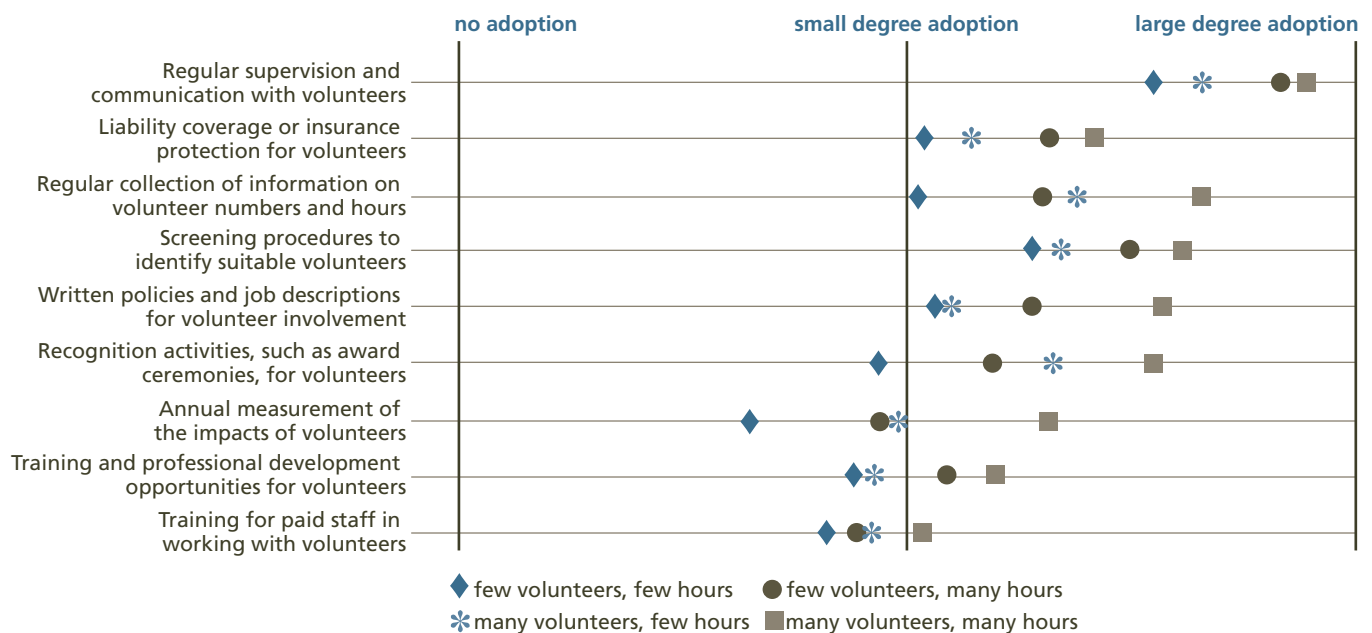
The cross-classification results in four categories of charities. The group with “few volunteers, few hours” is the largest group, and we expect that they are least likely to have adopted most volunteer management practices. “Many volunteers, few hours” includes those charities that engage many volunteers for predominantly short-term or episodic assignments; in contrast, “few volunteers, many hours” includes those charities that use volunteers in more sustained ways. “Many volunteers,

many hours” is the smallest group, but represents those charities with the largest scope of volunteer involvement.

Figure 3 shows how adoption of management practices varies across scope of volunteer use. As expected, charities with large scope of volunteer involvement are significantly more likely to have adopted the various practices when compared to charities that engage comparatively fewer volunteers for fewer hours.

Comparisons of the two middle categories show that charities that use episodic volunteers (“many volunteers, few hours”) have the edge in recognition activities, collection of information on volunteer numbers and hours, and measuring the impacts of volunteer activities. In contrast, charities with more sustained use of fewer volunteers (“few volunteers, many hours”) are more likely to have liability coverage or insurance protection, training and professional development for volunteers, screening and matching procedures, and regular supervision and communication. These practices indicate a greater investment in volunteers.

Figure 3. Average Level of Adoption of Volunteer Management Practices, by Scope of Volunteer Use



Management Practices and Primary Use of Volunteers

Key Finding: Charities that Primarily Use Volunteers in Direct Service Roles Are More Likely to Have Adopted Most Practices

The work that volunteers do also influences adoption of management practices. We asked survey respondents to describe the main role that volunteers perform, the one to which the organization devotes the most time, money, and other resources. Based on these descriptions, we organized charities into four categories based on their primary use of volunteers.

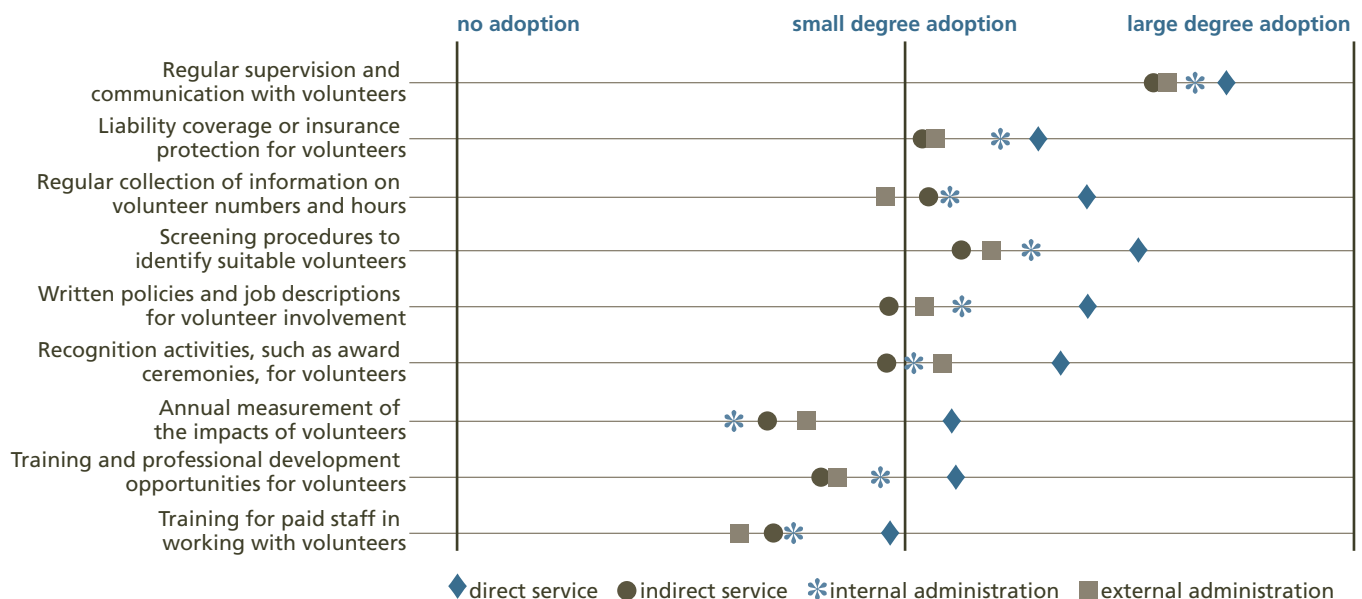
Most charities use volunteers primarily in direct service activities, such as mentoring or tutoring. Some use volunteers in carrying out services, but not in ways that usually bring them into contact with others; we describe these activities as “indirect service.” The other two categories include volunteers who are primarily working to make the charity run rather than providing services. One is an internal administrative role, including such activities as filing, copying, or answering phones. The other is an external administrative role, including such activities as fundraising, lobbying, or public relations.

Charities that primarily use volunteers in direct service roles are furthest to the right on all nine management

practice scales, indicating that they are far more likely to have adopted each practice. The result makes sense because charities that use volunteers for direct client contact must be more careful about how these services are handled. Failure to follow accepted practices for volunteer management may jeopardize service quality, the reputation of the organization, or the quality of the volunteer experience.

In contrast, the average adoption scores for charities that use volunteers primarily in indirect service, internal administration, or external administration tend to group together, indicating that these uses of volunteers do not distinguish adopters from non-adopters. To the extent that there are differences, charities that involve volunteers primarily in internal administration tend to be second-most likely to adopt most practices. However, these charities are least likely to evaluate the impacts of their volunteers, not surprising given that their volunteer tasks are primarily administrative rather than service-oriented.

Figure 4. Average Level of Adoption of Volunteer Management Practices, by Primary Use of Volunteers



Management Practices and Subsector

Key Finding: Health Charities Are Most Active in Adoption of Volunteer Management Practices

The charities in this study represent the broad array of nonprofit organizations in the United States. Charities are involved in our daily lives in a rich variety of ways, and their missions touch on almost all issues of public interest. The industry, or subsector, in which a charity works might be related to how it engages volunteers, or which practices it has adopted in managing its volunteers.

We placed our study organizations into categories based on their primary purpose. Three-fourths of them could be placed in one of four major categories: human services; education; health; or arts, culture, and humanities (Figure 5). The remaining one-fourth consists of either charities that support the work of other charities, or charities that operate in smaller subsectors (such as environmental or animal related). The figure below is based only on the three-fourths that we classified into the major groups indicated.

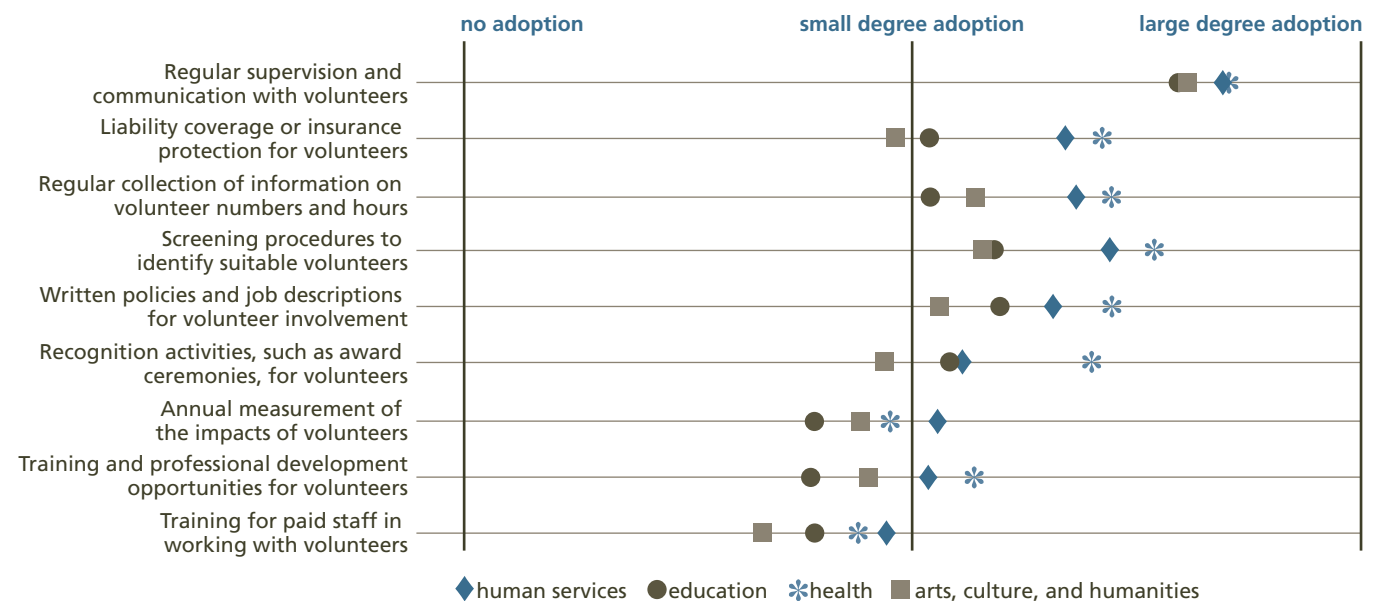
Charities operating in the health subsector are more likely to have adopted most practices. On average, health charities are more likely to have liability coverage or

insurance protection for volunteers, hold recognition activities for volunteers, and to screen and match volunteers to appropriate assignments. This likely reflects the greater number of resources, the higher level of professionalization, and (in some cases) the greater urgency of volunteer performance in the health field.

Human service charities rival health charities on adoption of most items, but charities operating in the education and arts fields tend to lag on most practices. Charities operating in the education and arts fields are substantially less likely to have liability coverage, to regularly collect information on volunteer numbers and hours, to measure the impacts of volunteers, or to screen and match volunteers to assignments. Arts organizations are notably less likely to hold award or other recognition activities for their volunteers.

The only practice that does not vary by subsector is the popular practice of supervision and communication with volunteers, practiced equally by human service, education, health, and arts organizations.

Figure 5. Average Level of Adoption of Volunteer Management Practices, by Subsector



Retention of Volunteers

What Factors Explain Whether Charities Can Keep Their Volunteers Coming Back?

In this section, we explore the relationship between the adoption of volunteer management practices, various organizational characteristics, and the reported rate of volunteer retention among the charities in our study. Retention is a goal for most charities, as well as an indication of the success of its volunteer program. For charities that engage volunteers mainly in episodic or short term assignments, retention may not be quite so high a priority. Even in these cases, however, most charities would likely prefer to have their volunteers take on new tasks as assignments are completed. Recruiting volunteers is an expensive and time-consuming job, so charities generally like to maximize retention. Retention is also important because volunteers often become loyal financial donors to the organization as well.

To measure retention, we asked respondents “Of the volunteers that worked with your organization one year ago, approximately what percentage would you say are still involved as volunteers?” Nearly 3 percent said zero, and 17 percent said all were retained, but most fell somewhere in between. The median charity reported an 80 percent retention rate.

Our analysis considers how a variety of organizational practices and characteristics are related to the reported retention rate. A key feature of our approach is that all of the factors are considered at the same time, so the influence of one practice or characteristic takes into account all of the other factors in the analysis. The factors are divided into four categories: management practices, investments in volunteer resources, the value that volunteers bring to charities, and various other organizational characteristics.

Management Practices⁸

As Figure 6 shows, four of the eight management practices have an effect on volunteer retention. Charities that say they have adopted to a large degree the practice of hosting recognition activities for volunteers have a higher rate of retention, as do those that offer training and

professional development opportunities for volunteers, and those that use screening procedures to identify suitable volunteers and to match them with appropriate jobs or tasks. These volunteer management practices all center on making the experience worthwhile for the volunteer. Other practices, such as liability coverage or insurance protection, regular collection of information on the number of volunteers and hours, training for paid staff in working with volunteers, and written policies and job descriptions, may generate other benefits, but they center on what is important to the charity rather than what is important to volunteers. Not surprisingly, adoption of these practices is unrelated to retention. Retention appears to be very much a product of what charities do directly for their volunteers.

Sometimes a practice that is good for the charity may not be popular with individual volunteers. A curious finding is that regular supervision and communication with volunteers is associated with lower levels of retention. This management practice is the most widely adopted among charities, with two-thirds of the charities adopting it to a large degree, and virtually all of them adopting it to at least some degree. We do not suggest that charities stop supervising and communicating with their volunteers! However, some charities may supervise and communicate in a way that volunteer experiences feel too much like the grind of their daily jobs rather than an enjoyable avocation, thereby diminishing the experience for volunteers and reducing their desire to continue volunteering. Of course, increased support and communication may be a response to poor retention. Thus, organizations that encounter retention problems may take steps to alleviate their problems by engaging volunteers more directly.

⁸The variables in this section are eight of the nine management practices discussed on the preceding pages; “annual measurement of impacts” is excluded because it overlaps substantially with “regular collection of information.” This set of variables separates charities that say they have adopted practices to a large degree from those that do not make this claim.

Investment in Volunteer Resources⁹

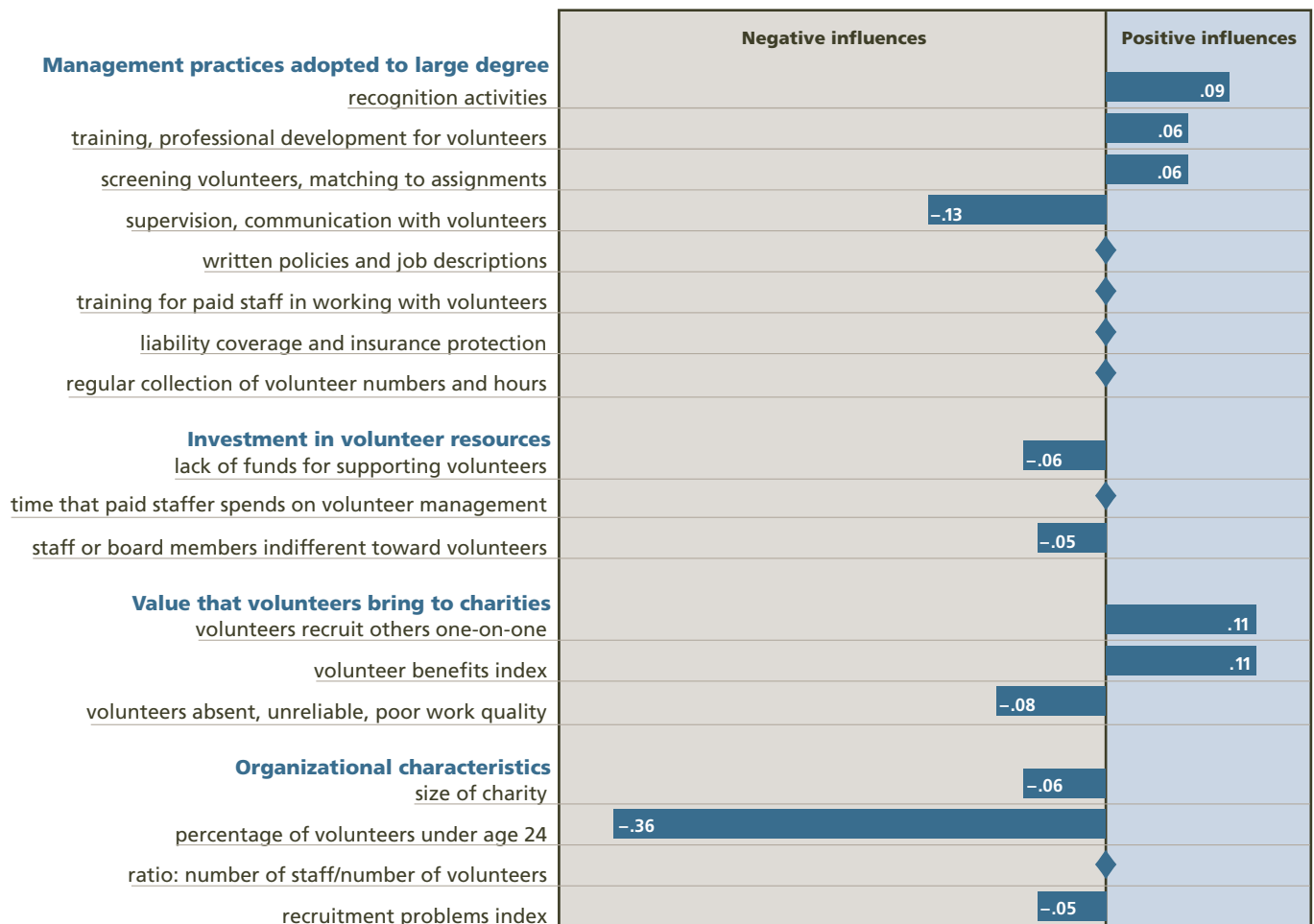
Charities that feel challenged by the lack of funds allocated to support volunteers have lower retention rates than charities that report fewer such challenges. Surprisingly, however, retention rates do not vary according to the percentage of time a paid staff member devotes to managing the volunteer program. Although having a paid staff volunteer coordinator is related to adoption of management practices (as well as other benefits), this support does not necessarily translate into greater retention of volunteers.

The final issue in the category of investment in volunteer resources concerns organizational culture. That is, has the leadership of the charity invested in creating the kind of climate that welcomes and encourages volunteers? No surprise, the results indicate that charities that experience resistance or indifference toward volunteer involvement are less able to retain volunteers.

Value that Volunteers Bring to Charities¹⁰

The value of volunteer participation to the charity affects retention. Charities that use volunteers to recruit other

Figure 6. The Influence of Management, Investments, Volunteer Value, and Other Organizational Characteristics on Retention of Volunteers



multiple regression, model adjusted $R^2 = 0.247$; magnitudes of bars are standardized betas for variables statistically significant at $p < 0.10$; ♦ indicates that variable has no effect on retention ($p > 0.10$).

volunteers one-on-one are better able to retain volunteers. Enlisting volunteers as “spokespersons” for the charity in this manner implies a level of trust in these participants, evidence of both a supportive organizational culture and confidence that the charity provides a worthwhile experience to volunteers. The value that charities place on volunteers pays dividends in retention. Figure 6 shows that the greater the number of benefits charities feel they realize from volunteer involvement, the higher their rate of volunteer retention. Conversely, to the extent that charities perceive that volunteer service is costly to them in the form of absenteeism, unreliability, or poor work habits, they have lower reported rates of volunteer retention. Charities that do not have this perception do a better job of keeping their volunteers.

Organizational Characteristics¹¹

We anticipated that larger charities would be better able to retain volunteers due to their greater adoption of various volunteer management strategies, but the results in Figure 6 suggest the opposite: smaller charities have higher rates of volunteer retention. The survey results cannot tell us why this is the case, but it is easy to imagine several possible reasons for this finding. Since smaller charities tend to have fewer volunteers, they can devote more attention to them as individuals. Or, with less budget to pursue organizational missions, volunteer assistance (and retention) is more critical for them. On

“Charities that use volunteers to recruit other volunteers have higher retention rates. Having volunteers represent the charity implies trust, evidence of a positive organizational culture, and confidence that the charity provides a worthwhile experience for volunteers.”

the other hand, another measure of the importance of volunteers to the charity, the ratio of paid staff to volunteers, is not related to retention.

The strongest effect in the analysis pertains to the predominant age of the volunteers in a given charity. Figure 6 indicates that charities with a larger percentage of volunteers under age 24 have lower rates of retention. Again, we can imagine the circumstances that might explain this finding. Young people are newer to work life, their life circumstances often change seasonally and rapidly, and their roots in the community are less deep than older volunteers. Consequently, they are less likely to maintain relationships with the charities in which they volunteer.

Finally, the analysis shows that charities that have problems recruiting volunteers also encounter difficulties in retaining them. Steps toward alleviating one of these shortcomings should also help to address the other.

⁹The first variable in this section reflects the percentage of time that a paid staff member spends on volunteer management; for charities with no staff or no paid staff member in the role of volunteer administrator, the value is 0. The two other measures come from a series of questions about challenges that charities might face. We asked respondents if lack of adequate funds for supporting volunteer involvement was a big problem, a small problem, or not a problem at all. We similarly asked whether indifference or resistance on the part of paid staff or board members was a problem.

¹⁰Our first variable indicates whether the charity uses volunteers to recruit volunteers one-on-one to a great extent, to some extent, or to no extent. The second is a Benefits Index, a sum of the reported values that volunteers bring to charities in the form of increased service quality, cost savings, public support, or specialized skills; higher values reflect greater reported benefits. The third item is another of the challenges that we asked respondents about; in this case, we asked if absenteeism, unreliability, or poor work habits or work quality on the part of volunteers was a big problem, a small problem, or not a problem.

¹¹Size of charity is indicated by the five size groupings used on page 7. Percentage of volunteers under age 24 is the reported percentage of total volunteers in this age category. The ratio of staff to volunteers is calculated by dividing the reported number of staff members by the number of volunteers in the past year. A high value on this ratio reflects an organization where most work is done by paid staff; a low value indicates an organization where most work is done by volunteers. The final measure, the Recruitment Problems Index, is a sum of three recruitment challenges that we asked about. High values indicate problems with recruiting sufficient numbers of volunteers, recruiting volunteers with the right skills or expertise, or recruiting volunteers during the workday; low values indicate few reported recruiting problems.

Concluding Observations

Implications for Practice

Charities adopt volunteer management practices for reasons that go beyond the question of whether they can afford them or not. While the resources available to a given charity no doubt play a part in adoption of the management practices under study, the roles that volunteers play in the organization and tradeoffs between satisfying organizational and volunteer needs are also important in understanding which charities adopt which practices.

Scope and Nature of Volunteer Use Influences Management Choices. Different volunteer management practices have different underlying purposes. While all volunteers like to be recognized for their contributions to the organization or community, this kind of external motivation may not be necessary for charities that have made long-term commitments to their volunteers, a practice that appeals to the intrinsic motivations of individuals. Long-term commitments are exemplified by training and professional development opportunities, regular communication and supervision, and liability coverage. These are precisely the kinds of practices more likely to be adopted by those charities that use volunteers in sustained ways, characterized by having relatively few volunteers who spend a lot of hours working for the charity. Charities that cater to episodic volunteers adopt different strategies, such as providing external validation through public recognition of volunteers.

Charities Must Balance Individual and Organizational Needs. To sustain the participation of volunteers, charities must create a good experience for them. Charities must be equally concerned with implementing prac-

“Some volunteer management practices are important to the operations of charities and some are important for providing good experiences for volunteers. The ones that focus on volunteers are the ones that keep volunteers interested and involved.”

tices designed to make sure that they involve volunteers wisely and well, and commit sufficient support resources to this endeavor. Our study shows that charities that adopt the practices most directly concerned with satisfying volunteers reap the highest rates of retention. Practices that cater more to the needs of the charity than the needs of volunteers are unlikely to motivate volunteers and, in fact, are not related to retention of volunteers over time. Nonetheless, these practices may be critical for the charity to oversee volunteer involvement in an accountable manner, and to generate resources necessary to keep the charity running.

Retention of Volunteers Involves More Than Management Techniques. Adoption of volunteer management practices can help organizations to retain volunteers, but charities interested in retaining volunteers should not stop there. They should also allocate sufficient funds to support volunteer involvement, cultivate an organizational climate that is welcoming to volunteers, give their volunteers an experience worth sharing, and enlist volunteers in recruiting other volunteers one-on-one. However, neither volunteer management techniques nor these other steps alone will maximize retention. Charities that want to retain these essential human resources should adopt relevant volunteer management practices *and* invest in the infrastructure, culture, and volunteer experience that will keep volunteers coming back.

Volunteers are valuable human resources. Four out of five charities use volunteers to help them meet organizational needs for service and administration. Most charities could not get by without their volunteers, and they certainly would be less productive and responsive without them. Turnover of volunteers can disrupt the operation of the charity, threaten the ability to serve clients, and signal that the volunteer experience is not as rewarding as it might be. Charities cannot be expected to keep every volunteer, but building volunteer management capacity to involve and retain them makes sense for both charities and the volunteers upon whom they rely.

Methodology

The volunteer management capacity study is based on surveys of separate populations of U.S. charities and congregations. The current report focuses only on the charities sample. A sample of 2,993 charities was drawn within expenditure and subsector strata from 214,995 charities that filed Form 990 with the IRS in 2000.

From August to November 2003, the Urban Institute and Princeton Survey Research Associates called organizations to verify their existence, check mailing addresses, and obtain the name of an appropriate contact; they completed precalls with 80 percent of charities. After contact, they mailed a letter that explained the motivations of the study and invited participation, and then called each organization up to 30 times to collect study information. Interviews averaging 20 minutes were conducted with organizational representatives familiar with volunteer management. In the final weeks of the study, interviewers offered \$50 donations to organizations that were reluctant to participate; 11 percent of interviews were completed with an incentive.

Adjusting for sampled organizations that were defunct or could not be verified as “working organizations,” our response rate was 69 percent. Our unweighted data includes 1,753 cases, including 1,354 that use volunteers in their operations and do not primarily recruit and refer volunteers to other organizations (volunteer centers).

Responding charities were weighted to represent the expenditure and subsector strata from which they were sampled. Weights were further adjusted to account for organizations unreachable in the precall. Because these weights help ensure that our respondents reflect the characteristics of the working population from which they were drawn, the results of the study reported in this report are based on the weighted responses. For more details on methodology, consult the FAQ at <http://www.volunteerinput.org>.

About the Authors

Mark A. Hager, Ph.D., is a senior research associate in the Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy at the Urban Institute. He is the principal investigator for the Volunteer Management Capacity Study. His other work focuses on administrative and fundraising costs among nonprofit organizations, data collection in the field of the performing arts, and the financial stability of nonprofits.

Jeffrey L. Brudney, Ph.D., is professor of public administration and policy at the School of Public and International Affairs, University of Georgia. He is the foremost research expert on volunteer management programs and community volunteer centers in the United States. Among numerous other publications, he is author of the “Volunteer Administration” entry in the *International Encyclopedia of Public Policy and Administration*.

About the Project Sponsors

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2100 M Street, NW
Washington, DC 20037

202-261-5709
paffairs@ui.urban.org
www.urban.org