Designing Effective Volunteer Roles

Informal discussion paper by Steve Harris 22 September 2014

Many Volunteer Involving Organisations find the difference between volunteer and staff status challenging. This paper ignores most of the well-known issues and focusses on just one challenge:

- Many volunteers "work" for just a few hours a week.
- The roles they do <u>must</u> take account of this

When someone only works a short "shift", there is a risk that an unacceptable proportion of their time will be taken up with training, updating, bureaucracy and other non-productive work. This is bad for the volunteer (who wants to do the core stuff) and bad for the charity (who wants to get it done.) Worse still, in the time between weekly shifts, things may be forgotten or change.
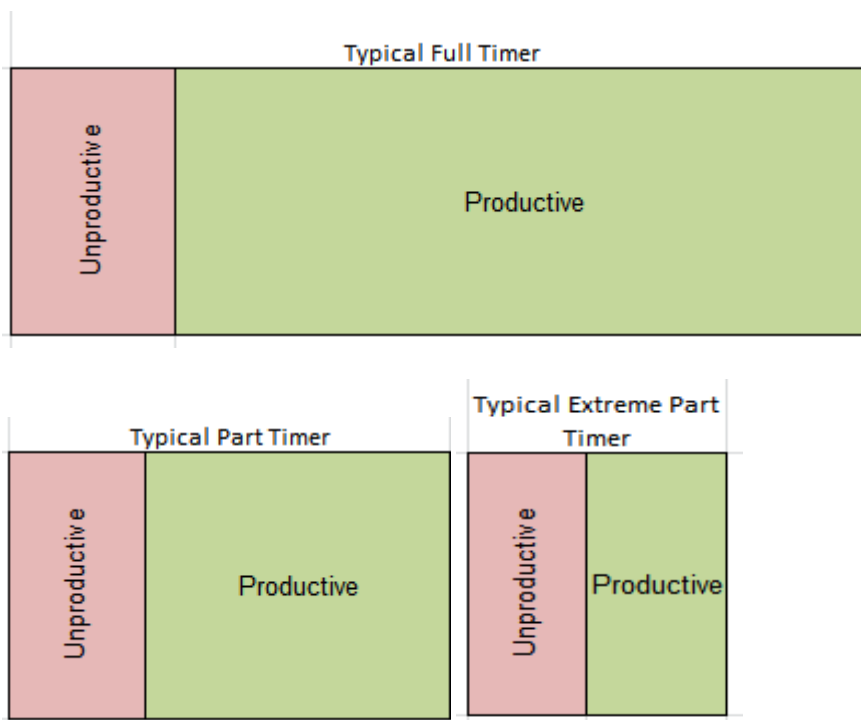
Typically, the non-productive tasks are skipped decreasing service quality and the satisfaction of all parties. Many volunteer roles are "extreme part time", need a different design approach and some roles may are not be suitable.

So, what affects role suitability for extreme part-timers?

- Rapid change between sessions – where what the volunteer has to know is in a constant state of flux. Consider these two examples:
  - An advisor on fast changing complex legal matters needs constant updating
  - Someone giving information to visitors at a historic site needs little updating
- The **quantity** of essential knowledge – whether technical or operational. Examples:

o   A benefits advisor needs to know a lot – the system is complex
o   Samaritan volunteers are expected to **know** little – they listen, give emotional support and explore suicidal feelings. They do not give advice.

It's worthwhile looking at all "extreme short timer" roles and identifying what the volunteer needs to know, how much there is and the rate at which it changes. If you identify a heavy load consider if this role should be allocated to a smaller number of (possibly) paid staff. That's just one potential solution, redesign of how the role works may be possible.

<u>Checklist for identifying issues and suggested mitigation strategies.</u>

1. What does someone need to know/learn to do this role?
    a. Legal/technical knowledge
    b. Local knowledge (EG: Other agencies to refer to)
    c. Operational knowledge (EG: where to find all the forms)
    d. State of Play knowledge (EG: Which service users are in the building)
    e. People knowledge (EG: particular service users and how to handle)
    f. Soft skills
    g. Other knowledge

Use this list to get a feel for "how **big** it all is"

2. How often is this changing?
    a. Perhaps some of the knowledge does **not** change often?
    b. Is all the change relevant?
    c. Is the workplace chaotic?

3. Mitigation
    a. Do we need <u>all</u> this knowledge?
        i.   EG: helpline workers often hand over what <u>has</u> happened rather than what <u>is</u> happening (However this activity might be important "offloading")
        ii. Would delay be acceptable when rarely needed knowledge has to be "looked up"
    b. Can we persuade fewer people to offer more? Not only will they have more time to keep up to date, they'll get more use out of the effort.
    c. Can we make the knowledge accessible through IT, wallcharts, etc.? (and can we keep these up to date?) Foster a culture of "looking-up the facts". Also consider using a full-time "fount of all knowledge" slightly behind the front line and encourage consultation
    d. Where knowledge is unavoidable, exploit long-term knowledge and experience. EG: Useful gardeners often have extensive **timeless** knowledge.
    e. Design/select roles that depend on soft skills such as listening and empathy more than knowledge.

f. Some volunteers will manage to keep their knowledge up to date through other parts of their life (EG: An IT volunteer might have knowledge through paid work elsewhere)

g. The way memory functions varies from person to person. Research suggests that while some aspects of memory may decline with age, others improve. Some useful reading is at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memory_and_aging However, this is not a suggestion to practice age discrimination but maybe the memory and cognitive strengths of individual volunteers need determining so they can be deployed most effectively.

The benefit of improving the design of extreme part-time roles.

Typical Extreme Part Timer		Improved Extreme Part Timer	
Unproductive	Productive	Unproductive	Productive