# What's in it for Me and My Agency? A Survey on the Benefits of Engaging Volunteers with Disabilities

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## Article:

In 1998, the Association for Volunteer Administration adopted a formal Statement of Inclusiveness (AVA Board of Directors, 1999) that defines diversity in its broadest terms, and proclaimed the value of inclusiveness in volunteering and throughout the profession. This followed a 1995 process that identified professional ethics in volunteer administration. Among the professional ethics identified were citizenship and respect. Within these two values the Association recognized

(a) human dignity—volunteer programs and initiatives should respect and enhance the human dignity of all persons involved; and

(b) accessibility—volunteer administrators will work to understand and treat with respect individuals from diverse backgrounds.

Wilde these are unquestionably worthwhile values, creating inclusive volunteer communities can be a complex undertaking. When it comes to those volunteers who appear to be more difficult to engage effectively, many volunteer administrators are left wondering why it is to their, and their agency's, benefit to be inclusive. Individuals with disabilities represent one such population that may leave volunteer administrators asking these questions. In a time when volunteering is being scrutinized from a cost-benefit perspective, and bottom-tine concerns are ubiquitous across the nonprofit world, what the agency will receive by engaging volunteers in general, let alone volunteers with disabilities, comes into question.

Management, staff, and other volunteers can quickly lose sight of the advantages to being inclusive, and instead direct their foci toward the barriers to inclusion. Various difficulties encountered by volunteer administrators when engaging volunteers with disabilities have been documented. Barriers such as a lack of transportation for individuals with disabilities, perceived increases in staff necessary to supervise and support these individuals, lack of staff training in how to supervise volunteers with disabilities, negative attitudes, potential costs (e.g., accommodations, liability), physical accessibility, and perceived skill deficits have all been cited (CSV's Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, 2000; Graff & Vedell, 2003; Miller, Schleien, & Bedini, 2003). However, many volunteer administrators with experience in engaging volunteers with disabilities find the benefits far outweigh the barriers (Miller et al., 2003). Unfortunately, there is a paucity of research available that reveals the benefits to agencies of broadening their volunteer pools by adding volunteers from underrepresented groups.

This study focuses on the inclusion of volunteers with disabilities, examining the perceptions of volunteer administrators regarding organizational benefits that result from engaging this segment of our diverse communities. The study was designed to answer the following questions: (a) Do volunteer administrators perceive benefits to engaging volunteers with disabilities, and if so, what are those benefits? and (b) Does a relationship exist between the proportion of volunteers with disabilities in an agency and the benefits perceived by volunteer administrators?

## LITERATURE REVIEW
### Engaging Volunteers with Disabilities
Approximately 19% of the American population has some form of disability (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Yet a U.S. study indicated that individuals with disabilities account for only 5.7% of the current volunteer pool (Miller et al., 2003). Similar results have been cited in the United Kingdom, where individuals with disabilities comprise only 5.9% of the overall volunteer pool, yet comprise nearly 20% of the overall population (CSV's Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, 2000). Despite the low number of volunteers with disabilities, many volunteer administrators have had experience engaging these volunteers. Surveys across the globe cited 77%, 85%, and 56% of agencies engage volunteers with disabilities in the U.S. (Miller et al., 2003), Canada (Graff & Vedell, 2003), and the UK (CSV's Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, 2000), respectively.

### Employing Individuals with Disabilities
Volunteer administrators are not the first to grapple with the complexities of engaging individuals with disabilities. In recent years employers have felt compelled to address the cost-benefit analysis of employing individuals with disabilities. Employers of individuals with disabilities have found these employees to be hardworking and highly motivated (Sandys, 1999), competent (Olson, Cioffi, Yovanoff, & Mank, 2001; Sandys, 1999), loyal (Kregel, 1999; Shafer, Hill, Seyfarth, & Wehman, 1987), trustworthy (Shafer et al., 1987), and dependable/reliable (Kregel, 1999; Nietupski, Hamre-Nietupski,. Vander-Hart, & Fishback, 1996; Sandys, 1999; Shafer et al., 1987). Employees with disabilities were found to have a positive impact on the productivity and profitability of businesses (Kregel, 1999) and to contribute to a business' efficiency (Sandys, 1999) by working productively and performing quality work (Mank, O'Neill, & Jensen, 1998; Sandys, 1999).

Employees with disabilities were also found to enhance a company's public and community image (Nietupski et al., 1996; Olson et al., 2001). In addition, employees with disabilities have had positive effects on workers without disabilities (Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994; Petty & Fussell, 1997), have brought employers personal satisfaction (Nietupski et al., 1996; Sandys, 1999), and have had a positive impact on the overall workplace (Olson et al., 2001). In addition, employers with experience hiring employees with disabilities reported having more favorable attitudes and perceptions toward employing individuals with disabilities in comparison to those with no such experience (Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994; Levy, Jessop, Rimmerman, & Levy, 1992; Nietupski et al., 1996).

While the volunteer and employment fields are different in many ways, the world of work is the closest known literature base from which to borrow in order to broaden our understanding of the effects of engaging volunteers with disabilities. It would be natural to assume that similar benefits would be introduced to agencies by volunteers with disabilities. Currently, research is unavailable to validate such an assumption.

## METHODOLOGY
### Instrument
A self-designed, online survey instrument was used, consisting of two demographic questions addressing agency mission and the total number of volunteers as well as the number of volunteers with disabilities engaged by the agency; nine questions on a 4-point Likert scale (i.e., strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree) concerning perceptions of the work characteristics of volunteers with disabilities; 12 questions using a Likert scale addressing the benefits associated with engaging volunteers with disabilities; and three open-ended questions, targeting volunteer administrators who had had experience in engaging volunteers with disabilities, on perceived benefits. Questions were related to the findings from the employment literature and from persons with disabilities.

Content validity of the instrument was established by a consultant in the field of volunteer administration and was further validated by board members of AVA. Internal reliability was strong for both the perceived work characteristics items (alpha = .91) and perceived benefit items (alpha = .90). The instrument took an average of 8 minutes to complete.

Disability was broadly defined for the subjects of this study in the introduction of the survey with the statement, "For the purpose of this survey, disability is defined as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities (e.g., self-care, community use, employment) of the individual."

## Procedures

A cover letter introducing the survey was sent by e-mail to all AVA members with e-mail addresses on file and to cybervpm, UKVPM, and OZvpm electronic mailing list subscribers. The letter stated the purpose of the survey, voluntary nature of participation, and confidential nature of the data collection. It also contained a link to the online survey. One week later, AVA members were sent an electronic reminder that included a link to the original online survey. In an attempt to broaden the international response to this survey, a notice requesting participation in and a **link** to the online survey was also placed in newsletters distributed by the following agencies: Volunteer Vancouver, Scottish Association for Volunteer Managers, and Northern Ireland Volunteer Development Agency. No tracking of individual responses occurred, with all respondents remaining anonymous. Online data collection limited respondents to completing the survey only once.

## RESULTS

The online survey instrument was accessed by 755 potential respondents. Fifty-two of these individuals chose not to answer the questions, reducing the number of usable surveys to 703. Respondents overwhelmingly resided within the United States (82.5%) and Canada (5.8%). Other respondents were from England, Australia, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Italy, Nepal, Singapore, United Kingdom, Netherlands, and New Zealand (in order by response rate of return). Due to the limited amount of data collected from out side the U.S. and Canada, the results reported reflect only North American respondents (n = 621). Due to the substantial amount of data collected via the three open-ended survey questions, reporting on the analysis of these data will appear in a follow-up article.

North American respondents designated their agency's primary mission as falling into a wide range of categories. Only 5.7% of respondents indicated that their agency's primary mission was to serve individuals with disabilities. The majority of respondents classified their agency's mission as the provision of social (18.5%) or health services (14.3%).

Other agency missions included working with children (8.6%), seniors (8.1%), the environment (6.6%), cultural arts (5.5%), and volunteerism (4.5%).

## Volunteers with Disabilities

It was determined in the North American sample that 4.5% of volunteers (N = 213,779) had an identified disability (n = 9,598), providing information on the number of volunteers with and without disabilities in their agency (n = 565). As expected, agencies that identified their mission as "working with people with disabilities" and "working with seniors" reported higher numbers of volunteers with disabilities. It was noted in the qualitative data set that many of the agencies working with seniors indicated that their volunteers often were from among their participants and had age-related disabilities. When excluding the respondents whose agency mission was "working with seniors" (n = 47) and "working with people with disabilities" (n =- 33), the percentage of volunteers with disabilities decreased to 3.9% (n = 485, volunteers = 191,386, volunteers with disabilities 7,531). Only 16.6% of the respondents had not engaged volunteers with disabilities in the prior month.

The survey instrument did not collect data on the types of disabilities represented among these volunteers. However, review of the qualitative data indicates a wide variety of disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, sensory impairments, and mental illness. Information gathered relating to specific disability groups will be discussed in a follow-up article, which will focus on the qualitative data.

## TABLE 1

### Perceptions of Work Characteristics Possessed by Volunteers with Disabilities

| Volunteers with disabilities… | m | sd | n |
|---|---|---|---|
| Are hard workers | 3.47 | .52 | 614 |
| Contribute quality work | 3.37 | .51 | 614 |
| Are conscientious workers | 3.45 | .51 | 617 |
| Are dedicated workers | 3.48 | .51 | 610 |
| Have a lower rate of absenteeism | 2.90 | .72 | 583 |
| Have a lower rate of turnover | 3.03 | .67 | 576 |
| Are reliable | 3.30 | .56 | 606 |
| Are willing to learn new skills | 3.27 | .58 | 609 |
| Are highly motivated | 3.34 | .55 | 606 |

### Work Characteristics of Volunteers with Disabilities

Volunteer administrators' perceptions of the work characteristics of volunteers with disabilities were more positive than negative (see Table 1). Volunteers with disabilities were perceived as hard workers (99.5% strongly agreeing or agreeing), dedicated (99.5%), conscientious (99.2%), contributing quality work (98.8%), motivated (96.0%), reliable (95.4%), and willing to learn new skills (93.7%). Volunteer administrators' perceptions of volunteers with disabilities were somewhat less positive regarding their lower rate of absenteeism (70.7%) and lower turnover (79.0%). There were no significant differences between the perceptions held by U.S. and Canadian respondents.

## TABLE 2

### Perceived Benefits to Engaging Volunteers with Disabilities

| Volunteers with disabilities… | m | sd | n |
|---|---|---|---|
| Help our agency to reach its mission | 3.31 | .57 | 610 |
| Are available during hours when many other volunteers are not | 2.94 | .70 | 600 |
| Offer unique skills and abilities | 2.98 | .64 | 598 |
| Are an untapped group from which to recruit | 3.09 | .66 | 601 |
| Help agency reflect the makeup of our consumers and community | 3.25 | .61 | 606 |
| Help enhance our agency's community image | 3.18 | .62 | 603 |
| Improve staff morale | 2.83 | .66 | 590 |
| Help staff to experience personal satisfaction | 2.87 | .61 | 586 |
| Motivate fellow volunteers and staff | 3.01 | .62 | 598 |
| Are loyal to our agency | 3.27 | .56 | 591 |
| Increase the diversity of our agency | 3.42 | .53 | 608 |
| Help staff accomplish needed tasks | 3.22 | .53 | 602 |

### Benefits to Engaging Volunteers with Disabilities

Respondents strongly agreed with a number of benefits perceived through the engagement of volunteers with disabilities (see Table 2). For example, these volunteers were perceived to increase the diversity of agencies (98% strongly agreeing or agreeing), help the agency reach its mission (95.1%), be loyal to the agency (94.8%),

help the staff accomplish needed tasks (94.7%), and help the agency reflect the makeup of their consumers and community (92.4%). Other benefits were also revealed: volunteers with disabilities help enhance the agency's community image (88.4% strongly agreeing, or agreeing), are an untapped group from which to recruit (82.2%), motivate fellow volunteers and staff (82.1%), and offer unique skills and abilities (79.3%). At somewhat lower rates, it was perceived that volunteers with disabilities help staff to experience personal satisfaction (74.7% strongly agreeing or agreeing), are available during hours when many others are not (73.0%), and improve staff morale (68.7%).

The only perceived benefits variable that yielded significant differences between the U.S. and Canadian respondents was "volunteers with disabilities motivate fellow volunteers and staff," where 83.5% (m 3.03, sd = .61) from the U.S. agreed in comparison to 62.5% (m = 2.75, sd = .67) from Canada (t(596) = 2.80, p < .01).

### *Correlations*
Work characteristics and benefit scores were calculated for each respondent. To calculate these scores, the following values were assigned to the Likert scale responses: strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, agree = 3, and strongly agree = 4. Following these assigned values, subjects' responses to the nine questions addressing work characteristics of volunteers with disabilities were summed to `calculate a work characteristics score that could range from 9 to 36. Likewise, subjects' responses to the 12 questions addressing perceived benefits of engaging volunteers with disabilities were summed to calculate a perceived benefit score with a potential range of 12 to 48. The mean work characteristics score was 29.68 (sd = 4.0, n = 555) and perceived benefit score was 37.51 (sd = 5.0, n = 536).

Volunteer administrators with more positive perceptions of the work characteristics of volunteers with disabilities (i.e., higher work characteristics scores) were more likely to perceive benefits (i.e., higher perceived benefits scores) from doing so (r(491) = .629, p <.01).

### *Analysis of Variance*
Analysis of variance was conducted to determine if a relationship existed between the proportion of volunteers with disabilities in an agency and the benefits perceived by volunteer administrators. Data addressing the percentage of an agency's volunteers that had a disability were recoded into four groups:

no engagement of volunteers with disabilities, low engagement (>0 - 3%), medium engagement (>3% - 9%), and high engagement (>9%).

Volunteer administrators who did not engage volunteers with disabilities and those supporting a medium level of engagement (>3% - 9%) had a less positive perception of volunteers with disabilities as dedicated workers (F(3,539) = 5.34, p < .01) compared to volunteer administrators with low (>0 — 3%) and high (>9%) engagement levels (see Table 3). Similar findings appeared for other work characteristic variables: volunteers with disabilities are conscientious workers (F(3,546) = 3.99, p < .01), hard workers (F(3,543) = 3.95, p < .01), and contribute quality work (F(3,543) = 2.71, p < .05).

Volunteers with disabilities were less likely to be perceived as benefiting an agency by helping it reach its mission (F(3,541) = 4.82, p < .01) by administrators who did not engage volunteers with disabilities as compared to those with a high engagement level (see Table 4). The same is true for the perceived benefit of helping an agency to better reflect the consumers and the community (F(3,538) = 4.53, p < .01), and helping staff accomplish needed tasks (F(3,534) = 3.03, p < .05).

## TABLE 3
### Perceptions of Work Characteristics of Volunteers with Disabilities by Percentage of Volunteers with Disabilities

| Percent Volunteers with Disabilities | Hard Workers | | | Quality Work | | | Conscientious | | | Dedicated | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | m | sd | n | m | sd | n | m | sd | n | m | sd | n |
| 0% | 3.33 | .50 | 91 | 3.27 | .49 | 90 | 3.31 | .51 | 91 | 3.33 | .50 | 91 |
| >0% - 3% (low) | 3.52 | .54 | 145 | 3.41 | .49 | 145 | 3.49 | .50 | 145 | 3.51 | .52 | 139 |
| >3% - 9% (med) | 3.45 | .51 | 166 | 3.33 | .49 | 168 | 3.44 | .50 | 168 | 3.44 | .51 | 168 |
| >9% (high) | 3.55 | .50 | 145 | 3.44 | .56 | 144 | 3.53 | .53 | 146 | 3.59 | .49 | 145 |

Volunteers with disabilities were less likely to be perceived as improving staff morale ($F(3,524) = 3.84$, $p < .01$) by administrators with a medium engagement level than those with a high engagement level. No significant differences were found between administrators with no volunteers with disabilities and those with a high engagement level on the perception that volunteers with disabilities would improve staff morale.

## TABLE 4
### Perceived Benefits to Engaging Volunteers with Disabilities Grouped by Percentage of Volunteers with Disabilities

| Percent Volunteers with Disabilities | Reach Our Mission | | | Reflect Community | | | Improve Staff Morale | | | Accomplish Tasks | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | m | sd | n | m | sd | n | m | sd | n | m | sd | n |
| 0% | 3.17 | .53 | 90 | 3.07 | .70 | 89 | 2.81 | .66 | 85 | 3.11 | .53 | 89 |
| >0% - 3% (low) | 3.28 | .63 | 143 | 3.24 | .56 | 144 | 2.78 | .67 | 139 | 3.18 | .53 | 142 |
| >3% - 9% (med) | 3.33 | .52 | 166 | 3.26 | .59 | 165 | 2.73 | .63 | 161 | 3.22 | .51 | 164 |
| >9% (high) | 3.45 | .58 | 146 | 3.37 | .61 | 144 | 2.97 | .65 | 143 | 3.31 | .54 | 143 |

## DISCUSSION

Results indicated that volunteers with disabilities comprised only 4.5% of the overall volunteer pool in North American nonprofit and public agencies. Volunteers with disabilities were currently engaged in 83.4% of the agencies surveyed. Volunteer administrators generally had a positive perception of the work characteristics of volunteers with disabilities. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed to the myriad benefits associated with engaging volunteers with disabilities: increasing the diversity of the agency, helping it reach its mission, being loyal, helping the staff accomplish needed tasks, and better reflecting the makeup of their consumers and community. Although less enthusiastically, respondents also noted the benefits: helping staff to experience personal satisfaction, being available during hours when many other volunteers are not, and improving staff morale.

A high positive correlation was found between administrators' perceptions of the work characteristics of volunteers with disabilities and the benefits perceived through their engagement. Volunteer administrators who engaged many volunteers with disabilities were more likely to have positive perceptions of their work characteristics, particularly as they related to being hard workers, contributing quality work, and being conscientious and dedicated workers. Likewise, administrators engaging volunteers with disabilities at a high rate were more likely to indicate that these volunteers helped agencies reflect the makeup of their consumers and community, helped staff accomplish needed tasks, helped agencies reach their missions, and improved staff morale.

It is interesting to note that volunteer administrators with medium engagement levels (>3% - 9%) ) of volunteers with disabilities were less positive in their perceptions of these volunteers' work characteristics than administrators with low (>0% - 3%) or high (>9%) engagement levels. A possible explanation is that these volunteer administrators recognized the need for inclusion, and have attempted to be inclusive in their practices, but lacked the resources (e.g., time, knowledge, experience) to ensure that these inclusive experiences were successful. Until further research is conducted, one can only speculate as to the nature of these discrepant administrator attitudes.

## Implications for Practice

The Association for Volunteer Administration has identified human dignity and accessibility as ethical principles that should be reflected in all volunteer programs (AVA Board of Directors, 1999). Results of this study indicated that managers who have effectively engaged volunteers with disabilities had a higher awareness of their benefits to the mission, agency staff, and their overall organization. Practices that increased the accessibility and accommodation of diverse groups served to strengthen and reinforce perceptions regarding the benefits of inclusive volunteering.

Volunteer administrators were aware of the benefits to engaging volunteers with disabilities; however, experiencing it increased their overall awareness of these benefits. Perceived barriers, such as the increases in staff needed to supervise and support, lack of staff knowledge regarding working with persons with disabilities, and the potential costs of physical accessibility were outweighed by the perceived program benefits among those managers with practical experience.

Volunteer administrators may cite organizational restrictions, liability concerns, and lack of senior management support as rationale for not engaging volunteers with disabilities. However, those that engaged volunteers of varying abilities became much more willing to accommodate, to appreciate the benefits, and to be less concerned about barriers.

Offering organization-wide staff training on how to supervise volunteers with disabilities, including underlying negative attitudes, perceived skill deficits, and potential administrative and accommodation costs, is a strategy offered for addressing barriers. This study indicated that practice leads to success and success leads to more successes. Organizations that effectively engage volunteers with disabilities build upon successes and benefits. Consequently, perceived barriers become less significant and restrictive.

Volunteer administrators are called upon to be principled leaders who establish inclusive volunteer programs founded on core ethical values that support citizenship and respect for all facets of our diverse society. It was determined that most volunteer administrators were politically aware of the benefits to creating inclusive programs. It also suggested that effective leadership led to action and action changed peoples' perceptions. Demonstrated success is a powerful force for changing and/or reinforcing perceptions.

## Implications for Research

This study was limited by the classification of all individuals with disabilities as one group. It is possible that volunteer administrators' perceptions are influenced by the type of disability (e.g., physical disability, cognitive disability, mental illness) involved. Further exploration of administrators' perceptions based on specific disability descriptions is warranted. Also, it should be noted that many respondents expressed difficulty and even contempt, when asked to share their perceptions about individuals with disabilities as a homogenous population. This sense of unease is understood, as many individuals wish to avoid stereotyping. Perhaps scenarios that describe a particular volunteer with a disability (e.g., their limitations, personality, strengths, interests) could be used to assess attitudes in future studies.

Due to the paucity of research in the inclusive volunteer area, disability employment literature served as the lone source for the development of survey questions addressing possible benefits perceived by administrators through engagement of volunteers with disabilities. This may also have limited the ability of our survey instrument to reveal benefits that are unique to volunteerism. Initial analysis of the data from the three open-ended questions provides hope that we may soon have the capability to identify and understand the benefits associated with engaging volunteers with disabilities. We plan to present these findings following further analyses.

In the future, an attempt should be made to translate the identified benefits of inclusive volunteering into more quantifiable terms. Objective outcomes would potentially have more "currency" for the skeptics of inclusive volunteering, including certain agency boards, funders, and agency staff. Broad "perceived" benefits, such as

"helping the agency to reach its mission," may not be a compelling enough argument to persuade the doubters of inclusion.

In addition to further defining and quantifying the benefits, further research is needed to determine the processes that are essential to ensuring that these benefits are perceived by a larger number of volunteer administrators. At this time, it is unclear whether the varied experiences—both positive and negative       that volunteer administrators have had when engaging volunteers with disabilities are due to the policies and procedures of different agencies, differential tasks that volunteers with disabilities have been performing, personal characteristics of volunteer administrators and/or the volunteers, some combination of these factors, or other factors yet to be determined.

Since this study was exploratory in nature, it posited more questions about the possible benefits associated with engaging volunteers with disabilities than it may have answered. Future research should attempt to validate and expand upon these preliminary results, and begin to answer the questions that were raised. Intuition suggests that the engagement of volunteers with disabilities is a "win-win" for everyone involved, and this study leans toward the validation of these benefits. Additional research to help us understand the components of these "win-win" scenarios is warranted and timely, as the inclusive volunteering movement continues to gain momentum. Now is the time to give that momentum an extra nudge.

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