

## Supporting Volunteers in Sport, Fitness & Recreation

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To state that volunteers are an indispensable resource for the sport, fitness and recreation industry is, to use a colloquial phrase, 'to quote the bleedin' obvious!'

It seems equally obvious however that in some ways the industry still doesn't manage volunteers as well as it could, or should.

Efforts are underway to address this, however. From Sport and Recreation Services within the Department of Communities establishing the Sport and Recreation Volunteer Reference Group through to the volunteer committee of the industry Skills Formation Strategy, the focus is clearly on volunteers.

The need to support, and better support, our volunteers is compelling.

According to the Australian Bureau of statistics (ABS 4441.0), 34.4% of all volunteering involvement in this country was for a sport/recreation organisation. The same ABS report, from 2006, identified approximately 1,758,000 sport volunteers nationally. The value of this to the economy is huge, with the published data using calculated estimates for volunteer wage rates.

*The Economic Value of Volunteering in Western Australia*, prepared for the Western Australian Department of Communities by the University of Melbourne, proposed an hourly rate of \$24.06 per volunteer hour in 2006. This is probably conservative when you take into account not only time, but resource costs incurred by volunteers.

In another report prepared by the University of Melbourne Economics Department, *The economic value of volunteering in Queensland* (updated 2008), the annual value of sport and recreation volunteering in Queensland was estimated at \$707M. This was the third highest figure for all sectors and the highest for private as opposed to public oriented organisations.

It's probably no surprise to learn that the Australian sport, recreation and fitness sectors' dependence on volunteers reflects a similar situation internationally.

Approximately 1.7m people volunteered for the Olympic Games and hosting communities during the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008 (Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games, 2008); a national population survey in England in 2002 identified that there were just under 6m sport volunteers over the age of 16, contributing over 1.2b hours; and in Germany a recent study identified over 1.8m volunteers operating within 19,345 Sports Clubs providing a total of 37m hours per month (Institute of Sport Economics and Sport Management).

Since the sport, fitness and recreation volunteer workforce is so significant, it might seem surprising that attracting and retaining volunteers continues to be a struggle for many organisations in our industry.

In a survey of sport and recreation organisations in 2008, the Skills Formation Strategy identified that a lack of staff (both volunteer and paid) was the third biggest impediment to organizational efficiency. Overseas again, a report for Sport England in 2002 by the Leisure Industries Research Centre, found 74% of respondents identified a lack of other people wanting to volunteer in their club as affecting their own voluntary work. In Germany, a 2007 survey by the Institute of Sport Economics and Sport Management found that the recruitment/retention of volunteers (board level/coaches/judges-referees) were 3 of the 4 top issues (including #1) affecting sports clubs.

So, how can the industry address this issue?

There's no simple answer, but the pressure is on to develop appropriate strategies. It's not simply an issue for us however, as the reliance on volunteers is certainly not a 'unique' feature of our industry. Significant volunteer workforces operate in areas such as emergency services, aged care, education and government.

There are certainly existing strategies that may not be common in our industry that we could look to develop. For example:

1. Virtual volunteers - to do newsletters, email marketing or website maintenance for example. Virtual volunteers don't need to attend meetings and can do their work in their own time as long as it meets deadlines.
2. Grey Nomads - With the aging population there is a significant focus on the use of grey nomads in meeting volunteer requirements. These people often bring with them significant and relevant skills. They may not be long term volunteers but their assistance could be valuable for specific projects/activities.
3. Young people – How much focus is there on the needs/interests of young people in volunteering? In 2005, the Russell Commission in the UK released A National Framework for Youth Action and Engagement in which the key theme for the Commission was the importance of involving young people themselves in the design and implementation of volunteering activity.

It's important that we look to other industries for ideas and guidance. Closer co-operation with these sectors through Volunteering Queensland and Volunteering Australia will assist us identify new and emerging trends and strategies and provide guidance on how best to implement them.

Better information about volunteers and their motivations, some of which will be identified by the current volunteer survey will also help.

The Skills Alliance will continue to liaise with industry about volunteer related issues and in coming months will be providing analysis of the current survey results as they become available.

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