

# VOICES - Briefing Paper 9

## Volunteer Retention

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### **It costs five times as much to get a new customer than to keep an existing one**

In business, it takes five times as much time, effort and money to attract a new customer as it does to keep an existing customer.

It is the same with volunteers. What does it really cost to lose experienced volunteers? What about the time, effort and money involved in recruiting, selecting, training and supervising new volunteers? What of the disruption to services, clients and other volunteers? How about the valuable knowledge and experience lost with the departing volunteer?

### **How do you measure retention success?**

How do you actually know if you have a volunteer retention problem? How does your organisation measure success in volunteer retention? Of course the answers will vary with each organisation and even with the type of projects involved.

Very few organisations have goals and outcomes defining what they mean by retention success. Even fewer collect any data on their volunteer retention rates.

### **So how long is long enough?**

How long must a volunteer stay to be considered 'retained' rather than a 'dropout'? Do you examine retention based on how long each individual person stays or do you look at their contribution rather than their time? Is retention about active membership or just being 'on the books'?

For many organisations the successful retention of a volunteer is not one year, ten years or even twenty years - it is usually until they die. Not that's a hard retention expectation to maintain.

### **Time for some retention goals**

Whatever your definition of retention, develop some practical retention goals. Holding on to a volunteer forever is far from a realistic goal.

One goal could be to achieve an average number of hours of service from each volunteer per year. Another might be a total number of hours per year per group of volunteers - a team approach.

Still another goal might be a commitment of 2 years or 200 hours involvement from each volunteer or to increase by 20% the number of volunteers staying longer than 2 years. Get realistic and very specific about those retention goals now.

### **Time to say goodbye**

But do keep retention in perspective. Eventually all volunteers will leave and for a myriad of different reasons. Changes in lifestyle and personal circumstances are not reasons you can control. Thank those volunteers warmly and let them go with your gratitude.

Save your energy and focus on those factors that can be controlled within your organisation to encourage rather than discourage your volunteers to stay.