

Rob Jackson



CUTS AND CHANGE AFTER C19

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In these circumstances please email
rob@robjacksonconsulting.com

Rob Jackson Consulting Ltd

Registered office:
9 Commerce Road, Lynchwood,
Peterborough
PE2 6LR
United Kingdom

Registered in England and Wales, No. 7561086

rob@robjacksonconsulting.com

www.rob@robjacksonconsulting.com

This ebook is dedicated to the many volunteers around the world who have stepped forward to support communities affected by Covid-19.

It is also dedicated to the thousands of leaders of volunteer engagement who support and enable many of these volunteers to have a positive impact in their communities. They are unsung heroes. Many have been furloughed or lost their jobs whilst others face an uncertain future in organisations that value donated money over donated time.

Whether volunteer or leader of volunteer engagement (or both), thank you.

We see you, we honour you and we stand with you.

INTRODUCTION

In May and June 2020 I published four articles on the [Rob Jackson Consulting Ltd blog](#) which looked at post-pandemic human resource planning issues for volunteering.

My goal was to help leaders of volunteer engagement: think about their roles in the Covid-19 'new normal'; reflect on how they are more important than ever to their organisations; and consider some of the complexities of deploying a different mix of paid staff and volunteers to meet organisational goals.

This free eBook reproduces those four blog posts, collated into one place and presented in what I hope is an easily accessible format. The aim is simple - to help you navigate an upcoming period of significant change for volunteer involving organisations and to support you in tackling some potentially tricky situations and conversations at work.

If you would like further help with the issues I discuss then I would be more than happy to help. Rob Jackson Consulting Ltd provides training, consulting and mentoring support that can be tailored to your needs, so please, don't hesitate to [get in touch](#).

Rob Jackson, Director, Rob Jackson Consulting Ltd

CHAPTER 1

THREE REASONS WHY ORGANISATIONS WILL NEED VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT PROFESSIONALS AFTER LOCKDOWN

Since lockdown started we've adjusted to a new way of living and working, but that doesn't diminish the impact of the change we've seen. English charities will have lost [an estimated £4.3 billion of income](#) by the end of June, putting jobs in jeopardy and even [risking the loss of some well known charities](#). Volunteer Managers are amongst many sector staff who have been furloughed, whilst volunteers have been stood down in significant numbers, sometimes by organisations whose websites still proclaim they they couldn't do their work without those now inactive volunteers!

More change will come as lockdown life comes to an end. We face an unprecedented economic downturn following the government bailouts, employment protection schemes and the ongoing costs of protecting people from Covid-19. For some, life may well get harder before it gets better. [Some commentators even think the loss of GDP in the UK could result in more deaths than those caused by the virus.](#)

Looking back to the global financial crisis a little over ten years ago, [the Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration \(MAVA\) looked at the impacts on nonprofits and volunteer managers](#) and there are some useful lessons for us to learn:

- Cuts in volunteer engagement budgets were disproportionate compared to other departments in nonprofit organisations
- Top management did not recognise the importance of volunteer engagement, creating instability in service delivery and fundraising activities that were delivered by volunteers
- Organisations benefited from setting aside outdated models of volunteer involvement and moving to involve volunteers throughout the organisation and in positions of significant responsibility
- There are serious consequences to cutting volunteer engagement resources

As the slow transition back to normality take place it's important that we learn lessons from the past. For example, perhaps cutting resource and support for volunteer engagement isn't the quick and easy money saving solution some may think? Perhaps the knock on effects of laying off Volunteer Managers will do unforeseen harm to service delivery and income generation? Perhaps a modest increase in investment in volunteer engagement might yield better returns as new ways of working and innovative approaches are supported?

What follows are three thoughts about why volunteer engagement needs to be prioritised as we come out of lockdown.

Interest in volunteering isn't the same as actually doing something

It is wonderful to see [reports of a million people coming forward to volunteer during the pandemic](#) but we must not equate an interest in volunteering with actual volunteering.

On 22 March, the day before the UK's lockdown was imposed, I applied to a local organisation who had an urgent need for volunteers due to Covid-19. After five weeks (!) I finally heard back from them and was told they "currently had no roles available".

On 24 March I signed up online to be an NHS Volunteer responder. Three months later I still haven't been given anything to do.

In both cases, my interest has not resulted in me actually volunteering. Instead, it has caused frustration and annoyance. I'm not alone either. Not long ago, [a UK tabloid newspaper called the NHS Volunteer Responder scheme a shambles](#), not exactly the kind of press coverage that encourages people to volunteer.

As Jayne Cravens once said:

"With online tools, it's never been easier to disappoint large numbers of potential volunteers and, with online tools, those disappointed people can let a lot of people know just how frustrated they are with your organisation."

Rather than having hundreds of thousands of people who are keen to volunteer, we may well find we have hundreds of thousands of people who have been put off volunteering because of such media coverage and a negative experience of trying give time and help in their community. Consequently, it may actually be harder to get people to volunteer in future. We will need to rise to that challenge.

That needs a skilled volunteer engagement professional.

What people expect when volunteering has changed

To be fair, people's expectations of volunteering were changing before Covid-19, but the last few weeks have really accelerated the pace of that change.

Some people who signed up to volunteer for the Covid-19 fight have gone through speedy online application processes that see them approved and ready to go in a matter of hours. Others have organised themselves, connecting with others and making a tangible difference in their communities, thanks in part to modern technology. This experience is at odds with our sector's more traditional, formal, bureaucratic, offline and risk-averse approach to volunteer engagement. No more will our lengthy paper-based processes cut the mustard.

We thought we had time to change to new ways of working - we don't any longer!

If I can be approved in 24 hours to deliver prescriptions to vulnerable people based on providing a photo of my driving licence, why do I need to jump through all your bureaucratic hoops to do some admin or fundraising?

Organisations need to re-think the practicalities of volunteer engagement for life after Covid-19. Change is needed now and fast!

That needs a skilled volunteer engagement professional.

We've lost key volunteers and not all of them will come back

Since 2011 I've been sharing how many organisations are reliant on a small, ageing core of volunteers and how that poses a risk. Like others, I have spent years highlighting the changes organisations need to make if they want to engage volunteers from outside this so-called civic core. The time to make those changes has now run out.

As both the [Third Sector Research Centre](#) and the [Charities Aid foundation](#) have discovered, some 8% of the population are responsible for 50% of the donated time. I used to ask organisations how they'd cope if half their volunteer hours disappeared in a few years time. Not any more - many organisations have lost 100% of donated time overnight with a large proportion of that 8% stopping volunteering because they have had to self-isolate due to their age.

We mustn't assume these older civic core volunteers will come back either. Sadly, we may lose some to Covid-19. Others may not want to risk exposure to the virus by returning to volunteering in the short-to-medium term. Some may have enjoyed no longer having the responsibilities of their volunteering and use this opportunity to retire on their own terms.

Similarly, not every sector employee will have a job to come back to. Sadly, we will lose skills we once paid for, skills will still need in order to serve our beneficiaries. Filling these skills gaps through volunteer engagement may be a

necessity for some organisations. That could mean a growth in skills-based employee volunteering or more targeted recruitment of volunteers with particular experiences and competencies. However it's done, it must be handled carefully and intelligently to ensure impact and manage issues associated with job substitution.

That needs a skilled volunteer engagement professional.

CHAPTER 2

WHEN THE AXE FALLS: BUDGET CUTTING AND VOLUNTEERS

What follows is a slightly edited article that was originally written by [Susan J. Ellis](#) and published on the [Energize Inc website](#) as the [Hot Topic for December 2009](#). [The original version is also available as an audio file](#).

The context for Susan's hot topic was the global financial crisis which was impacting nonprofits and communities around the world. In today's Covid-19 affected society, her thoughts and advice are as relevant as ever. Times are tough and many predict that an unprecedented economic shock is just around the corner. Let Susan's words from eleven years ago inform and inspire you to act on her timeless wisdom and insight so that volunteer engagement might come out of the current situation stronger, not weaker.

Can an organisation turn to volunteers to fill gaps when budgets are cut and employees laid off?

This ancient question has been resurfacing quite a bit recently, for obvious economic reasons. For many paid staff, it is fearfully voiced as, "Will my organisation do this?" Even in the best of times, employees are often wary of new volunteer projects because of questions of job security, so it's hard to deny the threat when budgets are in real danger.

I suspect that most readers here, being immersed in the dogma of our volunteer management profession, have a visceral negative reaction to even a hint of the "replacement" question. My stomach tightens, too. But we have to let our brains keep working and find a way to respond with care and concern when our organisations are struggling for their lives. Economic crisis is a teachable moment and has the potential to educate everyone about smart, motivating engagement of volunteers.

I see three levels of action: prevention/preparation; responding to hard times; and emergency mode.

Prevention / Preparation

Here is what I always give as my best advice: Plan for volunteers when times are good if you want their help in

times of crisis. Crisis is the worst time for an organisation to begin to involve volunteers. This reinforces the notion that volunteers are a temporary band-aid and is sure to be met with staff resistance to volunteer help just when they themselves are coping with an increased workload. Further, it is hard to sound sincere to the public about welcoming their help when recruiting in desperation.

If an organisation already has an established volunteer corps and a solid volunteer management process, it is legitimate to assess how this group of loyal supporters can best be deployed to respond to an economic emergency. Top management ought to know already that volunteers are cost-effective but are never a “free” resource.

Unfortunately, it is not unusual to see organisations lay off their director of volunteer involvement in the first round of staff cuts. The theory is that there are already volunteers in place and there will be few immediate consequences from this vacancy. Then, often without seeing the irony, the same organisations also announce that they are seeking more volunteers!

Clearly it is my position that the more critical volunteers are to an organisation, the more important the position of the person who leads the volunteer program. Not only will such a manager work to expand the volunteer corps, but current volunteers can feel unsupported and taken for granted if they lose their staff liaison.

Responding to Hard Times

In general, it is next to impossible to fill a gap left by a full-time employee with a single, qualified and available volunteer. Instead it would require an intricate schedule of several volunteers, each giving a certain number of hours per week and each bringing the organisation a different set of qualifications. Take all the concerns of "job sharing" and multiply them several fold!

The best way to handle the real problem of forced lay-offs is to reassess the job descriptions of the entire staff, both those who have left and those remaining. This means doing a task analysis of the way things really work in the organisation, not just what was put on paper in the distant past. Scrutinise the various tasks that each employee is/was doing and identify the following sorts of things:

What is someone doing once a week or periodically, rather than daily or on an inflexible schedule?

- What is someone doing that really does not require his or her specialised training? (For example, a caseworker may spend a lot of time away from clients finding referral information – telephone calls, Internet searches – or a librarian might be diverted from core work by changing the book displays and bulletin boards.)

- What is someone doing that might be done more effectively by someone else with more specialised training in that skill?

Once you have identified such tasks, you are ready to rewrite all the staff job descriptions. First be sure these contain all the tasks that require daily attention, special training, etc., adding the similar critical responsibilities that had been assigned to the laid-off staff members. Next, remove the periodic or less technical responsibilities. You end up with the remaining employees now tasked primarily with the most vital, daily functions. The remaining activities then become the basis for legitimate volunteer position descriptions. You will be asking volunteers to handle important work that can be done on a once-a-week basis or that makes use of special talents for which the volunteers have been recruited.

Now turn to the current assignments that volunteers are filling and ask this major question: Are these the most essential things we need right now? Weigh the list of tasks you've just culled from the employees against what volunteers are doing and make choices. Of course include volunteers in this deliberation. You can assume that they want to be of the greatest help and will be proud to be seen as part of keeping the organisation afloat.

This approach to the unfortunate need to trim the budget is therefore good management of both paid and volunteer staff. The organisation is paying for the best utilisation of its employees and will attract volunteers in its support. It is

also more likely to avoid the mistake of recruiting volunteers mainly for clerical roles at a time when increasing numbers of people are seeking more challenging ways to serve the causes in which they believe. Not to mention giving unemployed people a way to keep their professional skills alive while doing something worthwhile for others. (Another finding in the MAVA study was that 52% of the respondents said they were interviewing new volunteers with stronger work skills and 54% said these applicants were more likely to be unemployed.)

Emergency Mode

For some organisations, the financial choices have come down to eliminating services (even closing the doors altogether) or turning to volunteer help as a stopgap measure. In that sort of crisis, your mission comes first. Volunteers as well as paid staff understand and respect that. It is legitimate to share information about the emergency situation with current and potential volunteers and to ask for their help. You are likely to get it.

Again, the first task is to reassess the job descriptions of the employees, being even more deliberate in making sure primary, daily services are assigned to paid staff. Then look at what, where, and how volunteers are doing now. Are they familiar enough with the work of a unit or area that they might take on additional responsibilities? Would they be willing to increase their volunteer time for, say, two months?

Can they help you to recruit more emergency volunteers (with the skills you need most) and train them on-the-job? This is also a legitimate question to pose to board members, especially those with corporate ties.

Of course this is not a great situation! The key is honest and open communication about the plans to hold things together until new funding can be found. Solicit everyone's ideas for how to operate in the crisis. Set a timeline for reassessing how things are going and, perhaps, for when to throw in the towel. Volunteers are a vital part of transitioning to a more effective, fully-funded organisation but they cannot be expected to carry the load indefinitely.

Most important, always remember that volunteers are your most effective advocates for funding your work. Especially in a crisis, make sure you are asking volunteers to be spokespeople with legislators, donors, and other funders. Raising more money and having great volunteers are mutually compatible goals.

And, to repeat: The best way to gain expanded volunteer support in lean times is to have incorporated volunteers as a welcome resource in the first place.

- Are you facing pressure to recruit more volunteers because funding has been cut? How are you responding?

- How are you realigning volunteer position descriptions to be sure they are meeting the most pressing needs today?
- What else are you experiencing about “paid vs. volunteer” thinking in your organisation?

CHAPTER 3

HOW COVID-19 MAY CHANGE OUR VIEWS ON JOB SUBSTITUTION FOR EVER

Reading Susan's 2009 article in chapter two got me thinking about [a piece on job substitution that I wrote for Third Sector magazine in February 2017](#). In this chapter I want to revisit those thoughts with a particular eye to our pandemic affected world, not least because the idea of volunteers doing what was once paid work seems to be the main thrust of [calls for furloughed charity workers to volunteer for their employing organisations](#).

Job substitution is a thorny, complex and emotive issue that provokes strong views. The term 'job substitution' itself makes things worse, implying that one volunteer can *substitute* for one employee, something that, in reality, is both impractical and unrealistic.

Better terms to use are job displacement and job replacement. The distinctions between displacement and replacement may seem subtle but they are important:

- 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 due to funding changes, so deploys volunteers to deliver the service in a different way for the continued benefit of it's clients (remember that in most cases charities exist for the benefit of their clients, not their employee and volunteers).

If paid roles are being purposefully displaced so volunteers can do the work instead, then concerns should be raised. As well as the issue of removing people's livelihood, two serious errors of judgement about volunteering are probably being made:

1. Volunteers are a free or cost saving option
2. It is easy to recruit people who will take on those paid roles and do it for no pay

"Volunteer motives vary, but depriving paid workers of an income is not one of them." - Noble, Rogers and Fryar.

Sometimes, though, volunteers can be a preferable way to doing things than paid staff. That's why I hate the phrase, *"Volunteers should complement and supplement the work of paid staff"*. It fails to recognise the distinctive value that volunteering can bring. It dismisses anything unique and precious about volunteering and subordinates it to a low status activity next to paid work

I've worked in organisations where volunteers had a credibility in the eyes of clients that paid staff could never have. That credibility came from the client seeing the volunteer as someone who *wants* to spend time with them, not someone who they believe is there just because they are paid. In that scenario, volunteers didn't supplement or complement or displace or replace paid staff, they brought something that paid staff could not.

I accept that these issues of who does what for the mission aren't easy to discuss and resolve - if they were we would have stopped debating them years ago. Yet engaging intelligently and thoughtfully with these issues is essential as we emerge from the early phases of Covid-19, because the way we always did things before the virus simply won't cut it anymore.

Not everyone who volunteered for us in the past will do so again.

Paid staff are, sadly, going to be laid off.

Money may be in short supply as unemployment and financial hardship reduces charitable donations.

Mission driven organisations will have to rethink how they fulfil their goals with a different mix of human talent and skill than they did before.

As Albert Einstein said: *“The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them”*.

Are we as leaders of volunteer engagement ready to lead this debate in our organisations? Are we ready to challenge old orthodoxies that may not fit the new world we live in?

I hope so, because our leadership is needed now more than ever.

CHAPTER 4

FOUR MISTAKES UNIONS SOMETIMES MAKE ABOUT VOLUNTEERING

In the previous chapter I discussed how Volunteer Managers need to be leading debate about job substitution issues as our organisations adapt to a world changed by Covid-19. When we get into these discussions we may encounter resistance from unions, resistance we need to counter. But how?

First, let's remember that unions do an important role protecting their members: this isn't an anti-union rant. As I said last time, however, old ways of thinking won't cut it in our Covid-19 'new normal' - that's true of unions as much as the rest of us. Consequently, leaders of volunteer engagement may need to challenge unions more than we might have done in the past.

To that end, I want to highlight four mistakes unions often make when thinking about volunteering that may be useful when you need to challenge their position.

Unions can confuse amateur (volunteer) with incompetent

Unions typically come at volunteering issues with the assumption that professional (paid) means competent. This is the same argument some in the voluntary sector use to argue for paid trustees - if we pay people, we get more professional behaviour and more competent practice.

Neither argument holds up in reality. What someone is paid is no indicator of their professionalism or competence. This is an area I've blogged on before so do [take a look at a post on my old blog site for more of my thinking](#).

Unions can assume we will deploy *anyone* as a volunteer

In my experience, unions sometimes think volunteers will be random people, plucked from the street and placed into roles with no training or support. This is, of course, something no competent volunteer manager would ever do. Volunteers, when properly recruited, trained, managed

and supported, are no less competent at what they do than paid staff (see point one above).

Unions can get it wrong on commitment

This one is a little bizarre - unions sometime suggest volunteers, because they are unpaid, may be less committed than paid staff. Interesting. Filling a role for no pay implies less commitment? If anything, the issue with volunteers is them being too committed! Sure some volunteers may be a bit flaky but you know what, that can be true of paid staff too. Just as volunteers don't have a monopoly on passion, whether someone is paid does not indicate their reliability or commitment.

Unions typically say one thing and do another

Finally, and crucially, almost every union rep I have engaged with professionally has failed to recognise the the very movement and organisation they represent runs on volunteer labour. As one of the UK's biggest unions state on their website:

"UNISON employs around 1,200 people across the UK and has more than 1.3 million members. But we rely on volunteer

activists for much of the support we offer. Without them UNISON would not be able to function. "

Which begs the question - why are volunteers in other settings viewed as untrained, uncommitted, well-meaning amateurs, individuals who are out to take paid staff jobs, yet union volunteers aren't? Is it one rule for them and another for everyone else?

Conclusion

Remember, this is not an anti-union rant. When plans were recently announced for Boots (the chemist) to recruit volunteers to work thirty-two hours a week as Covid-19 testers, it was the unions who had the most sensible objections.

Sara Gorton, head of health at Unison, said: *"Many people want to give their spare time to the NHS to help it through the Covid crisis, but this advert takes the notion of volunteering way too far."* She added that rather than *"seeking to take advantage of people's good nature, the government would be better placed utilising the experience of NHS staff returning from retirement, or the healthcare students in their final years, to help expand the UK's testing capacity"*.

In contrast, politicians argued it was physically demanding work and so should be paid. Which begs the question as to

why they have no such qualms about volunteer gardeners, lifeboat crews, mountain rescue teams and countless other physically demanding volunteer roles?

Unions don't always get it right though and as leaders & managers of volunteers we need to stand up to any ill-informed, prejudice driven perspectives **anyone** has about volunteering. We need to find a way to work with unions, and others, to ensure volunteer involvement in adds value without displacing people from paid work.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Rob Jackson is Director of Rob Jackson Consulting Ltd, a consultancy and training company that helps engage and inspire people to bring about change.

Rob has more than 25 years experience working in the voluntary and community sector, holding a variety of strategic development and senior management roles that have focused on leading and engaging volunteers.

Rob has run his company since 2011 working with a wide range of clients in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Europe, the USA and Canada.

Rob is co-author of The Complete Volunteer Management Handbook (DSC, 2012 and 2019) and From The Top Down - UK Edition (Energize, 2015).