Implementation: Creating a Strong Skills-Based Volunteering Program

The key to a successful implementation phase of a skills-based volunteering (SBV) or pro bono project is properly executing the selected project at-hand. At this point you have a strong understanding of what an SBV project includes, you've taken the appropriate steps to organize, identify and source your resources and needs, and now it's time to put your plan into action.

Project management will be a key component in implementing your SBV project. Project management is the discipline of planning, organizing, securing and managing resources to achieve specific goals. During this time, team members (including volunteers, nonprofit staff and an intermediary organization) refine content, determine project deliverables, objectives and milestones and continually touch base with project participants. The project manager, who is assigned to lead a probono volunteer or a team of volunteers, ensures all players are staying on task and working towards the common goal.

The implementation phase comes with its own set of challenges. First and foremost, it is essential that you don't begin executing your SBV program without taking the necessary steps to ensure your organization is prepared:

- Board and management is engaged
- The vision, mission and strategy of your organization is clearly stated
- Projects clearly defined as individual or group projects
- Volunteers are recruited and available
- Necessary equipment and budget available

Now that you're ready – it's time to implement. Let's discuss implementation in three sections: introduction, execution and evaluation.

Introduction Phase

First, it is strongly recommended that the project manager responsible for managing the volunteers and project at-large and the volunteer manager take time to introduce his or herself to the volunteers and let them mingle as a group in their working environment. A strong, cohesive team will be an efficient team.

Explain the organization's vision, strategy and programs to allow volunteers to understand the context of the project. This introduction phase will allow volunteers to assimilate into the organization's culture, form relationships with staff members they will be working alongside and translate their business skills into the nonprofit's needs. SBVs are crucial to the success of a project. In order to keep them properly engaged, it is recommend to involve them in project scoping and development of the work plan and deliverables. Involving volunteers in the entire process will help strengthen their commitment to the project and organization.

During this phase, the nonprofit will be able to set expectations for the organization and volunteers. All parties involved (staff, management, volunteers) need to understand the benefits and challenges of skills-based, probono work. Defining the project details, work plan, working agreement, project goals and measurable success factors upfront as a cohesive plan will kick-off a smooth running project. The working agreement will be the foundation of the project – and allow for proper management of work load and resources every step of the way.

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Below is a recap of these responsibilities.

Responsibilities of the volunteer:

- Learn the nonprofit sector and organization's language
- Proactively "onboard"
    - Understand the details of the organization
    - Meet project manager, nonprofit staff and key project players
    - Gather tools and useful resources
    - Understand the expectations of the nonprofit organization
- Participate in various steps of project scoping and finalization
    - Finalize project scoping
    - Develop work plan, deliverables and timeline
    - Define project roles
    - Define working agreement
    - Set realistic expectations

Responsibilities of the nonprofit organization:

- Train nonprofit staff and management about SBV
- Manage staff and management expectations
- Finalize details with recruited volunteers (e.g. project scope, work plan, deliverables, working agreement)
- Understand the volunteer's expectations
- Introduce the volunteer as a consultant working for free
- Educate volunteers in all facets of project
    - Nonprofit staff and management
    - Tools and resources available to volunteer
    - Working environment
    - Possible challenges and access to solutions/resources

Execution Phase

The key to the execution phase is properly monitoring all facets of the project to proactively address potential challenges. If possible, engage a volunteer manager or connect with an organization like HandsOn Network, the volunteer activation division of Points of Light, to ensure the efficient flow of all project phases. A HandsOn Network Action Center can help monitor the project and provide support to ensure that both the nonprofit and volunteers are attaining their goals.

The project manager is the ring leader of the execution phase. It is essential that they consult the documents established (e.g. work plan, timeline) to ensure that project participants are meeting deadlines and working collectively to reach the expected results.

It is recommended that project managers organize regularly-scheduled check-ins to discuss volunteer perceptions of progress, challenges to-date and future deliverables and deadlines:

- In-person meeting at least once every other week
- Weekly or bi-weekly conference calls
- Numerous, daily email exchanges

Evaluation and Ending Phase

At the completion of any volunteer project it is pertinent to do a thorough evaluation. The volunteer manager and/or supervisor should spend time with the nonprofit staff and volunteers discussing the impact of the project, reviewing successes/failures and having candid conversations to learn what went well and what could be revised for the next project. Collecting feedback verbatim will help build a compelling story when it is time to recruit more volunteers for future projects. Remember to be attentive and listen to suggestions. Keep the communication open with your board and management to share project results and discuss best practices for future projects.

In some instances, volunteers will end their work early due to other responsibilities, job pressure, etc. In this case it is even more important to get a complete and detailed view of their role in the project. Leaving the project before its completion will require an updated work plan, review of deliverables and direction for the replacement volunteer. This transition phase is crucial to ensuring long-term success for the project.

Important steps to take:

- Review project and determine next steps
- Evaluate short-term and long-term results based off measurable goals
- Determine proper project transition steps to nonprofit organization
- Gather and track volunteer feedback
- Develop project story, collect verbatim quotes, pictures, etc.
- Recognition and celebration of the volunteer work, skills and results

Tips for Flawless Implementation

- Communication with nonprofit staff and volunteers
- Focus on two to three smaller projects managed by a leader rather than taking on a large project first, remember: *slow and steady wins the race*
- Keep your volunteers motivated and engaged
- Structure projects and hold regular check-ins
- Make the project fun and attractive – remember you're depending on *volunteers*

Dos and Don'ts of a Successful Implementation Process

Do	Don't
Start small	Start a program if you're not prepared
Say no to a volunteer if it's not the right fit	Start a program without engaged volunteers
Get buy in from all parties	Just make a task list
Take time to manage project	Forget the volunteer isn't paid
Manage expectations with volunteers	Underestimate challenges
Communicate often, clearly and effectively	Reject feedback
Translate the nonprofit sector language	Fail to define goals
Give feedback, ask for feedback	
Share project results with board and management	
Recognize the work of the volunteer	
Write project content as a consulting mission	

HandsOn Network Action Centers have more great [skills-based and probono volunteer resources](#) to help you implement your projects. Find a [HandsOn Network Action Center](#) near you.