

Boomerang Volunteers: Back Atcha



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Since it's National Volunteer Week, the NRMCC team has been reflecting on the many volunteers (from guest writers to [conference faculty](#) and our [board of directors](#)) who fuel our mission to inspire Risk Champions. Because it's in our DNA, we've also been pondering volunteer risk and reward, the subject of our very first publication, now available as a [fifth edition](#)! As usual, many calls to our Risk Help hotline (free to [Affiliate Members](#); call us at 703.777.3504) focus on volunteer issues, from sourcing to supervising and even suspending the volunteers. A topic we hadn't considered very closely, however, is the possibility of boomerang volunteers. In "The Alumni Advantage," featured in the April 2018 edition of *HR Magazine*, Geri Tucker describes some of the advantages of staying in touch and welcoming back "alum" employees. While reading this piece it occurred to me that the benefits of entertaining "comeback colleagues" and staying in touch with volunteer alum are potentially significant. They include:

- **Good news travels fast:** employees who have been treated fairly and with kindness—from start to separation—have the potential to be ardent ambassadors of a company or nonprofit organization. The same holds true, of course, with volunteers. Volunteers who had fun and were fulfilled serving your mission will share that experience with potential donors and future volunteers.
- **Efficient onboarding:** the time to onboard a brand-new volunteer is arguably longer than the time and resources required to bring a returning volunteer up to speed. Returning volunteers don't have to be sold on your mission, and they are likely to remember key values and policies as well.
- **Lasting commitment:** In her interview for "The Alumni Advantage," Lisa Inserra from the company Sodexo says that "boomerang employees also tend to stay longer than other hires." Why? Inserra cites two reasons: "they know exactly what they're signing up for... and they've seen that the grass isn't always greener in other pastures..."

Managing Returning Volunteer Risk

- *Don't Skimp on Safety:* Although a returning volunteer has already heard your safety speech, the importance of your mission and the wellbeing of everyone at your agency warrants taking the time to reiterate key safety messages. Express appreciation for a returning volunteer's valuable know-how, and emphasize what's changed and *why* since their last period of service.
- *Don't Assume a Stale Skill Set:* another benefit of boomerang employees touted in "The Alumni Advantage," is new skills and fresh perspective acquired while away. Ask returning volunteers about their experiences since leaving your nonprofit the first time, and show appreciation for those skills when matching the boomerang volunteer to a new role.

- *Ask and Invite the Volunteer to Tell:* remember to ask a returning volunteer *why* they chose to return to service at your nonprofit, instead of seeking service opportunities elsewhere. Invite the volunteer to tell their story to current and prospective volunteers, perhaps in a social media spotlight or as a volunteer team lead who helps onboard and supervise other volunteers.
- *Keep in Touch:* over the years we've counseled many nonprofit leaders to take the high road when negotiating or celebrating the departure of any staff member or volunteer. Every former team member is either a potential crusader for your cause—or a person who might poison the well of your volunteer pool. "The Alumni Advantage" reminded me that stellar leadership teams do more than taking the high road: they strive to stay in touch with former staff. The article cites the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Junior Achievement America as examples of nonprofits that foster familial alumni networks. While some private companies have deeper pockets to fund alum activities, consider cost effective ways to send the message that you still care about former staffers. Invite them to holiday gatherings, to sign up for your mailing list, and use a calling tree to say hello from time to time. Alumni in positions of influence can potentially align their organizations and social spheres in support of your mission.
- *Use Gentle Candor:* of course not every former employee or volunteer is eligible to rejoin your workforce. The best course is to be truthful with departing staff, so they don't labor under the false impression that they are welcome back in the same or a different position. But that doesn't mean disconnecting entirely. A former volunteer may not have been a good match for a service role, but could be a dedicated and generous donor. When an ineligible volunteer asks to return, use gentle candor. Don't string along a would-be boomerang volunteer and turn them into a mission detractor in the process.

You'll come full circle when your mission benefits from the renewed support of a comeback colleague. "Each thing is of like form from everlasting and comes round again in its cycle." – Marcus Aurelius

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