

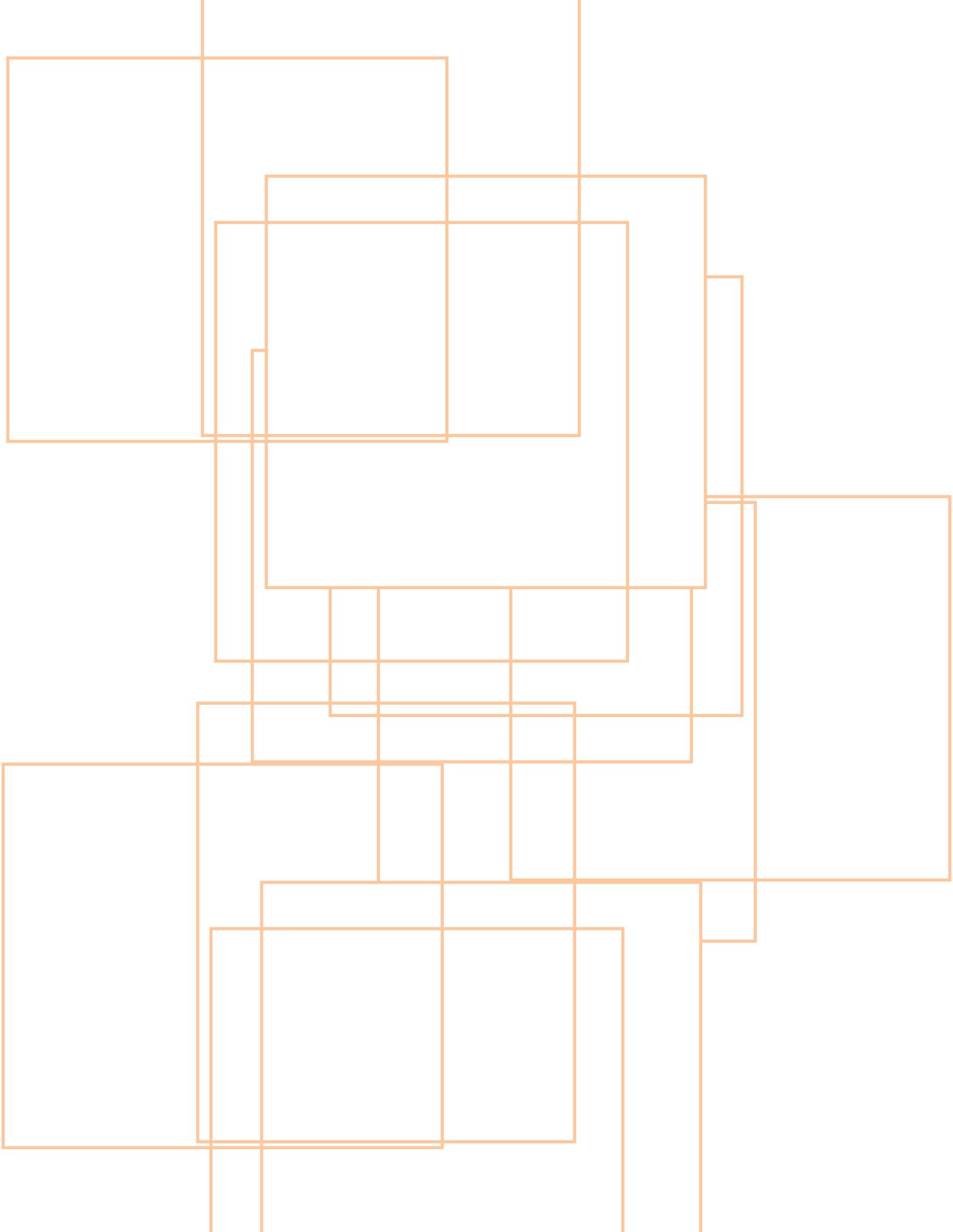


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Volunteerism 2.0:

Skilled Volunteers Bring New Talent to Organizations





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- Joanne Hild, Executive Director, Sierra Streams Institute (CA)
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- Hugh Espy, Executive Director, Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement
- Jennifer Browning, Executive Director, The Biodiversity Project (IL)
- Maura McCarthy, Executive Director, Friends of the Wissahickon (PA)

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“Traditional volunteer roles in environmental nonprofits, such as stuffing envelopes, planning a special event, or replanting grasses, are important but no longer sufficient in creating a robust volunteer resource for your organization. It’s time to think “outside the box” to develop important, meaningful roles for volunteers. Short-term benefits will be immediately apparent—high-quality work products that you would not have been able to afford otherwise. The long-term benefits are volunteers more fully engaged and more easily retained, who become loyal donors and advocates for your cause, and perhaps most importantly, become significant leaders in your organization.”

—Dianne Russell, Executive Director, Institute for Conservation Leadership

A New Era of Volunteerism

Volunteers have always played an important role in the nonprofit sector and in the growth of environmental and conservation organizations. For many lightly-staffed or all volunteer organizations, these passionate individuals are often the only reason things get done, whether it's showing up at hearings, writing letters, or organizing a river or park clean-up.

According to a Corporation for National and Community Service report titled, "Volunteers and the Economic Downturn," more than half of all nonprofit organizations expected to increase their reliance on volunteers. Many of these **new volunteers are taking on professional-level responsibilities and redefining what it means to be a volunteer.**

Given trends and innovative examples ICL is seeing around the country, it is time to revisit what it means to be a "voluntary organization." We are entering a new era of volunteerism, or what we're calling "Volunteerism 2.0." Volunteerism 2.0 is changing how we think about volunteers, and how we involve them in the critical work of our organizations to create lasting change.

This report highlights examples from five organizations that are thinking creatively and strategically about volunteer roles. We think it's important to hold up these examples to support leaders, the emergence of a new generation of leaders, and overall organizational effectiveness.

Several trends in the nonprofit world have influenced our urgency to help leaders think more creatively and strategically about volunteerism. Those trends include:

- Environmental and conservation organizations have become **more professionalized** as they've developed over the last 25 years and hired staff. Many groups have lost touch with their volunteerism roots that were so important to their founding.
- With the **economic downturn**, many people are contemplating a career change or looking for ways to contribute in their community. Recent high school and college graduates are looking for internships or volunteer opportunities that allow them to develop their skills and to gain valuable experience particularly for green collar jobs.
- La Piana Consulting cites **new technologies and online platforms** for volunteering as an important new development. In their research for the James Irvine Foundation, they identified rising interest in civic engagement and volunteerism as an emerging trend that impacts how nonprofits do business in the future.

- A **generational shift** is occurring. A large number of “boomers” (people in their 50s and 60s) are contemplating retirement and looking for new ways to use their time and stay active. The generational shift also means new ways of communicating and getting things done for an emerging generation of leaders who grew up with technology and are more likely to associate with a cause or issue than a particular organization.
- We have also noticed changes in how people think about volunteering and how they use their time. People are less likely to make a long-term commitment to one organization and are more likely to engage in **episodic volunteering** with one or more organizations. They are more demanding in wanting to know a **specific time commitment and the outcome**. Some organizations have had success planning **family-oriented volunteer activities** or activities for **affinity groups**.

All of these trends—in whatever degree they exist in your community—require all of us to rethink the old ways of recruiting and managing volunteers. This is not because engaging volunteers is just a good thing to do or “free” labor, but because highly skilled volunteers are critical to achieving your organization’s mission and to building a foundation that will allow your organizations to thrive in the future.

Volunteerism 2.0 highlights innovative examples and will challenge you to think creatively about how your organization can involve skilled volunteers. The report is divided into the following sections with advice and examples:

Open to Possibilities *featuring* **Sierra Streams Institute (CA)**

Innovation Engine *featuring* **Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy (MI)**

Mission Critical Work *featuring* **New Generation Energy (MA) and Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement**

Volunteers and Interns *featuring* **The Biodiversity Project (IL)**

Overcoming Staff Resistance

Hiring a Volunteer Coordinator

Open to Possibilities

Rather than Limiting What Volunteers Can Do

Although it is important to have some structure in place that support volunteer activities, successful programs prioritize ways to learn about volunteers' interests and look for ways to match them up with the needs of the organization. They listen and work at being open to new ideas.

At the **Sierra Streams Institute** in California, volunteers have played a key role in stream monitoring for many years. More than 35 volunteers, many of them scientists, do regular monthly monitoring that helps Sierra Streams Institute better understand the health of the watershed and the impact of its work.

The success of this initial program created a high level of trust in volunteers and interest in finding opportunities to take advantage of their skills and experiences. Executive director Joanne Hild emphasizes that they take time to get to know their volunteers, and find out their interests and what they're good at so they can develop mutually beneficial projects.

Today, volunteer talent fills roles that may have been considered not possible in the past. Many experienced Sierra Streams Institute volunteers work with staff scientists to lead weekly training sessions for other volunteers. In addition, over 20 volunteers, including taxonomists, artists, and writers also produced *The Bug Book* for Sierra Streams Institute. This comprehensive guide to aquatic macroinvertebrates in California and western North America now generates income for Sierra Streams Institute.

"People literally walk in the door and say I want to help. We interview them and figure out how their skills can best be put to work," said executive director Joanne Hild, Sierra Streams Institute.

One single volunteer can also have a significant organizational impact. **Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement** (Iowa CCI) has had a long history of grassroots activism. Several years ago one of Iowa CCI's members—a nurse and family farmer—got involved because she was concerned about large-scale farming in her community. She rallied her neighbors, recruited 110 members, and eventually successfully stopped the "factory farm." Since then, this volunteer has become a statewide leader helping others lead campaigns. She is now on Iowa CCI's board where she has increased her overall giving by tenfold and cultivated other leaders.



The Bug Book was an amazing collaboration of many talented volunteers. It's a great resource that we now sell.

— Joanne Hild, Executive Director,
Sierra Streams Institute
(formerly Friends of Deer Creek)

Volunteers as Your Innovation Engine

Today's volunteers are eager for a challenge with clear results. They want to create something new or solve problems. Corporation for National and Community Service research found that volunteers who engage in less challenging activities are less likely to continue volunteering the following year.

Only 53 percent of volunteers who did “general labor” activities continued volunteering the following year. By contrast, 74 percent of volunteers performing professional or more highly-skilled activities continued volunteering.



74 percent of volunteers performing professional or more highly-skilled activities continued volunteering

“People are an organization’s competitive advantage. We also realized that volunteers are key to us achieving our mission, so now we are building relationships—much like we do with donors—and offering people a way to really make a difference.”

—Rolf von Walthausen, Volunteer Coordinator, Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy

Like many land trusts, the **Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy** in Michigan has involved volunteers since it was founded in 1991. Volunteers are involved in activities common to many land trusts (and other environmental and conservation organizations): land stewardship, staffing events, helping with mailings and other administrative tasks. They hired a volunteer coordinator in 2007 and with his support and urging the organization thinks more broadly and creatively about how community members can support its mission. Now volunteers help out with communications, fundraising, and land protection.

One way volunteers make a difference is innovation. In one case a local township approached the Conservancy about the removal of old structures on land recently preserved. A volunteer team working on the project advised turning the demolition into a “green” project whereby the “highest and best reuse” of materials was considered first. The proposal was approved and a great success with a lot less material ending up in the local landfill.

The volunteer-inspired effort garnered a significant amount of press, helped educate the community about sustainability, and was a wise use of resources. Without the volunteer input and expertise the project would never have happened. Other volunteers have suggested shoreline monitoring and two kayakers approached them about monitoring three islands in one of the local lakes. Previously, Conservancy staff had borrowed a boat and done it themselves. “This initiative from volunteers has led to recommendations that we place signs along the shore so boaters and swimmers are able to identify and use the land that’s protected—something we hadn’t thought of before!” said Rolf von Walthausen, Volunteer Coordinator.

Volunteers for Mission Critical Needs Rather than an “Add-on”

Volunteers can provide what your organization needs now—marketing, program delivery and support, writing, researching, fundraising, and high-level financial legal and technical assistance.

The Boston-based **New Generation Energy** is a good example of this shift. It provides investment and donation options to individuals, businesses, and foundation in the areas of renewable energy, conservation, and the environment. From issuing Renewable Energy Investment Notes to growing its Corporate Partners Program, the small organization does it with the help of a cadre of high-level volunteers. If you check their website you will see announcements for specific volunteer positions with titles such as a Community Lending Program Intern or a Marketing and Publicity Coordinator. Elevating the job title helps volunteers build their resume and reflects the high value the organization places on their responsibilities.

“Our volunteers and interns help us in many ways from high-level marketing strategy, to installing energy meters. As a lightly staffed organization, volunteers are how we carry out our mission. They’re doing energy assessments, helping shelters go green, and promoting NGE’s programs.”

— Karla Franco, Associate Director,
New Generation Energy

**Community Lending
Program Intern**

Editor

**Development and
Outreach Intern**

Photographer

**Marketing and
Publicity
Coordinator**

Scientist

Volunteers or Interns?

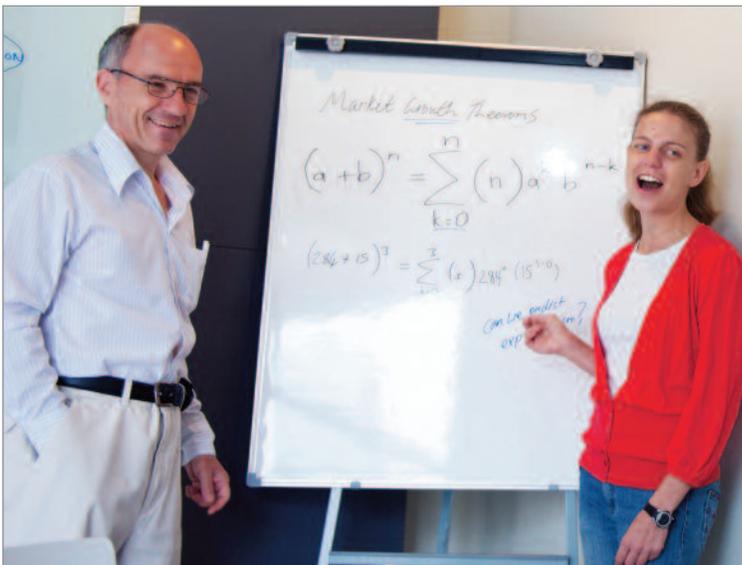
The difference between volunteers and interns is minimal for the nonprofit sector.¹ Developing an internship opportunity is one way to package what may be short-term or highly focused activity that will attract a volunteer with a specialized skill.

“We do a thorough orientation and make sure they [interns] have clear tasks. It requires some upfront hand holding, but then they take off on their own. It is exciting to see them gain confidence and develop their skills in a way that benefits the organization.”

— Jennifer Browning, Executive Director, Biodiversity Project

Interns are typically students, recent graduates, or sometimes individuals in the middle of a career change who are seeking to gain or try out new skills or knowledge. We ask, is that really different from many “volunteers?” Students often receive credit for their work and have a university-based advisor. In some cases, an intern is able to give a more intensive set of hours than a volunteer. Interns and volunteers both need a job title and description, an orientation, and on-going guidance. Hours for both interns and volunteers should be tracked, and they should both deserve recognition and whatever benefits your organization offers.

The Chicago-based **Biodiversity Project** plans for 2-3 interns per year to help them accomplish their mission. Sometimes these interns are college students or recently-graduated interns, but they may also be volunteers in mid-career. In one case, an intern was a former accountant from a large national consulting firm who went back to school for a degree in environmental management. He ended up redoing the organization’s entire financial management system.



“You really have to be committed to managing interns,” emphasized Jennifer Browning, Executive Director. “We do a thorough orientation and make sure they have clear tasks. It requires some upfront hand holding, but then they take off on their own. It is exciting to see them gain confidence and develop their skills in a way that benefits the organization.”

1 The U.S. Department of Labor is currently reviewing the need for guidance on internships in the nonprofit sector. Please visit <http://www.dol.gov/whd> for more information or check with a nonprofit attorney.

Overcoming Staff Resistance

Even with innovative examples like those highlighted in this report, you may face resistance from staff at your own organization. For many groups, especially larger ones, the biggest challenge is developing an organizational culture that fosters the kind of creative thinking and flexibility needed for involving higher-level volunteers. We often hear that staff are resistant because they view volunteers as more work or not qualified to take on higher-level responsibilities.

In one case, a volunteer coordinator came to ICL because she felt her organization had reached a plateau in terms of staff support for the volunteer program—and with some staff, a wall of resistance. Staff members were more likely to respond to placements for volunteers doing more traditional tasks such as stuffing envelopes and clean-ups. Few of them jumped on offers from highly-skilled, professional volunteer candidates, or proactively identified volunteer positions that required a unique skill set or experience, despite encouragement to do so.

To help shift the organization’s culture to “Volunteers 2.0,” the volunteer coordinator partnered with ICL to open dialogue, invite staff to air their concerns, and grow interest in using more highly-skilled volunteers. In short, the strategy included:

- Inviting all staff to an interactive “lunch and learn” event on using volunteers;
- Convening the management team to specifically address managers’ concerns about volunteer engagement in high-impact areas, and their role in making that happen; and
- Encouraging volunteer program staff to re-visit their assumptions about staff resistance and better respond to staff members’ needs related to the placement process, orientation, and supervision.

The result was greater understanding throughout the organization about the opportunities and concerns, more managers’ buy-in, and a plan to shift the team’s approach to meet the needs of managers and professional volunteers.



Tips for Overcoming Resistance:

- A commitment to volunteerism starts at the top. How has your board, executive director, and lead staff endorsed the role of volunteers as mission-critical? Are you building volunteer engagement into job descriptions and performance reviews and showcasing teams or managers who use volunteer talent well?
- Is it really resistance? Identify what kinds of support staff need to help them identify non-traditional volunteer roles and to work with them.
- Ask questions. Use a process of mutual learning to open up a dialogue about possible strategies for involving volunteers. Convene managers who work with volunteers to discuss their concerns, success stories, and challenges they’ve faced.

Hiring a Volunteer Coordinator

According to the Corporation for National and Community Service, approximately one-third of volunteers drop out of service each year. The most common reason for not continuing to volunteer was because of a bad experience related to poor management practices. This bad experience also made them less likely to volunteer for other organizations.

To sustain and build an effective volunteer program requires investing time and resources that lead to good volunteer management practices, and that often means a dedicated staff person. The question of when is the “right” time to hire a volunteer coordinator is a difficult one. Like the development of any new staff position it should be considered carefully in relation to the organization’s overall goals and financial position. Here are three questions help your organization make the right decision:

1. Does a strong organizational commitment to volunteers exist at every level? For some organizations, the importance of community outreach and community engagement become such critical components of achieving their mission that the need becomes obvious and is shared by all board and staff members. “How can we not have a volunteer coordinator?” becomes the question rather than whether they should. Figuring out the steps to make it happen is often built into a strategic plan.
2. Are your volunteers and staff currently receiving the level of support and investment that is commensurate with their value to the organization? Think of volunteers as “donors of talent” (they may also become some of your best financial contributors) who are potential leaders.

Like “donors of money,” they require regular communication, support, appreciation, and need to be tracked. In short, what’s valued in an organization is managed.

3. Is a non-paid volunteer coordinator an option for your organization? For many small environmental and conservation organizations, hiring a paid volunteer coordinator is not realistic. With the proper systems and supervision in place, however, developing a volunteer as a volunteer coordinator can make a significant difference. This role is ideal for someone willing to make a year-long commitment (or longer) and is preferably someone who has volunteered with the organization. Many organizations also employ Americorps members as a volunteer coordinator.

The Friends of the Wissahickon (FOW) in Pennsylvania hired its first volunteer coordinator in 2007 when there were 260 volunteers. Today, there are over 540 volunteers and the average number of volunteer hours has increased.

The Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy first hired a part-time volunteer coordinator to work exclusively with its stewardship team. At that time there were approximately 30 regular volunteers. A year later GTRLC recognized the need to increase the role of volunteers throughout the organization so he became a full-time staff member with Communications and Outreach assisting volunteers and staff in all departments. In 2010, GTRLC had over 200 regular volunteers and several hundred more engaged on a periodic basis.

Take the Next Step

We hope the examples highlighted in this report will inspire your organization to engage volunteers in new and creative ways. While the basics of managing a volunteer program may remain unchanged (see box on p.10), recent trends and the economy require all of us to re-examine how we can seek out and be open to the interests and skills of a changing volunteer work force. As many groups have demonstrated, involving skilled volunteers and interns in high-level, mission-critical activities is possible—perhaps even a necessity if we are to thrive well in to the future.

The lessons from the organizations we have highlighted can guide you in developing an effective and robust volunteer program. The chart below, “What Distinguishes Volunteerism 2.0?” summarizes those lessons for you. Use the chart below and the questions on the next page to deepen the conversation about volunteers and interns with your executive director, board, staff, and current volunteers:

What Distinguishes Volunteerism 2.0?

	Volunteerism 1.0	Volunteerism 2.0
Volunteer work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low-skill “Nice to do” work Often repetitive events or activities Supports staff Spells out tasks Recognition in newsletters and at banquets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High-skill, professional Mission critical work Often intensive in a shorter-period of time Works side-by side with staff Challenges to solve or innovate Recognition outside the organization, career development & networking
Volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trusts organizations Altruistic More individual activity More long-term 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trusts results Expects mutual benefit More social, family, or group activity More episodic
Organizational approach to volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Add on” resource Left to chance Structured roles Sharp volunteer-staff line Viewed as free labor Only involved in a few areas Championed by individuals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planned resource Managed as a core strategy Flexible roles, while strategic Few boundaries on volunteer roles Viewed as donors of talent Involved as an integral part of the culture Championed by top staff and the board

Questions for Discussion

1. What are our volunteer “success stories?” What have we learned about successfully involving volunteers?
2. What high-level volunteer activities would really make a difference at our organization? (Brainstorm a list without placing limits on the possibilities or saying, “...but we tried that and....”)
3. To what extent does a “culture of volunteerism” exist at our organization? Does the board and lead staff endorse volunteer involvement, and are the necessary resources available to support a volunteer program?
4. How open and flexible are we to adapting volunteer opportunities, or creating new ones, based on the interests and skills of the volunteers we attract?
5. What is one thing we can do in the next six months that will help us increase the profile of volunteers at our organization and create new opportunities for involvement in the future?

Some ways you can build basic volunteer management practices into your organizational culture include:

- Consider volunteers when you are doing strategic planning: in the research phase, be sure to survey current and prospective volunteers about why they serve and what interests them most.
- Coordinate volunteer recruitment with your membership and fundraising campaigns.
- Add volunteer recruitment to the “fundraising and friend-raising” roles of your board members.
- When thinking about performance evaluation for staff, develop a process for volunteers as well.
- Recognize volunteers on your website, at special events, in your press releases and in your newsletter, and bring them to professional meetings for networking benefits
- Include the number of volunteers and hours of service in your evaluation metrics.
- Identify needs for specialized expertise, such as financial management, legal, scientific, etc.
- Involve the whole organization in volunteer orientation and training – make a schedule that involves meeting all key staff, as well as board members.

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Organizations Highlighted in this Report:

Biodiversity Project Chicago, IL	http://www.biodiversityproject.org
Friends of the Wissahickon Philadelphia, PA	http://www.fow.org
Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy Traverse City, MI	http://www.gtrlc.org
Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement Des Moines, IA	http://www.iowacci.org
New Generation Energy Boston, MA	http://newgenerationenergy.org
Sierra Streams Institute Nevada City, CA	http://www.friendsofdeercreek.org

Resources

Institute for Conservation Leadership	http://www.icl.org
Vantage Point (formerly Volunteer Vancouver)	http://www.thevantagepoint.ca
Energize, Inc.	www.energizeinc.com



INSTITUTE
FOR CONSERVATION
LEADERSHIP

6930 Carroll Avenue, Suite 1050
Takoma Park, MD 20912
301.270.2900

13 S. Willson Avenue, Suite 9
Bozeman, MT 59715
406.582.1838

www.icl.org

