

VicSport Update

What Will Sport do if the Volunteer Pool Runs Dry?

Ask a CEO of any sport organisation to list the top three issues affecting their sport and you can bet your Manolo Slingbacks volunteers will be one of them. Volunteers are sports' greatest asset. Over 90% of all sporting activity takes place at the community level. Down here, almost every organisation is fully run by volunteers, and as a collective, sport and active recreation uses more volunteers than any other community sector. That so many people are willing to give up their time freely and without complaint to make sure the Saturday morning comp's and Wednesday night trainings continue to go ahead is testimony to the valuable contribution sport makes to the community at all levels.

Such heavy reliance on this precious, yet increasingly rare commodity, is however fraught with danger. For some time now we have known that volunteer levels are declining. This is not the result of an increasing stinginess amongst people who no longer wish to make a contribution, but rather is quite simply an outcome of the cash strapped and time poor society we live in. The bottom line is there is less free time available to devote to activities outside of work and family priorities, and this includes volunteering.

The news on the volunteering front isn't all bad. According to the results of a nation wide survey into volunteers completed by Volunteering Australia each year, people do still want to make a contribution to their community by volunteering. 2007 results showed most volunteers surveyed were positive about the benefits their work brings to the community with 99% believing their volunteer work always or sometimes made a difference to their organisation and what they are trying to achieve. The problem is volunteers are being forced to think twice about their contributions due to a range of factors largely beyond the control of the community organisations themselves, namely the ever-increasing administrative burdens placed on organisations, and the personal costs, in both time and monetary terms, volunteering in the 2000's requires.

Those who work in sectors heavily reliant on volunteer resources have continually raised concerns regarding the burden of compliance with legislative and procedural requirements, and the impact of out of pocket expenses on volunteers. To a large extent, we have been able to turn a blind eye to this problem at the highest level because in the end, a volunteer steps up and increases their own workload to take up the slack. Volunteering Australia's 2007 survey clearly shows however that across all sectors, (including sport), the increasing costs of out of pocket expenses, and time and cost of complying with legislative and procedural requirements (in 2007 background checks such as Queensland's Blue Card in Queensland and Victoria's Working with Children Check were listed as the single biggest recent regulatory impact affecting volunteers) are taking their toll.

Out of pocket expenses are a difficult issues to address, namely because most small community organisations do not have the financial resources to provide reimbursement even if they wanted to. Volunteerism in sport in fact grew from a need to secure 'cost free' resources to provide services, and traditionally volunteers have covered many costs from their own pockets – it is the way community sport has survived all these years. With the costs of living increasing so dramatically in recent times however, the \$80 worth of fuel or \$40 phone bill are biting too hard on the individual. Couple this with the already heavy administrative burden volunteers endure – and it is unrealistic to expect to keep increasing the size of our volunteer workload.

For sport and active recreation, ongoing declines in volunteer numbers will have an impact on the ability of the sector to provide the low-cost sporting opportunities so important to providing people with the opportunity to not only be physically active, but also to be socially interactive. The community and funding bodies alike have reaped the benefits of a community sport structure built on volunteer resources for more than a hundred years. But this resource is ever so slowly dwindling, and if some serious steps are not taken now to provide some much needed support on the volunteering front, there will come a time in the future when we will be wondering where the Saturday morning junior hockey, softball, netball, football, cricket, badminton and basketball competitions went. They disappeared when the last of the volunteers were forced to accept it was just one hour, one dollar, one legislated form too many for them to justify their time away from work or family.

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