CultureCase

Recruiting and retaining volunteers at a rural producing theatre

This research was conducted by **Helen Bussell and Debora Forbes** at the **University of Teesside, UK**

Summary

This paper describes best practice in volunteer management, focusing on a regional producing theatre in the UK. It looks at all aspects of the volunteering process – from recruitment and management through to retention. The research found that successful volunteer management is primarily about relationship management: ensuring that the individual volunteer feels connected with and appreciated by their employer organisation.

The case study used in the research was a producing theatre in a National Park in northern England

The core of the data for the research came from 20 in-depth interviews with staff at the theatre (including those responsible for volunteer management) and a sample of volunteers at the theatre. The theatre relied on volunteers to run their front-of-house. It had a database of 140 volunteers; over 40 were from outside the local area. Two thirds were retired and three quarters were female.

The theatre did not use a conventional volunteer recruitment strategy

Instead, it simply took advantage of a strong latent demand amongst local people to volunteer with the organisation. Volunteers seemed to be most interested in the social connections that volunteering gave them, and the proximity to the art and artist of the theatre company. Because of the theatre’s

location there were no equivalent organisations competing for the volunteers' time. Six weeks of induction, training and mentoring both ensured a certain level of quality control for front-of-house customer service whilst motivating and rewarding any new volunteers.

The front-of-house manager was a lynchpin in the system, being enthusiastic, charismatic and committed

All the volunteers reported an excellent relationship with this person who did not simply manage but acted as a transformational leader. As a result the volunteers strongly identified with the theatre and were proud and loyal.

Keywords

interview **rural** **theatre** **UK** **volunteers**

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