(VIRTUAL) VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT GUIDE

With the world turning virtual, from schools to yoga classes to family parties, your nonprofit may be facing a similar new adventure: how to manage volunteers in a virtual setting. You're in luck! Fandom Forward has been an entirely remote operation, both for paid staff and volunteers, for 15+ years. Along the way, we've developed some tips and tricks that may help you!

Volunteers are the life-blood of any nonprofit organization. Bringing virtual volunteers into your community opens up so many wonderful possibilities for what your organization can accomplish. So, without further ado, here are the Fandom Forward's virtual volunteer management tips!

This guide was written by Sara Mortensen, Fandom Forward's volunteer Campaigns Manager. She has experience being a virtual volunteer herself, being a volunteer who manages other volunteers, and being a paid staff member who manages virtual volunteers at the nonprofit she works at full-time. If you have any questions, email her at *saramrts23@gmail.com*.

WHY VIRTUAL VOLUNTEERS ARE RAD

Depending on how your organization operated pre-pandemic, the first necessary step may be a re-framing of your organization's mindset around volunteers.

> Convey your mission in a way that inspires others to help, and then let them help you!

If your nonprofit is anything like ours, you have big dreams and a small staff — whether "small" for you means four people, 10 people, or 50 people — who would never be able to accomplish all those dreams by themselves. This is the main reason why virtual volunteers are rad: they open up your organization to so many new possibilities and expand your impact. It doesn't matter where in the world your volunteers are, as long as they're passionate and committed. Speaking from experience, it is the best feeling when you start to see people from all over the world come together and rally behind your mission.

Think of it this way: if your organization values efficiency, you are going to need volunteer help to be as efficient as possible.

> Asking for help is a rebellious act in a culture that tells us successful people (or organizations) must "do it on their own." Strive to be a little rebellious.

STEP 1: SETTING EXPECTATIONS

Great, so you have volunteers ready to help. What now?

Tip: Clearly communicate your expectations for these volunteer positions. Fandom Forward's method and recommendation is to create a job description for volunteer positions. This description should have a clear title, outline of duties, and the number of hours per week a volunteer should expect to commit to this position. For example:

[Position Title]
Hours: [Number of expected volunteer hours per week]

[General Description of the Role: Who does this position report to and work with within the organization? How does this role support the mission of the organization? What are the general duties and expectations?]

Reports to: [Position Title]

Responsibilities:
[List the specific duties that will be expected of someone taking on this role]

Qualifications:
[List the specific qualifications that will be expected of someone taking on this role]

Tip: Integrate your volunteers into the staff structure. At Fandom Forward, we call the paid staff members "Senior Staff" and everyone else is referred to as "Staff." We do this because the volunteers truly help us accomplish our work and this structure reflects that. This also empowers volunteers to take ownership over projects. With virtual volunteers, it's likely you'll see an influx of younger people (high school or college students in particular) looking to develop their skills and gain experience to put on their resume. Creating specific job titles and this integration into the staff structure helps them do just that.

Example: To help integrate volunteers into your staff structure, we recommend giving them email addresses for your organization, if possible. This can easily be done through Gmail! In addition, create organizational charts to represent the true nature of your staff, volunteers included. This helps volunteers understand their place and importance within your organization as well as re-frame your entire staff structure to include volunteers.

STEP 2: CREATING INFRASTRUCTURE

Expectations: Set. Next up: Infrastructure. To be honest, this part can feel like a bit of a hurdle to get over. It takes a lot of thought and time to set up entirely new systems and procedures to get volunteers set up to do work, but it is absolutely worth the time it takes.

Tip: Give volunteers the tools they need to be successful, and more importantly, self-sufficient. This can look like a lot of different things. Do volunteers need a master spreadsheet in which to write social media copy? Do they need a guide for how to develop their own campaigns step-by-step? Do they need a resource document for how to write curriculum? Take some time to think through what they need and how they will access it.

Example: Google Drive is a wonderful tool for creating spreadsheets, documents, slides, and forms that multiple volunteers can access and edit at the same time. So much easier than emailing documents back and forth to each other!

Tip: Create a system for regularly checking in with volunteers. This is important for making sure you have consistent communication with volunteers in a virtual setting. Whatever system you set up, we recommend checking in with them if they are unresponsive for two weeks. You might be reluctant to do this because it can feel like nagging, but after years of experience, we find that volunteers really appreciate the check-in. Further, it helps volunteers truly understand the importance of their work to their organization, and that their contributions have been missed.

Example: Within our departments, we set up Office Hours. Each Monday morning, an email is sent with a fun check-in question. We set the expectation that all volunteers be online for a consistent two hours a week, and that they will respond to the check-in email during this time. We are, of course, understanding if something comes up or they need to change their Office Hours. In this case, we ask that they communicate with us beforehand. If they are unresponsive for 2-3 weeks, send them a positive, light check-in email to make sure they are okay.

Tip: Look into ways to easily chat with volunteers. Email is great, but can sometimes be overwhelming. You might also want a faster way to communicate with volunteers.

Example: We use GChat to quickly communicate tasks or questions to volunteers. You can set up certain chats so groups of volunteers can also communicate quickly with each other (social media team, campaigns team, grants team, etc.)

Note: The infrastructure you create will be ever-evolving, and you should be transparent about that with volunteers up-front. Especially if this is your first time implementing virtual volunteers, let them know that this is an experiment and thank them for their patience in testing out these new systems with you.

STEP 3: ONBOARDING VOLUNTEERS

Expectations: Set. Infrastructure: Created. Next step: Onboarding!

Tip: Just like with a job, interview volunteers for their position! Designate a person (could be a Volunteer Manager–see the first tip under Step #4) to receive applications. This person can communicate with other staff members about moving forward with an application. An interview sets the volunteer's expectations that this is something to take seriously. It will also help you weed out unreliable candidates!

Example: We recommend treating these interviews as a get-to-know-you chat. Ask about why they're interested in this position and what they're hoping to learn. It's also important to specifically ask them about their experience working in virtual environments and how they plan to keep themselves motivated in this setting.

Tip: Create standard procedures for onboarding the volunteers. How do you want to onboard volunteers? With an email? A live video meeting with their supervisor? Whatever it is, work on standardizing the procedure so everyone gets the same experience. Think deeply about what is the most important information they need as they start volunteering.

Example: *At Fandom Forward, our Team Leads send welcome emails to new volunteers. These emails include resources they need to get started (links to org charts or how to add their information to our volunteer directory), an explanation of Office Hours, the importance of communication in a virtual setting, our email etiquette procedure (always reply all!), who to go to if they have any Human Resources type issues, and resources for them to get started on their actual volunteer work. Pro tip: Save these email templates in a Google Doc so all you have to do is copy/paste for new volunteers.*

Tip: Be a little wary of volunteers wanting to do the same thing as their muggle job.* This is not to say this situation would never work out. But we've found that there's a difference between volunteers who are seeking mentorship and guidance in gaining new skills and volunteers who want to lend their expertise to an organization. Again, it's all about setting expectations up front. With some positions, you need expertise and a volunteer who can just run with tasks. Other positions may allow you to help volunteers navigate a learning curve. When creating new positions, think deeply about which type it is and clearly communicate it during the interview process.

Example: *The volunteer who is writing this guide (Sara, Fandom Forward's volunteer Campaigns Manager) manages the administration, communications, and curriculum at her muggle job. She would never want to, for example, be the Social Media Team Lead for Fandom Forward because that is a huge part of her day job and she would feel extremely drained doing that for two organizations. This is a personal preference, of course, but over the years we've seen this become an issue for more than one volunteer. It's just something to keep in mind and be open and communicative about during the onboarding process!*

*Other people may refer to this as a "day job."
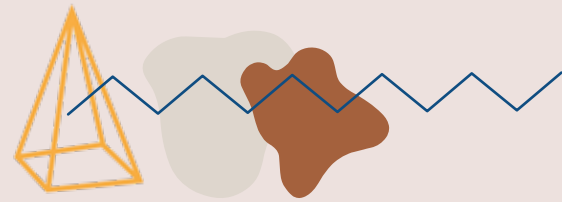
STEP #4: CULTIVATING LEADERSHIP

At Fandom Forward, we are all about leadership development. We have a whole annual conference devoted to leadership training. It is a wonderful gift to both your organization and to the volunteers themselves to provide leadership opportunities and allow volunteers to grow their skills while expanding the capacity of your organization at the same time.

Tip: Elevate volunteers to leadership positions. When you notice volunteers who are passionate and reliable, consider how you might be able to offer them a position involving leadership. Do you have a social media copywriter who is always on top of writing posts? Do they have initiative to get things done with little supervision? Are they communicative? Maybe they'd be a great Social Media Team Lead!

Example: *At Fandom Forward, our structure goes something like Directors (paid staff) supervise volunteer managers who supervise team leads who supervise their specific teams.*

Tip: You can never have too many volunteers. When there are too many volunteers for paid staff to handle, this is what volunteer leadership positions are for! It may sound odd to have volunteers managing other volunteers, but it is absolutely possible and effective when you clearly communicate expectations and find volunteers who are passionate, driven, and, most importantly, reliable. In the above example, you can see that with this structure, paid staff mostly have to concern themselves with supervising a volunteer manager and a few team leads, rather than 50+ volunteers at one time. Volunteer management becomes much more manageable when you have help!

Note: Every new volunteer you bring on has the ability to increase the capacity of your organization. Not only with the time they devote to volunteering, but they may donate to your fundraising campaigns and will probably become an outspoken advocate for your work and mission, all of which is helpful for expanding your reach and impact.

Example: Since the beginning of COVID-19, organizations have seen an influx of volunteers wanting to help them virtually, which is incredible! It may seem overwhelming, but don't stop accepting new volunteers. Remember, not everyone who expresses interest in volunteering will actually follow-through. At every stage of the process (initial interest, interview, onboarding, actually starting to volunteer), there will be some percentage of volunteers who drop off. So the more you bring on in the first stage, the more you'll have in the end.

Also, consider the fact that there is no task too small to give to volunteers. You may have a task you could use help with and think, "No one is going to want to do this." But you never know! Some people absolutely love data entry, or calling members, or organizing files. You'll never know unless you ask. And as long as you communicate how these small or mundane tasks still matter, we're sure someone will be willing to help.

Tip: Default to trusting volunteers. This is a big one, and something that is hard for a lot of people to grasp. After doing this for 15+ years, however, we whole-heartedly believe in the idea that you can and should default to trusting your volunteers. Of course, this doesn't mean you should give anyone access to your organization's most sensitive information. But if you have a task that needs to be done that involves giving a volunteer an organizational log-in to a website, give it a try! We've found that most people can be trusted. If anything goes wrong, you simply remove the volunteer from that task or the organization. However, most times it will go right. You'll be able to pass those tasks along to volunteers and free up your time for things volunteers truly can't help with.

Example: Maybe you want to start utilizing Instagram Stories for your organization, but you really don't have the time. You might feel hesitant to let them run free on the platform, but give it a try! Set expectations and give guidelines to your volunteers. Check on their work and provide feedback when needed. If something goes terribly wrong, it's easy enough to change your Instagram password so volunteers can't log back in.

Tip: Mention publicly, and often, that your organization is volunteer-led. This will convey how meaningful volunteers are to your mission, both to the volunteers themselves and to your wider community. It will also attract new volunteers to your organization because they'll immediately know that their contributions are valued!

Example: If your newsletters, blogs, or emails are written by volunteers, consider adding a line that says something like, "This blog was written by [Name] & [Name], Fandom Forward volunteers! If you're interested in helping us write content like this, [insert contact information]." Note: This may also make your supporters a bit more forgiving of typos or small errors if they realize that the only way you can get the work done is with volunteer support.

STEP #5: THE CHALLENGES

You might be thinking, "Okay, but what's the catch?" Besides the fact that it will undoubtedly take time and energy to manage volunteers, there are a few challenges you may encounter.

Tip: Prepare yourself for the "quality" of work to not be up to your standards. There are a few things to unpack here. If you are passing off a task to a volunteer, the first thing to keep in mind is that you have much more knowledge about the project, and the entire history of your organization than your volunteers. You may get a project back and think, "Oh, no... I could've done this so much better and so much faster." Resist the temptation to do it yourself. Instead, take the time to give them feedback and instill some of that knowledge they need to do even better the next time around.

> *Example: Perhaps your organization is preparing a toolkit. Hopefully, you now have volunteers to write, edit, and design this toolkit. You may experience a feeling that you're losing control over the final product because you're no longer working on every step of the project. But you should always remain the final check on a project before it goes live. That way, the time you need to spend on the project is drastically reduced without giving up control, freeing you up to focus on larger strategy and tasks that you can't assign to volunteers. Again, after you've done the final check, circle back with the volunteers and give them your feedback.*

Another thing to ask yourself if you feel quality is lacking: Is the quality really not up to par, or is it just not matching your preference? For example, maybe you're editing social media posts and you come across a post that is written in the voice of your organization and there's nothing grammatically wrong with it... but it's not how you would phrase it. You may feel an impulse to change it. Take a moment to realize that and sit with it. If there's nothing technically wrong with it, consider leaving it as is. This empowers the volunteers and opens up many more voices to truly be a part of the conversation in your work. Whether social media, a toolkit, a grant, or an email to a potential partner, a diversity of voices is such a valuable tool for any organization, so whenever possible empower those voices.

Tip: Recruitment can take time. This can be difficult, especially when it feels like you need the volunteers right now, but it's the simple truth. When interviewing and onboarding volunteers, we recommend letting their interest guide their work first and foremost.

> *Example: Perhaps you have two volunteer positions posted on your website and one is higher-need than the other. It may be tempting to try to coax new volunteers into the second, high-need position. It may take longer, but it's worth it to wait for the volunteers who are truly interested in that position. The recruitment time can feel like it drags on, but once you get a team going (and in our experience, you'll get an influx of applications after months of waiting for no discernible reason) it's magical!*

Tip: If there aren't enough volunteers to take the lead, don't do the thing. This is another big one that can be hard for organizations to grasp. Nonprofits are full of passionate employees who work extremely hard. When volunteers leave, especially those in leadership positions, paid staff may feel responsible for taking up their tasks so they can maintain projects and expectations. Unless it is an absolutely essential function of your organization, put these duties on hold until you can find another volunteer/volunteer team to take the tasks back up again. As we've mentioned many times, volunteers add capacity to your organization, thus allowing you to shift your own tasks or duties. When your duties have been shifted because of volunteer support, and then you try to resume those tasks again when volunteers leave, it can be completely overwhelming.

Example: Maybe you suddenly lose a bunch of social media volunteers for some reason. Instead of picking up the slack yourself, cut down your social media production in this time and only pick back up when you have volunteers to support. You can even use this as a volunteer recruitment tactic: "Have you noticed we've been quieter on Twitter? That's because we rely on volunteers to help our organization with social media, and need more people to join our team! [Apply here]."

STEP #6: THE FUN TIMES
One of the best things about volunteering is meeting other volunteers and forming new connections and friendships.

Tip: Provide volunteers with opportunities to bond as a community. When volunteers know and like who they're working with, it's more fun for everyone and teams become more productive!

Example: Set up monthly brainstorming meetings for volunteers to talk through ideas (with social distancing in mind). If you're working on a project together, set up working meetings where you hop on a video call and work in real-time. Host game or movie nights. Create a Facebook Group or Discord channel where volunteers can easily chat with one another. Whatever it is, give volunteers space to know one another as humans rather than names on an email address!

Even after 16 tips, there's more we could talk about in terms of virtual volunteer management. We'll leave you with one final tip: When you're reaching out to volunteers via email, especially if you're asking them to help with a task, put their name in the subject line. For whatever reason, it's 85%** more likely that they'll respond.

We hope this gives you a basis to work from and a chance to welcome virtual volunteers into your organization. If you leave with anything, remember: let people help if they want to. Set expectations. Be communicative. Provide feedback.

IF YOU'D LIKE TO TALK FURTHER, FEEL FREE TO EMAIL: SARAMRTS23@GMAIL.COM

** Not an actual data point but we're willing to bet it's pretty close.