4-H Volunteer Recruitment and Retention

What actions lead to successful recruitment and retention of quality volunteers?

Introduction

Adult volunteers are people of value who play a vital role in 4-H Youth Development work. Consequently, successful recruitment and retention of quality lay leaders are critical to sustaining 4-H club leadership and supporting various other program efforts where these volunteers serve. The volunteer corps includes an assortment of interests, motivations, time availabilities, skill sets, backgrounds, leadership styles, personality traits, and needs. With such diversity come the challenges of appropriate volunteer management in orientation, placement, training, recognition, and supervision while aligning with the organizational mission and program goals (9, 24, 25). Volunteer involvement in youth programming brings the added dimension of identification and selection of “the right people” for the “right jobs” as adult-youth relationships are built. The programmatic component of 4-H Youth Development work requires connections with volunteers who effectively team together with professional staff, families, and other volunteers to teach, inspire, and nurture youth to become competent, confident, connected, caring, and contributing citizens of strong character.

Research to Practice Points

- Not every person is interested or suitable for every volunteer role. A variety of jobs within the 4-H club framework along with diverse youth in those clubs requires identification of many diverse, trustworthy adults who are willing to donate their time to take on the responsibilities associated with those positions. Finding the right match between program needs and volunteer interest, availability, and suitability (8, 9, 14, 19, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 31, 33, 34, 36, 39, 41, 53, 54) is often time and labor intensive (18, 21, 24, 25). From their 20’s to past retirement age, adults have different reasons to consider volunteering: maintaining/strengthening professional skills (8, 14, 34, 44, 45, 53, 54), interactions with other adults (8, 9, 10, 14, 22, 23, 24, 25, 31, 34, 36, 44, 45, 53, 56), associating with youth (19, 22, 23, 24, 29, 36, 39, 45, 55), exploring interests (8, 9, 22, 28, 45, 53), self-improvement (22, 45, 55), feeling useful (10, 14, 19, 23, 27, 34, 36, 53, 55), being challenged (9, 16, 24, 36), benefitting their family or the community (8, 9, 10, 14, 19, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 34, 36, 37, 45, 53, 55, 56), sense of duty (23, 55), connections to possible employment (56), and more. In recruiting for volunteer positions, 4-H staff need well-defined job descriptions (9, 26, 28, 36, 37, 39, 53, 55) that help both the staff and the potential volunteer to recognize the right fit with the needs of both the volunteer and organization in mind.

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**Research Quality and Review Methodology**

**Key Search Terms:** 4-H, 4-H retention, volunteer, 4-H leader, 4-H volunteer, volunteer recruitment, recruitment, volunteer retention, retention

**Article Selection Criteria:** no restriction on dates; focused on articles in *Journal of Extension*, *Journal of Volunteer Administration*, *International Journal of Volunteer Administration*, and publications and websites associated with the National Cooperative Extension System. Additionally, publications reviewing volunteer involvement with not-for-profit or youth organizations were considered.

**Research Design:**
69 different data sources were identified to support the provided information including 34 utilizing surveys/questionnaires; 3 featuring focus groups; 8 utilizing interviews; 9 employing literature reviews; and 1 utilizing 4-H leader enrollment data

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- **Timing will alter volunteer readiness.** Life pressures and demands will affect when a person can accept or continue a volunteer commitment (6, 31, 33, 55). Flexibility (9, 19, 20, 53, 55) in responding to the volunteer’s needs at this time can often determine whether a person takes a leave of absence, transitions to a new role in the program, or severs his relationship with the organization altogether. During their adult years, volunteers can experience such changes in their life as time availability (10, 17, 19, 24, 34, 45, 55), family and work responsibilities (19, 24), life pressures, physical health and stamina (10, 34), and personal interests and motivations (14, 19, 23, 26, 28, 36, 53). When changes warrant a need or desire by individuals to alter their volunteer roles in some way, advance planning by program leadership can respond with greater options to offer the volunteer. Other or additional responsibilities (9, 24) or adjustments within the volunteer’s current role may lead to a win-win arrangement. Without foresight, the program may lose valued volunteers.

- **Quality volunteer management is essential for effective volunteer involvement.** Much applause is given to the work of volunteers…and such accolades are deserved. However, the support needed to identify, select, orient, train, utilize, recognize, and evaluate volunteers requires an effective volunteer manager (or management team) to lead the volunteers; and it behooves 4-H Youth Development Staff to invest in quality volunteer management practices to retain those volunteers who have been recruited for service within the program (20, 21). Properly trained management (20, 40, 42, 53) is necessary for effective recruitment, retention, and much more. Volunteers need staff support (4, 24, 25, 28, 30) to be optimally engaged in satisfying work and in carrying out the mission and goals of the organization. Attention must be given to appropriate volunteer orientation (6, 9, 12, 18, 21, 43); well-defined job assignments (6, 9, 23, 24, 26, 28, 31, 37, 39, 53, 55); applicable, on-going training opportunities (4, 9, 10, 12, 15, 18, 21, 24, 25, 28, 35, 36, 42, 43, 44, 51, 52, 53, 55); appropriate and effective supervision (9, 18, 20, 21, 23, 28, 47); and regular and meaningful recognition (1, 2, 4, 6, 9, 10, 16, 18, 21, 23, 24, 25, 28, 29, 30, 36, 42, 43, 47, 52, 53, 56). Effective communication must be maintained (6, 24, 30, 37, 45, 54, 55, 56), and job performance evaluation (18, 21, 36, 52) that’s viewed as positive by both parties (47) must be accompanied by regular dialogue between supervisor and volunteer.

- **The organization’s image and philosophy of volunteerism impact volunteer recruitment and retention.** Community residents who are considering volunteer opportunities are interested in associating with organizations with whom they can be proud (10, 24, 27, 29, 45, 54, 56). Because the 4-H Youth Development Program is nested in the Cooperative Extension System, potential Cornell Cooperative Extension provides equal program and employment opportunities.
volunteers may respond differently to recruitment efforts because of how they view the organization or its mission (29, 36, 45, 54, 56). However, Extension’s collaborations can enhance recruitment efforts with new audiences (12, 19, 20, 24, 31, 44), including its commitment to their community (24). Support for volunteer involvement is reflected in how potential and active volunteers are shown respect and meaningful inclusion by all agency staff and administrators (1, 4, 6, 21, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 30, 34, 42, 46, 53, 54, 55), by the organization’s board and administration’s allocation of sufficient resources to provide volunteer management (20, 21, 55), and by the organization’s recognition of the value and efforts of volunteers (1, 6, 10, 21, 25, 45, 46, 53, 54, 55, 56).

- **Effective volunteer recruitment and retention require attention to what is communicated and how it’s communicated.** Whether by one-on-one conversation or mass appeal, people must accurately hear the right message (6, 9, 24, 25) of volunteer opportunities in order to respond. Recognition of cultural, primary language, and generational differences (9, 13, 19, 24, 25) to name a few will lead to different marketing tools and approaches and the choice of channels to employ in order to reach a wide diversity of potential volunteer recruits who will hopefully begin a long tenure of service with the program. Eye-appealing and culturally sensitive brochures and flyers are needed (6) but not enough (9). Historically, direct appeal by current leaders and youth participants is the most effective recruitment method (6, 17, 21, 23, 25, 28, 29, 31, 39, 41, 43, 45, 49, 50, 56), but utilization of various outlets (radio, TV, newspaper, professional organization and workplace communiques) will help reach the entire community (6, 9, 17, 19, 21, 44, 45). Volunteer opportunities should be shared internally with staff, program participants, and current volunteers in order to recruit as broadly as possible (6, 13, 53). Recruitment materials need to be available in response to interest (11, 29), and all staff should know how to handle inquiries (13).

**Conclusions:**

**What We Know**

Throughout its history, 4-H Youth Development work has been a team effort of volunteers and 4-H professional staff. Not only do volunteers have the potential to enrich the program through the diversity they bring; but in many cases, they are crucial to reaching goals and objectives. For most programs, paid staff could not fulfill current obligations without volunteers.

Engaging community residents as volunteers requires that the organization, not just the 4-H program, embrace volunteerism (21, 24, 25). All staff and governing boards must genuinely respect and value volunteers and their efforts for maximum success (1, 6, 24, 25, 26, 46, 53, 54). Though by definition volunteers are not paid, neither are they free (18). The organization must invest staff time and other resources to support volunteer engagement (3, 21). Open and

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effective communication is needed to keep volunteers informed (24, 30). In return, there can be much gain. Long-term quality volunteers can have significant positive impact in the lives of youth, in advocating effectively for the organization, and in contributing extensively to overall programming efforts.

What We Don’t Know

Through additional research that addresses the following questions, better recruitment and retention practices could be adopted and volunteer could be better utilized in 4-H Youth Development work.

- What factors are most important in determining success in recruiting volunteers?
- How can adults on the brink of retirement be attracted to volunteer?
- What are the challenges of volunteering in current society, and how can those challenges best be addressed?
- How do different mixes of social factors influence a person’s likelihood of volunteering throughout his/her life cycle?
- What constitutes effective volunteer engagement?
- What factors are most important in determining who will be successful in key roles, such as 4-H organizational club leaders?
- How can volunteer satisfaction be measured, and how do various facets of volunteer satisfaction relate to organizational outcomes?
- How important is volunteer satisfaction in determining retention?
- What are the best practices of volunteer-friendly organizations?
- What are the primary influences that lead volunteers to leave the program?
- What strategies could lead to more successful volunteer diversity?

Through effective research application, we can bring best practices to 4-H Youth Development work in volunteer recruitment and retention while enhancing the outcomes for volunteers, participants, staff, and the organization collectively.

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Selected References


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