

Recognition: Evaluating and Celebrating the Story of Skills-Based Volunteers

Volunteers are essential for nonprofits to create positive change in the world. Recognizing and celebrating volunteers is necessary in order to retain, recruit and keep the overall work environment positive and appreciative. Sharing stories is one of the most effective ways to personally recognize and demonstrate the good work of your volunteers. Also, storytelling raises awareness of social problems at-hand and the work a nonprofit is doing to combat those issues. Often, this can result in increased donors and more fundraising dollars.

Recognition

The best way to recognize the work of a skills-based volunteer is to examine and compare the goals of a volunteer project with the measurable results. This evaluation can be two dimensional:

1. Effect on the volunteer and nonprofit organization
2. Positive change created in the community

Additional elements should also be mentioned including details about the specific skills the volunteer contributed to the project and the new knowledge and competencies that were introduced.

Hosting a “thank you” celebration at the conclusion of a project is a great way to formally recognize volunteers in a meaningful way and share the short and long-term results accomplished with the full group. Getting together in a group setting also encourages conversation and can serve as an additional touch point to gather feedback.

Below is a recap of what should be recognized:

- Project results and impact
- Skills and experience brought by skills-based volunteer
- Impact volunteer’s personality and skills had on the nonprofit organization
- New skills the volunteer has developed in a different working environment

Formal recognition events and vehicles (dependent on budget):

- Volunteer awards and certificates
- Breakfast, lunch or dinner with formal reception
- Agenda item during official board or management meeting
- Project reports and published documents from nonprofit organization
- Internal communication vehicles
- External communication vehicles (e.g. websites, Twitter, Facebook)
- Nominate your volunteers and organization for awards like the [Presidential Volunteer Service Award](#) or [Daily Point of Light Award](#).

Informal recognition:

- Day to day personal “thank you”
- Introduction of the volunteer, showcasing his or her skills and experience to other volunteers and staff
- Staff presentations, project updates in meetings
- Invitations to staff events unrelated to volunteer project when appropriate

Recognition has a short lifespan; therefore it should be done regularly and consistently. Before the project kick-off recognize the skills needed for previous projects to help set the bar high moving forward. Throughout project share project and volunteer advancement stories during staff and board meetings, brainstorm new ideas for moving the project forward and invite the volunteer to regular business unit meetings when appropriate. To wrap-up the project, present findings, solutions and results at a staff or board meeting. At the meeting, invite the volunteer to share his or her story. One of the key metrics to help staff understand the value of a volunteer is to share that value in terms of dollars.

Celebration

Celebrating a skills-based volunteer project and the accomplishments of volunteers is equally as important as recognizing their efforts. A celebration after the project is completed allows all involved to kick back, relax and enjoy the accomplishments of weeks and months of hard work.

Formal celebration ideas:

- National or global organization events
- National Volunteer Week
- National days of service

Informal celebration ideas:

- Internal gatherings for brunch, lunch
- Thank you notes from board, management and staff members
- Gift cards
- Free trainings, webinars, conferences
- Volunteer happy hour

Telling the Story

Skills-based and pro bono learning is a continual “learning by doing” exercise. Constant conversation and sharing of feedback between all parties is necessary for success and volunteer retention and recruitment. Open dialogue throughout a volunteer project will help you collect stories from the experience. Storytelling is one of the best ways to get more people excited about the project and engage volunteers.

Important components of storytelling:

- Volunteer project key messages
- Volunteer’s accomplishments, experience, how the project enabled them to grow
- Impact on the community or other individuals
- Difficulties faced and solutions
- Volunteer and nonprofit organization teamwork
- Value brought to the nonprofit organization
- Volunteer quotes, photos and video footage will bring extra life to your stories

Storytelling is not only a great way to celebrate and recognize your volunteers, but will help you get your volunteer project publicity. Sharing your story with the public will raise awareness, recruit volunteers and attract potential funders.

Ways to publicize your project:

- Internal and external newsletters
- Social media channels: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube
- Organization websites
- Official reports
- Outreach to local media outlets

If you are working with a corporate partner on your volunteer project it is important for them to also publicize where and when appropriate. Work together to ensure you both have appropriate logos, boilerplates, key messages, etc.

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.