VOLUNTEERS AND PAID STAFF: EXPLORING THE ISSUES

Thoughts for organisations considering the creation of volunteer roles where there were once paid staff.

Background

The challenges facing organisations during the coronavirus pandemic are huge and no doubt in time we will see the devastating impact Covid-19 has had on a range of third sector organisations (charities and social enterprises). Loss of jobs is inevitable for many.

Volunteering is defined as "*the commitment of time and energy for the benefit of society and the community, the environment or individuals outside (or in addition to) one's immediate family. It is unpaid and undertaken freely and by choice*." Join in, Get Involved: Build a Better Future Volunteering Strategy for NI, 2012.

Volunteering has been critical to the pandemic response, and the contribution of so many people has been invaluable. However, as organisations attempt to recover and rebuild, we consider the issues around involving volunteers in the context of job losses. Clear principles should be in place in any organisation for deciding what is the role of a volunteer and what is the role of paid staff.

Job Substitution

Job substitution is a difficult and complex area. In an article in Third Sector, Rob Jackson used different language to tease out some of the issues in this area. He suggested using the terms displacement and replacement instead of substitution.

- *Displacement is when paid roles are purposefully removed with the intention that volunteers can be brought in to do the work instead.*

- *Replacement is when work previously done by paid roles is reallocated to volunteers. For example, an organisation is forced to cut paid roles because of funding changes, so it recruits volunteers to deliver the service in a different way for the continued benefit of its clients.*

If paid roles are being purposefully displaced so volunteers can do the work instead, concerns should be raised. As well as the issue of removing people's livelihoods, two major errors of judgement about volunteering are probably being made: volunteers are a free or cost-saving option; it is easy to recruit people who will volunteer to take on those paid roles and do it for no reimbursement."

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The key issue with replacement is that the service provided should not be the same when provided by volunteers as it is when provided by paid staff. This could be because the service is provided in a different way involving a team of people instead of one individual or it could be that the service is provided for a shorter period of time. This could create the need for greater coordination and management of volunteers.

Thinking in this way also explains why context in these decisions is crucial. For example, if a volunteer in a hospital setting is being asked to assist a patient with washing, it is likely that someone's paid job is being displaced. In a community-based setting in a voluntary organisation which involves longer term volunteers, this may be regarded as a normal part of the role.

Consideration also needs to be given to the potential to stray across the line between a volunteer role and the potential creation of an employment contract. If the role is too formal and too much like a paid job that can cause confusion. Similarly, if there is high value training given in return for a specific number of volunteer hours this could be problematic- see Volunteers and the Law Information Sheet.

However, it is also possible that by providing a service involving volunteers the service is enhanced because volunteers have a different motivation and approach, for example the additional support provided by a regular, volunteer driver as opposed to the one-off service provided via a taxi. It is also possible that by involving volunteers a service can be continued even in a different way.

Key Issues to Consider

There is no doubt that the organisation must start by asking why they are considering the involvement of volunteers in the first place. If an organisation can show reasons that acknowledge the benefits to the organisation and the volunteer, then a good volunteer policy should be developed and implemented with a range of management procedures.

See https://iiv.investinginvolunteers.org.uk/ to explore the Investing in Volunteers Quality Standard for involving volunteers that outlines practices that should be in place for effective volunteer involvement. Remember that managing volunteers is not always carried out by a paid member of staff. In some instances, this role in itself is a volunteer role.

The following is a **framework of questions** which each organisation should ask itself if it is considering involving volunteers where once there were paid staff. Questions will revolve around how the role is developed, the selection process chosen, the risk assessment framework and the training and support provided.

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- How has the need for the role been identified?
- Is a paid person already doing the role?
- Have paid staff been doing this role in the past?
- Is the role different to what was being done before?
- What is the organisation's reasons for involving volunteers?
- Is the role description clear?
- Are the responsibilities considered reasonable, how much time is required?
- Has a risk assessment been carried out on the role?
- Does the volunteer have the opportunity to opt out at every stage?
- Who will take responsibility for recruitment and selection of volunteers?
- Does the volunteer have adequate support while volunteering?
- What supervision will be in place? In particular does the volunteer have a clear link to someone with whom they can raise any concerns?
- Does the volunteer have the required training and skills?
- What if any is the regulatory framework?
- What insurance cover is required? There is a need to explore with the insurer that the volunteer role is appropriate.
- What are the boundaries and guidelines for the role?

Conclusion

Effective management, based on a clear value base, is the key to involving volunteers. By thinking through these questions and considering each individual context, organisations can decide if volunteer roles are appropriate and how they can be best managed.

Disclaimer

Reasonable precautions have been taken to ensure information in this publication is accurate. However, it is not intended to be legally comprehensive; it is designed to provide guidance in good faith without accepting liability. If relevant, we therefore recommend you take appropriate professional advice before taking any action on the matters covered herein.

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