

Volunteers... another angle



❖ They need to be cosseted and encouraged - again taking up valuable staff time.

❖ It is incredibly annoying when they let down the librarian-in-charge at the last minute and it is too late to make other arrangements.

❖ The volunteer's true agenda tends to surface after a few days, for example, they want to make use of the computer, fax machine, or telephone. They want to become part of the library 'family', hanging around workroom areas, chatting to staff and becoming a distraction.

❖ Not all the staff buy into the concept of volunteers and can be uncooperative and unfriendly. They resent management for not being forceful enough in motivating for more staff.

❖ Volunteers can introduce a new dynamic into a staff situation that can be problematic.

❖ There's also the danger that with volunteers a false impression is created that libraries are coping with reduced staff. Libraries deserve an equitable staff allocation based fairly on circulation, membership, in-house use, physical size of library, et cetera. If libraries have 'managed' through difficult times by using volunteers, and the support of their Friends of the Library, this should not be exploited when staff allocation is calculated.

The librarian who offered these comments says she is sorry that it is a rather jaundiced view, but maybe it is a sign of the times. No doubt other libraries have similar experiences both positive and negative but I am very grateful to the above librarians who took the trouble to respond.

We hope to hear from other librarians who have experience in this matter.

RHEINA EPSTEIN

Correspondent

I was delighted that my piece on volunteers in the January/February 2005 issue of the CL p. 44, provoked a reaction from some librarians (and I believe, not a little discussion over tea).

A manager from a public library wrote that it was a very positive article but suggested that it calls for another article outlining the pitfalls, more specifically from the human resources angle. What, for example, is the legal position of volunteers in terms of the work that they may or may not do? Can a volunteer claim to be a part-time employee and expect to be paid after working for some months as a volunteer? This manager confirmed that wanting to get a foot in the door is the reason why so many young people volunteer.

A manager of a special library found the article most interesting saying that, on thinking of her volunteers, what most of them want to get back from their volunteering is the opportunity to talk. She does not know why but she always feels that she has to repay them by listening to them for at least half an hour - either their geyser broke, or their pills ran out or other subjects equally mundane. She feels that for her it is awfully frustrating but after unburdening themselves she finds they get into their work very nicely.

This manager continued that she has a volunteer, a pensioner who is a pleasure to have working in the library. She is in touch with people and with what is happening, teaching those around her that what you exude has nothing to do with age.

Another librarian in charge of a public library responded with her initiatives and efforts to keep her volunteers motivated and interested. These essentially boil down to making sure that each volunteer knows

that her/his efforts on behalf of the library are recognised and appreciated. On the job they are treated as individuals and given personal attention and whilst they're working the librarian-in-charge takes the trouble to get to know each volunteer personally. The highlight of this library's volunteer recognition is an old-fashioned tea party with all the trimmings. Each individual is commended for his/her specific contribution. Staff and the committee of the Friends of the Library are also acknowledged and the particular attributes of everybody mentioned is highlighted.

This library also has another group of volunteers - young people who have qualified as librarians but who are unable to find a job. They volunteer both for the experience and also for a recommendation to any future employer.

A very different viewpoint of volunteers was that expressed by a librarian also in charge of a public library who has found that in her experience the difficulties encountered with volunteers far outweigh the benefits. Generally speaking, staff are always willing to take on extra clerical duties.

They are considered a reward or treat after gruelling desk sessions in a busy library which, this librarian-in-charge goes on to say, is not for the faint-hearted as volunteers quickly discover and yet it is here where they are most needed. Although volunteers are recruited when the library is short-staffed, when posts are frozen, et cetera, ironically, they can end up causing more difficulties. She lists the reasons.

❖ They need training, taking up valuable staff time.

❖ They make many errors, the fallout from which the staff have to take the blame.