

Staff replacement by volunteers

There has been a lot of talk recently about the rights and wrongs of volunteers taking the jobs of paid museum staff – see the *Museums Journal*, 'Volunteers could replace staff at four museums in Hampshire', Patrick Steele, Issue 111/01, p.5, 04.01.2011. The fact that the *Journal* changed the headline to its story from 'Volunteers could keep four sites in Hampshire open', shifting clearly from the positive to the negative, demonstrates how undecided people are about whether volunteers playing an increasing role in the delivery of services in times of cuts is a good thing. It's time to unravel this issue and dispel some of the myths about volunteering which is vital for those having to take decisions about museum resourcing in these financially challenging times.

Defining the terms

Let's start with the language of the debate. People used to talk about job 'substitution', but now it's 'replacement' or 'displacement'. The *Charter for Strengthening Relations Between Paid Staff and Volunteers*, jointly published by Volunteering England and the TUC, uses 'displacement', stating, amongst other important things:

The involvement of volunteers should complement and supplement the work of paid staff, and should not be used to displace paid staff or undercut their pay and conditions of service.

I've always thought of displacement and replacement in the following way:

- **Displacement** – when paid staff are made redundant so that volunteers can fill their roles
- **Replacement** – when paid staff leave and their roles are filled by volunteers.

To illustrate, a museum client told me that he could foresee problems if paid staff were ousted from their jobs so that volunteers could take their place (displacement), but he asked what was wrong with filling vacant paid positions (replacement), especially if the structure was still heavily weighted towards paid staff. My answer was that displacement was bad because, amongst other things, museums provide necessary employment:

most people need paying jobs; the Government needs people to have paying jobs. Organisations with healthy budgets could also be seen to be profiting from volunteering – an accusation commonly hurled at museums offering lengthy unpaid internships. Replacement wasn't so worrying because many museums have charitable objects or are run by local Councils, and as such are duty-bound to maximise the resources they are given. They also exist to serve and engage the public, and volunteering is a great way of achieving these aims – it's good for the museum and it's good for the volunteer. Even when organisations are cash rich, well-managed volunteers in museums are a very good thing. But, clearly, the argument for replacement also applies to displacement when times are hard.

The cuts to my sector are forcing arts and heritage organisations to take distressing decisions about their future (or the lack of it) with potentially catastrophic results. As an adviser to the sector and a voluntary trustee of two arts charities, I'm seeing it from both sides. When creating strategies to survive, restructuring services and human resources are top of the list – how can efficiencies be made without taking steps which may be irrevocably damaging to museums, employees, volunteers and the public they serve? Increasing the number of volunteers in our museums will not solve all the problems we face in these challenging times, but it has to be a serious option.

Obligations

Since many museums are charities and / or are run by Councils, they have an obligation to operate efficiently. These museums do not exist to provide employment – they belong to the tax-payer. Councils have obligations to staff but they also have obligations to the wider community. If we close our museums – making people redundant – everyone loses, and we run the risk of them never re-opening as collections and buildings deteriorate. While some Councils have blindly closed museums without considering alternative management models, some are not knee-jerking; they are thinking about ways of ensuring that heritage is retained and accessible – albeit via a reduced service. In challenging financial times, local people may rally. Where redundancies are unavoidable, I think we're talking about staff replacement *not* displacement – the staff are not being made redundant so that volunteers can take over; they're being made redundant regardless. Whatever we call it, the results are going to be the same. Is it really better that museums are closed, making both staff and volunteers redundant,

completely closing access and volunteering opportunities to the public; or should the number of volunteers be increased in order to keep museums open?

And what about our obligations to the volunteers? What do they want – both those who currently volunteer and those members of the community who might want to support museums through hard times? What do we know about their motivations and needs that will help us take staffing decisions? There are still myths about volunteering that persist in the sector which confuse the staff replacement debate.

Dispelling the myths

Volunteers are not professional/skilled/reliable: If we change the staff/volunteer ratio in favour of volunteers we do not *necessarily* reduce the levels of competence, skills or commitment. It's a myth that volunteers are not professional, and many are specialists in their own right. I've worked with several museums where some volunteers are at least as experienced as staff. If redundancies are necessary, there are solutions. With experienced leadership, well structured, high-turnover volunteer placements or internships are currently providing many museums with the latest in sector knowledge while offering valuable short-term work experience in return. Retired, part-time or unemployed professionals can contribute further. And unskilled volunteers often very quickly become highly skilled as a result of supervised training. The challenge is to provide continuity of service by a voluntary workforce increasingly interested in short-term volunteering.

Volunteers will want to replace paid staff: Other than student volunteers, volunteers generally don't want to replace staff; they like working with for and with them. They don't always want responsibility. It's a huge stretch of the imagination to think that most volunteers would accept the pressures of a full-time job without salary, benefits and the protections that employment law brings. What is more usual is for the different tasks performed by a paid member of staff to be allocated to several people – and this requires good organisational structure and management. Museums can create a framework within which volunteers work and allocate responsibilities, but at the end of the day a volunteer's only obligation is a moral one.

Volunteers are easy to manage: One of the biggest problems in volunteer management is that staff often don't understand the motivations of volunteers – this is crucial to good volunteer management and retention. Many volunteers quite rightly want to suit themselves as much as the museum they volunteer for. Volunteers like to be able to work on their own terms, and they do walk away if they're not happy. It's a real skill to manage people who are not contracted, understanding and meeting their expectations (which can change, sometimes frequently) within a necessary structure. Some volunteers want that structure and formality and some don't. Some want to be seen as different and special and some don't. Younger volunteers on work placements may look for a different experience than a retired specialist or volunteer looking for a largely social experience. As people now have longer working lives, museums must look at more flexible and often shorter-term volunteering opportunities, reaching different audiences, to create complex yet excitingly diverse volunteer teams to support core staff. Volunteering England's recent and much-needed Value Volunteer Management campaign is helping raise awareness of the wide range of skills and competencies involved in volunteer management. Museums must recognise this.

Volunteering is free: Perhaps the biggest myth about volunteering is that it's free. Successful volunteer programmes must be well-resourced – funding and staff. While increasingly museums are exploring having volunteers as Volunteer Coordinators or Managers (many successfully), these voluntary positions work best when they add support to existing paid staff who must be experienced volunteer managers able to attract, recruit and retain good people.

Risks

Of course, there is a real concern about the loss to the sector of the skills of those made redundant. If volunteer programmes are successful those in charge of budgets may seek to retain high numbers of volunteers as a policy. The sector may become a less attractive to employees – existing and future. So it could be argued that the closure of some museums would benefit the sector in the long-run, raising awareness amongst external decision-makers that there needs to be some boundaries around involving volunteers. On the other hand, if the volunteers are not exploited, we must acknowledge that involving more volunteers has the potential to bring many benefits, including

widening participation and improving services if, and only if, there is heavy investment in professional volunteer recruitment and management.

Volunteers in with the bricks

If a museum has, as part of its vision and values, a strong volunteering culture – a commitment to involving local people in the delivery of its services as well as being beneficiaries – there is likely to be less controversy when paid roles are filled by volunteers. Think of the National Trust: an organisation started by volunteers, its charitable activities currently underpinned by 62,000 people giving their time for free, increasingly in all areas and at all levels of operation, delivering its vision of properties being locally ‘owned’. Property Managers welcome the added value to and expansion of services that involving local people brings – specialists and non-specialists alike. When Imperial War Museum North opened its doors to the public in 2002, volunteers were very much in with the bricks. The social inclusion volunteer programme, which involved local residents in visitor services roles, was developed with the fabric of the new building – the museum’s *raison d’être* was about widening access to collections. It would not have been so successful in achieving its mission had it not involved volunteers. If volunteers are an acknowledged part of the team and vital to delivering the vision of museums, and if there is also a commitment to resourcing volunteer management, increasing the staff / volunteer ratio should not, in principle, be problematic.

Many of our museums are run entirely by volunteers, and the past ten years have seen great leaps forward in the recognition and management of volunteers in our cultural institutions with dedicated management becoming more the norm. However, many still struggle to integrate unpaid help, perpetuating the ‘them and us’ culture, and missing the full potential of this dedicated workforce. Often museums engage volunteers informally, as a bit of an add-on, or as part of a specific objective such as audience development, rather than placing them at the heart of their mission. These museums will find it harder to allow volunteers to develop and progress into non-traditional positions generally, and they’ll also find it harder to make a case for – and to manage the process of – the replacement or displacement of staff with volunteers.

The lesser of two evils?

The ideal model, regardless of the financial climate, must be that of taking a mixed approach, with paid staff and volunteers working together. Volunteers can do more than supplement and complement the work of paid staff; they *can* fill some key roles. Faced with two undesirable redundancy situations – letting all staff go and closing a museum, or retaining a skeleton staff and increasing the number of volunteers – I would advocate the latter every time.

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