

TECHNOLOGY THERAPY

Volunteer Management Series



By Florence May

My friends often ask me. "What exactly is your job?"
The response is often, "Everyone thinks I sell software
but really I provide pain management tools
for volunteer directors of festivals,
marathons and big events."

Sounds too good to be true? The right volunteer management system should provide life/work balance. The software is the tool that makes you efficient because it forces you to follow the best practices of both volunteer management and on-line operations.

What does that mean? Don't volunteer managers just automate their existing registration process? How hard can that be?

Many people think that volunteer management is an easy job. The reality is that managing a large number of volunteers, a wide variety of jobs, numerous shifts, schedules and locations is often a very complicated and time consuming process.

Volunteer programs differ greatly in size, complexity and budget. How does a volunteer manager know which software

to buy? Aren't all volunteer management systems the same?

Please use the chart below as a guide to compare a variety of manual and online options for automating your volunteer management operations.

Consider the best approach for you and your organization by contemplating the following three questions:

1 How much is your time worth?

Volunteer managers are frequently under-valued. One perception is that if volunteer managers just work harder; they will be more productive. This sentiment is one reason the turnover in these jobs is relatively high. Ask your organization to demonstrate how they value their volunteers by investing in the

volunteer manager's process and time. For example, many event organizations do not have the staff or time available to manually enter volunteers into a system or track people from year to year. A system that automates these tasks saves time for the volunteer manager allowing him or her to focus on improving their volunteer program versus wasting time and resources doing administrative work. If you could automate, how much would your volunteer program improve and/or expand? What more could you accomplish with extra time?

Many of our clients have expanded their volunteer management program by adding more events and volunteers. They have focused on becoming the volunteer hub of their community and therefore are

SOLUTION	FEATURES	COST	EFFICIENCY RATING
Excel/ Access Database with email and phone	All processes manual	\$	Very Low, works for organizations with less than 75 volunteers for an annual event.
Online Volunteer registration form	Automated information gathering	\$	Low, volunteer data must be typed into a database. Works for very small organizations. Saves 10 – 20% of staff time.
Basic Volunteer Management System	Basic online registration, communications, reports. Limited customization and minimal customer support.	\$\$	Low to Mid. Works for organizations with basic needs. Additional fees for more robust features. Saves 20 – 40% staff time.
Robust Volunteer Management System	Numerous built in reports, tracks e-mail status, templates, text option, links to other systems in your office. Customizable features and design.	\$\$\$-\$\$\$\$	High. Built for process efficiency. Allows customization for unique types of volunteers (eg. Team leaders, Job Certified). High quality training and customer service. Saves 50 – 75% staff time.
Custom Volunteer Management System	Custom to fit your organization.	\$\$\$\$\$	Depends. Appropriate for organizations with one of a kind process and structure. Extremely rare in the event world. Time saving varies greatly.

10 Paths

1 Software is magic. It will not solve all your problems. It will improve efficiency, but you must have good processes in place to support the software. Bad process is still bad process. You have to adopt best practices and good processes to compliment the software and overall improve your program. Make sure the software company provides you with best practices to guide you through the process because it will be an adjustment. Also, make sure to get the support you need from your vendor.

2 Online services are your knight in shining armor. There is no such thing as the perfect fit that will save the day! Not everyone has the same needs as you, so it's important to prioritize your needs and focus on the most critical for you and your volunteer program. Also, software cannot force your registrants to read and follow instructions. It allows you to lay out all the directions, expectations, etc., but your registrants will still have to read it, which as we all know too well doesn't happen all the time! Overall, it should put you in a position to better your volunteer program.

3 You are the only volunteer manager looking for an online registration solution. Sorry to burst your bubble, but you aren't the first and you won't be the last! There are people who have already gone through this process. Ask for references. Call 3 - 5 of them and ask them about their experience. Gather pros and cons in order to make an educated decision. Make sure to talk to the person who is actually using the software on a daily basis.

4 Your event and volunteer management needs are completely unique. Your event may be complex, large or unusual, but key functions almost always carry across volunteer opportunities throughout all kinds of events.

5 Your volunteers will never use online registration. You will be stunned by how many of them dislike your existing offline system. They are seeking better use of their time. You will also be surprised at how quickly your shifts fill up! There might be some volunteers who are uncomfortable at the thought of online registration, so you have to take the time to walk them through the process. In the end, even they will think the system is easy after they see, understand and use it.

6 Online volunteer registration services are too expensive for my organization. Consider the administrative hours you are spending now. If you are spending all your time on administrative tasks in the office and away from your volunteers, you are inhibiting yourself from doing the important recruiting, relationship building and volunteer managing that your events need.

number of years volunteered across your entire volunteer database? Maybe you need to track volunteer hours for your organization or keep better track of attendance so you aren't sending your appreciation party invitation to those people who never showed up for their shifts. At a glance, would you want to see how many volunteers you still need and in which shifts? Do you want to print check-in lists efficiently? You must have good reporting features to be able to gather, sort and track this information.

3 What are your critical volunteer program pain points? Are you or your staff burnt out spending more time on administrative tasks rather than operational or management? Are you experiencing staff turnover? Have you invested time and money in tools/systems that aren't improving your efficiency? If so, it might be time for a new volunteer registration system. Make a list of areas that are causing you pain. Burn out is common when staff is spending too much time on administrative tasks and not enough time on actually managing volunteers. Meanwhile your volunteer program is suffering because there isn't any time to improve it. Providing a good experience for the volunteer will increase your return rate, but if you don't have time to improve upon their experience, you are continually losing volunteers.

The quantity and quality of your work is improved when your time is valued, you complete your tasks efficiently and you reduce your pain points. As a technical therapy patient (oops I meant client) once told me, "When my company invested in volunteer management software, I felt this was an investment in me and the quality of my work and my attitude improved dramatically." Finding the right volunteer management software is one solution to help you achieve that life/work balance we are all searching for.

providing a better return on investment for their own organization.

2 What tasks are consuming your time? Calculate how much time you are spending on entering data, individual communication with volunteers, creating and running reports (if available) and the actual tasks required to do your job and run your event. Categorize your tasks by registration, communication and reports.

Registration - Are you tired of manually entering registration forms into a database? Are you putting volunteers into shifts for them? If you are spending time manually entering volunteers into a database and assigning them shifts, having a volunteer management system that will do all this for you will not only save you time and make you efficient, but it will also save your san-

ity. Will the system allow the volunteers to select their own activities and shifts? More and more, volunteers want to be in control of their own schedule and time and select their own activities and shifts.

Communication - Do you need help speeding up your communication process? Do you want to be able to email your volunteers assigned to a specific shift or those volunteering for a certain activity with ease? Or do you want to quickly send out reminders to volunteers regarding their upcoming shift(s) or quickly notify them of any changes? Providing good communication with your volunteers keeps them interested and engaged and starts their volunteer experience with a strong foundation.

Reports - Do you need to know how many volunteers need a large shirt? Do you want to know the breakdown of the

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