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# Count me in People with a disability keen to volunteer

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## ABSTRACT

People with a disability are generally not viewed by the community as potential volunteers. This undervaluing of human potential negates the abilities of people who belong to this special group. People with a disability, as well as those who are missing out on the service and contribution people with a disability might provide, are being disadvantaged.

This article delivers a message to volunteer and community organisations, expressing the views and opinions of people with a disability. It outlines the barriers that people with a disability experience in seeking volunteer positions and in performing such roles. It speaks to organisations that have the capacity to recruit volunteers with disabilities and the ways in which their communities can benefit. This community development project provided a mechanism whereby people with a disability gained a voice and provided practical information to redress organisational and management issues.

It calls upon organisations to become creative and proactive and to lead the way forward in answering the call from people with a disability to 'count them in'. It is time the community responds to this call and gives people with a disability the opportunity to be valued for the contribution they can make to our communities.

## INTRODUCTION

For many years I have been concerned about the lack of participation in volunteer or community organisations by people with a disability and the resistance of organisations to provide meaningful opportunities for them. I am aware that the Commonwealth Government's Welfare to Work legislation will change the work requirements of people with a disability, and that the State Government has recently introduced the State Disability Plan. These changes will impact on both people with a disability and community organisations.

## METHOD

My understanding of this issue increased last year when I returned to complete further study in Regional Community Development with Monash University. In my research I chose to focus on volunteering and community options for people with a

disability. I was successful with gaining funding, through the Department of Human Services' 'Moving Ahead Grants' for projects that will help 'build inclusive communities' for people with a disability, and had the pleasure of convening a group made up of people with a disability and community representatives. The group of 12 people formed a study group to investigate volunteering and community options for people with a disability in our rural region of Gippsland, Victoria. Members of this project group have included eight participants with a disability between 18 and 22 years of age from the Gippsland Vocational Training Unit and representatives each from the Department for Victorian Communities, Latrobe City Council, Gippsland Regional Neighbourhood House Group, GippsTAFE and Monash University. Focus groups were conducted with people with a disability from local disability services.

Using the 'Building rural futures through co-operation: study circle kit' developed by the Centre for Rural Communities, Churchill Campus, Monash University, we shared ideas and feelings regarding volunteering and participation in community organisations. The concept of study circles exists worldwide, but this kit incorporates additional concepts to bring communities together by incorporating a practical process where action takes place from the identification of areas of concern. The study circle program is a democratic tool that empowers community members by offering a supportive environment to actively participate within.

As we worked on the project it became very clear from people with a disability that they were keen to volunteer. They wanted to be involved, to be counted in, and were looking for meaningful ways in which they could become involved in their community and wanted to be included in these activities. People with a disability find it very difficult to get information about organisations. People need and want to be able to freely access services; they want to be made welcome and to be provided with real opportunities to participate. Volunteer organisations need to get information out there, so people can become aware of what opportunities are available to them. There is a need for these organisations to become better informed about people with a disability and their abilities, to become aware of access issues for them, and to create meaningful jobs that people with a disability can do and so achieve a sense of helping. Organisations have a responsibility to welcome and include people with a disability.

It became quite obvious that finding out about the role of volunteer and community organisations was one of the biggest barriers confronting people with a disability. To overcome this barrier we chose to hold a Volunteering and Community Options Expo as a means of finding out about volunteer organisations. The exhibition was held on 25 November 2005 in the small regional town of Morwell, in Gippsland.

### **DISABILITY FRIENDLY ORGANISATIONS**

In general, people with a disability stated that they enjoyed the benefits they gained from being involved with volunteer organisations or community groups. They understand that there is much to be gained from being an active participant in community organisations. Unfortunately, some of the positives

of volunteering have been discounted due to negative experiences many people have had in the past.

Many people with a disability have difficulty with reading and writing and this makes it difficult for them to find out information, to fill in forms and to do formal training. Some people feel that they were not valued when they have volunteered and made comments such as:

'People stink, the way they deal with people with a disability, some people's opinion can be really harmful.'

'Some people do not know that people with a disability can work or do things, they see the wheelchair and think I can't do anything, they do not see me for the person that I am.'

'Unfortunately some people just do not want to know or do not want to know you because you have a disability.'

'People often do not include me.'

The expression of such feelings indicates that people with a disability often feel that they are not welcome or respected.

The volunteer experience generated other kinds of negative experiences. Some of the people with a disability described having been frightened to say they did not understand what they were expected to do or becoming confused: '...different people kept telling me to do different things. I did not know who to take notice of or what was expected of me.'

Our project group concluded that many organisations do not know how to support a person with a disability. The negative experiences described by those with a disability have an influence on the willingness of people to become active members of volunteer and community organisations. Some people specifically stated:

'People's understanding of disability is not good. I think groups need help to understand how best to help us.'

'They need to know about different disabilities and that we really can do lots of different things.'

When the surveys that we sent to organisations started returning I soon found out that these statements were reflected in the organisations' comments. Organisations identified that they were not sure how to support a person with a disability. Furthermore, organisations did not seem to understand the implications of how people might cope with their disability in very individual ways. Numerous organisations that I spoke with expressed uncertainty about what a disability was. It became obvious that understanding was needed. The causes and manifestations of disability are so diverse that individual profiling of personal attributes needs to be given special attention by volunteer coordinators. The allocation of volunteers, always challenging, becomes even more difficult when the volunteer has a hearing problem, is blind, has joint or mobility problems, a learning problem, intellectual disability or depression. Appearance and behavior may need to be taken into account if persons with a disability are to be assimilated successfully into organisations, to benefit from the experience and to make their best contributions.

People with a disability speak with many voices and have many concerns. I was told that:

'There need to be more opportunities for people with a disability.'

'People need to think of different jobs that we can do, gardening, helping other people.'

'There need to be greater choices, not just folding clothes out the back or not just meals on wheels, people need to be creative in the jobs that volunteers can do.'

'There should only be one boss who gives you instructions.'

'We need clear messages.'

'People need to be friendly and help me feel welcome and a part of the group.'

One person summed this up very nicely: 'Where someone could help nicely with things, someone who is caring, be spoken to properly, tell me and help me, people who care'.

I do not believe that all people with a disability

will be interested in any given service nor would they all have the skills to be actively involved in some aspects of an organisation. This is also the case with other sections of the community. It is important however that organisations set out policies outlining minimum skill requirement. Many people with a disability are able to take up volunteering very competently, like others in the community regardless of having clusters of skills/abilities, in which they excel and from which they receive satisfaction.

If the people in volunteer organisations were more aware of the degrees of disability and how this impinges upon the lives of people with a disability they may realise that people with a disability can be actively engaged. It just needs a little thought about tasks and jobs that are carried out in the different organisations. As with all change, people in volunteer organisations and services will be reluctant to meet the challenge of engaging people with a disability and concerned about how this might work. Mistakes will be made along the way but it is from making mistakes that some of our greatest lessons are learned. As long as people are all treated with respect, called by name, asked what they can do and if they understand, given simple instructions, even perhaps an opportunity to do a trial period, then we are providing the opportunities for us to all learn. As with all people those with a disability are each different; some people will move on when they have learnt skills, some will not be suitable, some may stay for years.

It was a recommendation of the project group that volunteer and community organisations would benefit both from understanding the supports that are available in each of their communities and from disability awareness training. Training should include information about specific disabilities, how to support people with a disability and the type of tasks that a person with a disability is capable of doing, disability discrimination and how organisations can become more inclusive. Government and non-government community organisations are available to provide support, information and training.

## **ACCESS**

Our group explored the access conundrum. Not only did people with a disability feel that identifying and finding out about services was the greatest initial barrier to volunteering for people with a disability

but also many of the disability organisations indicated that they too found it difficult to find out what services welcome volunteer participation by people with a disability. Stories were shared of our attempts to build relationships between volunteer organisations and people with a disability, and the feelings we experienced when told time and time again that volunteer organisations would not be able to have a person with a disability as a volunteer or member or, more specifically, that they would not have any jobs that a person with a disability could do.

My personal experience was that scanning the internet is difficult without taking into account problems associated with making follow-up contacts. Telephone numbers are often out of date on the web and in the directory. Contacts are unavailable during normal business hours and availability may be confined to very few and narrow intervals. Most people reported that finding out about organisations presents a formidable barrier early in the search for volunteer roles.

This study has helped me understand that many people experience difficulty making contact with organisations and finding out what opportunities are available to participate in. People with a disability identified that they needed help to understand what each place actually does. They told me: 'If someone could explain what different opportunities there are for me to be involved in that would help.' Others suggested that they would appreciate '...someone to introduce them to the group and let them know what is available'. Many people suggested 'If an opportunity to go and see what different places do, what jobs I might need to do if I were to volunteer with that place' or 'a come and try session'. Similar to their counterparts who don't have a disability, those with a disability expressed the feeling that, 'I do not want to join a place and then find that I do not really enjoy what they are doing'.

People shared their views about the type of support they may need and what could be done to help them access volunteer and community organisations. People expressed that it would make it easier to access volunteer and community options if they could get assistance with filling in membership forms and if the forms could be made easier. They identified a need for general help with reading and writing if this is required. Many mentioned the need for someone to support them or help them to learn what

to do. They spoke about a lack of job availability and thought that a variety in jobs or tasks is often a good idea. Some people suggested the use of a buddy system or a key person that they might work with. 'If I had someone to help me learn, maybe a mentor would be good', was what one person stated. Many people spoke of issues for accessing services in wheelchairs and the barriers people in wheelchairs or walking frames experience with getting in and out of buildings or with going to the toilet. Other barriers to volunteering were transport, time and place of meetings.

I found out that the majority of volunteer and community organisations use word of mouth or advertisements in the local paper as their preferred means of recruiting. Unfortunately this means of recruiting poses numerous difficulties for people with a disability.

The study group felt that a model similar to that of the Geelong and/or Ballarat Volunteer Resource Centres might be a way to reduce the barriers identified by people with a disability. A Volunteer Resource Centre should be inclusive of, and accessible to, people with a disability and have the capacity to assist people with a disability to identify volunteering options to meet their needs. The Centre should provide information to all people on opportunities available for volunteering and membership of community organisations, provide information to organisations who are investigating volunteering and community options for individuals, assist with recruiting of volunteers (this would take pressure off local shire councils and organisations), provide a service which matches peoples' individual choices and skills to volunteering opportunities, develop and maintain a database of all organisations seeking volunteers and opportunities for inclusion. It could explore the use of volunteers to introduce people with a disability to organisations and services, develop task lists for volunteering opportunities including work instructions, and introduce a buddy system or mentors who would assist people with a disability with their new role and promote this service to the whole community.

The Morwell Volunteer and Community Options Expo was an overwhelming success as a means of providing two-way learning for people with a disability and volunteer and community organisations. It is felt by many that a Volunteering and

Community Options Expo should be held annually. The Expo could be held during National Volunteer Week each year, it could even be held across Australia, as a way to highlight the great work done by these organisations and to encourage people to be active participants. We found it is a great way to showcase what organisations are doing and a means for people to ask questions, get answers and become active.

## **VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT AND ROLE DEFINITION**

People with a disability want to be included and they feel that the steps to help them feel accepted into the volunteer organisations can and should be taken. The things that they identified are not extraordinary. People with a disability made several suggestions. I heard them say:

‘It is good to ask people what jobs they can do, or what they might need to help them do the job.’

‘Do not assume.’

‘If a person with a disability has been given a job to do, please, do not take over, just because I may take a bit longer to do it.’

‘Ask me if you are not sure if I understand or can do the job, doing it for me does not help me.’

‘People all have the same needs.’

‘People do not always support others.’

Buddy systems were discussed and were viewed as great value to people:

‘Give people choices of who to work with, if possible provide choices of jobs I can do. It is good if these can be varied.’

‘List things or actions that need to be done, if I cannot read you could put this on a tape recorder for me.’

‘Share the role of things to do.’

‘Teamwork is always good; I often work better if I am working with other people.’

‘If there is a group of people doing the job it makes it fun no matter what you are doing.’

Many people said that they are frightened to say what problems they have when they start a new group. It is good to discuss this with potential volunteers before they take on a volunteer commitment.

Realities form the basis for useful discussion with potential recruits. ‘What people say can hurt you.’ This hurt may be unintended. Nevertheless coaching may be necessary to ensure that the climate of the organisation is supported with consistently healthy and clear communication. A question from a volunteer deserves a thoughtful response. Uncertainties are best addressed by careful listening followed by clear directions. Mistakes can be frustrating but they can also provide useful learning opportunities. Tell someone if they are not doing the job correctly, but do not take over. Show respect and do not interfere. People with a disability identified that direction given by inept people can heighten risk: ‘Sometimes learning what to do is hard, other people seem to stress me out and I get confused.’

Many people identified barriers with the training that was provided for volunteers. They felt that the training is often not delivered in appropriate formats for people with a disability or that if they had done training at a particular organisation it might not be recognised at another.

It would assist people with a disability if volunteer training was more inclusive, perhaps by introducing flexible delivery and assessment modes to meet the learning needs of all participants. The delivery of transferable and accredited volunteer training could be explored with accredited training organisations. It would be beneficial if a system of accreditation were developed for volunteer training that is recognised across organisations.

I have learnt that it is not just people with a disability who identified concerns with the training that was required for volunteers. During the course of the project I heard from a large number of organisations requesting training on how general assistance and support might be provided and requesting information on special needs. Some organisations identified access issues with their service or that they are unsure how to engage people with a disability. Other organisations indicated they wanted to find out more about disabilities in general.

Unfortunately, many organisations rejected the idea that people with a disability could be volunteers. Some specifically stated that they would not be able to have a person with a disability volunteer with their organisation. The people whom I spoke with seemed to be unaware of the varying degrees of disability, and had many concerns regarding the type of jobs that people with a disability could do, their ability to understand and how occupational health and safety concerns might be resolved. They did not acknowledge that many current volunteers have a disability: the elderly, the hearing and visually impaired and those with various medical or mobility problems. These are the same things that many people with a disability experience. Many have stereotyped people with a disability and the range of tasks that they can be allocated. Clearly organisations are able to set their own policy on recruitment and the kind of support they are capable of providing for their volunteers. This is not new, but it needs to be given greater thought when people with a disability are actively recruited.

A small number of organisations were uncovered that had identified some areas where they could use some help from people with a disability, or had made offers to support people who may be interested in their organisation. Some volunteer and community organisations are already doing this well and have made modifications to their organisations to accommodate people with a disability. This is occurring to various degrees with some organisations being very keen and understanding of the benefits of including people with a disability and enthusiastically shared stories of how their organisation had facilitated inclusion for all people.

Management of organisations will need to become creative and pro-active so that people with a disability can be better assimilated into the community and into volunteering as a way of life. Time is needed to explore how this may work for individual organisations. Contracts need to be

designed and negotiated with special emphasis not only on functions and performance but also on volunteer needs and support. It is crucial to positively promote the abilities and activities that people with a disability are involved in. The community as a whole will then see the benefits of, not barriers to, including people with a disability.

People with a disability are keen to volunteer and there is much that they can contribute – yet they are an untapped resource. People with a disability are eagerly awaiting the day when volunteer and community organisations demonstrate that they are ready to count them in.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

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*Leanne Bruce was the project manager and key driver of this project. She has had more than 10 years' experience working in various roles from support worker to manager in the disability field, and is a keen advocate for the rights of people with a disability. She is now living and working in the Mornington Peninsula area and is extremely keen to expand opportunities for people with a disability.*

*For this work Leanne Bruce has won the Monash University Pro Vice Chancellor's Community Service Award for the School of Humanities.*

*The award is for students who during the course of the academic year made a significant contribution to their local community and furthered the relationship between their community and Monash University.*