

Three Risk Trends to Keep in Mind as you Enlist Volunteers



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In my work with nonprofit teams, I am repeatedly impressed with the array of terrific volunteer programs that support nonprofit missions; that positive impression swells when I observe smart risk management practices in volunteer recruitment and supervision. I experienced first hand the positive message that a clear, compelling volunteer training transmits to a brand-new volunteer. That experience led me to wonder, how are trends in volunteerism affecting the risk profile of nonprofits?

Do a Doubletake on Your Volunteer Risks

There's little doubt that for many nonprofits, volunteer programs are a key focal point when it comes to risk management. The types of risks associated with volunteer service vary, from personal safety risks, to data privacy concerns, reputation risk, youth protection, and labor law, to name a few. The NRMCM team explores the myriad risks and plentiful rewards of volunteer service in our eBook, [*No Surprises: Harmonizing Risk and Reward in Volunteer Management—5th Edition*](#).

When it comes to risks experienced or caused by volunteers, nonprofit leaders naturally tend to be risk savvy. NRMCM has seen nonprofit leaders pay extra attention to volunteer risks to ensure that:

- Volunteers understand the safety policies and expectations of the organizations they serve
- Volunteers are prepared to act to protect the safety of others
- Volunteers feel connected to the nonprofit's mission and feel valued and energized
- Volunteers are aware of the special care that must be exercised when working with vulnerable clients

Top Volunteer Risk Trends

My colleague Katharine Nesslage and I set out to learn how the volunteer risk landscape is evolving, and discover what trends might be relevant to our [Affiliate Members](#) and clients. Here are the observations that stood out following our research and interviews with several highly experienced volunteer program leaders:

- **Reputation risks are on the rise.** As organizations sort through their top risks, reputational concerns have risen to the top of top 10 risk lists. As Melanie Lockwood Herman explains in her article "[Social Distortion, Personal Responsibility, and Reputational Risk](#)," the repercussions of a controversial tweet,

arrogant comment, or misstatement online are keeping nonprofit leaders up at night. How does this relate to volunteer programs? More than one volunteer leader cited the growth of social media as a clarion call to educate volunteers about social media do's, don'ts and must nots. The missed cues of exuberant volunteers can lead to embarrassing and harmful outcomes: an inaccurate social media post could undermine an advocacy campaign, and pictures of a child could lead to harm caused by a non-custodial parent whose parental rights have been terminated.

- **The ranks of episodic volunteers are growing.** One theme in our interviews and research was the growth of “episodic” volunteering versus traditional long-term volunteer commitments. Retiree volunteers may be more open to a weekly or monthly responsibility, but many other demographic groups are increasingly reluctant to sign on for long-term gigs. Introducing risk management practices and inculcating risk-aware volunteer service is much harder when there is churn in the volunteer ranks. Remember that risk briefings need to be incorporated into every event to capture all of the volunteers participating for the first time. Don't miss out on the time and talents of episodic volunteers by making safety training inconvenient or hard to access. For a fascinating look at trends in volunteerism from a survey of volunteer coordinators in 12 countries, see VolunteerPro's [2022 Volunteer Management Progress Report](#).
- **Virtual volunteers are online and ready to serve.** With high-speed internet becoming ubiquitous, many nonprofit leaders are looking to tap into the growing potential of remote volunteer labor. The trend toward remote workers is reflected in many volunteer coordinator titles being updated to “volunteer and virtual volunteer manager” or “virtual volunteer lead.” While many nonprofits are experimenting with the best ways to deploy remote volunteers, we spoke to several leaders who said they already consider their virtual volunteer programs a success. Remote volunteer teams can bring great services to the organization, reduce facilities expense, and enable homebound workers to contribute to the cause. We learned that virtual volunteers are contributing to myriad projects, such as:
 - Monitoring and responding to social media posts
 - Compiling survey results
 - Research and advocacy work
 - Creating fliers and making phone calls and appointments
 - Project management
 - Grant writing
 - Training
 - Supporting candidate recruitment and vetting

Some risks are reduced when volunteers work remotely, but other risks may increase. For example, remote volunteers may need additional training and support since they are working off-site. Virtual volunteers may require more frequent feedback and coaching, compared to their in-office counterparts. Remember to find opportunities to re-connect remote volunteers to the mission of your organization. Keeping these vital team members connected is likely to be more challenging than on-site volunteers in helping them understand the value of their service.

Risk Tips in the New Age of Volunteering

Two important practices stand out as vital to the success of a modern-age volunteer program: 1) keeping connections with volunteers fresh, whether that means exploring a new mode of communication, revisiting expectations, or experimenting with the frequency of messaging with volunteers, and 2) cultivating volunteers as advocates for your cause.

Peruse the tips below for ways to create and sustain the enthusiasm and effectiveness of your volunteers.

- **Compose concise training materials.** Easy-to-digest training materials produce an army of informed volunteer advocates ready, willing, and able to move mountains to support your mission. While the wants and needs of volunteers differ, a consistent theme in our conversations with volunteer leaders is the gratitude expressed by volunteers who feel properly equipped for their assignments. See our article [“Effective Training is Key”](#) for general tips on training, as well as a breakdown of the important benefits of great training programs.
- **Consider episodic volunteerism.** If your volunteer base would prefer a more flexible schedule, are you able to adapt? Try surveying your volunteers regularly to get a feel for their schedules and consider experimenting with schedules that may be a better fit for your changing volunteer workforce. A bit of flexibility on your part could inspire priceless contentment in your volunteer ranks.
- **Revisit your communication methods and timing.** Are there new, easier ways to connect? Styles

and expectations differ based on myriad factors. See “[Rewarding Risks: The Prodigious Power of Volunteers](#)” for insights on recognition options and considerations.

- **Empower volunteers to speak for you.** The authors of [Good Measures: Reassessing Your Social Media Response](#), remind us to keep in mind that “everyone in your organization who uses social media adds to your digital footprint.” Your volunteers should probably not be running your social media platforms or your communications department, but they should be treated as respected advocates for the organization. Make sure they have the training and understanding needed to represent your mission and help quell troublemakers.
- **Remember that volunteers are customers, too.** The advice to “put customers first” may need to be refreshed if volunteers are truly a vital asset to your nonprofit. Have you ever “fired” a customer or client for disrespecting members of your staff or volunteer team? Remember that putting those who serve first is key to creating an environment and culture conducive to enviable client and community service.

I am inspired by the dedication and service of volunteers who bring nonprofit missions to life. Nonprofit missions are enriched by dedicated and risk-aware volunteers. It’s gratifying to see how a commitment to risk management best practices fortifies a nonprofit mission and builds resilience.