

Obtaining and Managing Volunteers

By Jon Francis and Raphael Savir

Most Ultimate organizations are run predominantly by volunteers. If you have someone who is willing to work hard for little money, you may be able to put most of the burden of running your leagues and events, the website, back-end databases, etc. on their shoulders, but it's likely that you'll rely on volunteers.

You may wonder why I grouped Volunteers with Code of Conduct. You and your volunteers not only write the rules of your organization, but you live and model them every day. Whenever you are playing in a match and a heated argument erupts, many faces will look at you and wonder how you will behave. Whether your organization helps fund or promote a local high school Ultimate team, runs charity tournaments, etc., your actions speak to the kind of organization that you run and how your players and community will perceive you.

Who Do You Need?

Before sending out mass emails requesting assistance, think carefully about what you need. For example, it doesn't do a lot of good to get 5-10 volunteers to help redesign your website if you don't know what you want in the new design. What you might need first is to cast about for someone who can *lead your web redesign* and then you can work on finding suitable workers for that person. *In other words, it comes down to a lot of project management.*

As President, I tried every year to make a list of the three or four most important tasks facing our organization. For example, working on coed, web redesign, and online registration could have been the list for one year.

From that short list, I talked with the likely project leaders who were already volunteers. They were knowledgeable about how the organization runs, they can make decisions or know who to go to in order to get a decision made, and they are emotionally invested in seeing the organization succeed.

After talking with a few people, my short list would undoubtedly have grown to include their pet projects, but usually I ended up with someone who could lead the project I had, or some names of friends or colleagues to contact.

Who Do You Really Need?

The punch line here is that you need to set up a network of volunteers who have real business skills and training. If your organization grows beyond a single night/week with 50 players mixing it up, then you're probably going to need people with the following skills or training:

Web Developer This means someone who can program in some combination of fairly mainstream html, javascript, java, etc. so that you can write web pages and programs that can be maintained after that person has left town

Web Site Administrator Ideally, one or more volunteers with skills in smtp, spam prevention, mail groups, application hosting environments, etc. This is an area where you will want to have redundancy, so try to make sure you have backups who are in the loop.

Content Providers You should have one or more volunteers who are good writers. It is amazing how much you'll write, on your web site, in newsletters, emails, flyers, letters to prospective field owners, rec departments, schools, teams, organizations you wish to help fund, organizations you hope will fund you, and so on. You might not have these volunteers write everything, but it is very helpful to have them around when you have anything important to write.

Fundraisers If your organization wants money, you should have some volunteers who know how to go about seeking funding.

Database Developers Once your leagues have more than 100 players, it becomes easier to manage the data with real databases which hook into your website for online registration. Even if that's not where you are today, you'll want to be there tomorrow, so it's better to plan out your infrastructure appropriately.

In other words, even though your organization may be mostly about running leagues, it turns out that the volunteers you most need to get may have little direct connection to that work.

How Do You Get Them?

You really have two options when looking for volunteers. The first is to spam as many people as you can. The second is to network. My experience has been that networking works best.

The hard part is that you have to push every year to expand your group of volunteers because you'll suffer attrition every year. In an ideal world, your web administrator would find his or her own replacement before leaving, but that's not likely to be the highest priority for someone who just changed jobs, moved, got married, had an accident, etc., so this means that you have to continually fuel the pipeline for every job description in your organization, planning ahead for when you'll likely need the new person to step in.

Managing Volunteers

As mentioned above, managing volunteers can be difficult because "authority" over them is always very limited. But a few basic, perhaps common-sense, people-skills can be a huge help. First, remember that a volunteer always has to be asked to do something. Avoid phrases like "I want you to..." or "your job will be to..." Instead, use phrases like, "Would you be willing to...?" or "I need someone to... do you think you could help with that?" Second, be patient and understanding; volunteers are donating their free time, and while the board member or manager doing the delegating might also be a volunteer, not everyone will be able to make the same level of commitment.

That said, be willing to gently encourage volunteers to get things done—keep track of their progress, and make sure they don't forget about deadlines or commitments that they previously accepted. Forgetting or losing track of time is one of the more likely reasons a volunteer might not get something done on time. Again, asking for a progress report will work better than high-pressure remarks like "don't forget that your deadline is coming up." It is important to make volunteers' experiences as positive as possible so that they will be more likely to volunteer in the future.

Finally, do not be afraid to ask a volunteer to step aside; once all reasonable efforts have been made to help someone get a job done, if it simply is not working, politely "ask" the volunteer to pass the role on to a new appointee. Firing volunteers is something that must be done rarely and carefully, or it becomes more difficult to recruit new volunteers.

Volunteer Overwhelm and Burnout

Local Ultimate organizations will tend to grow over time if they are run well, which is a good thing for the sport both locally and globally. As the organization grows, the work involved in running everything grows too, and this tends to put an increasing load on volunteers. This need for more workers tends to make it even harder to find volunteers.

The solutions are simple, but not easy. First, make it a top organizational priority to constantly recruit and retain volunteers. Recruiting volunteers is usually most successful when done one-on-one, where a current volunteer asks a friend or teammate if they are willing to help with something, rather than by mass-mailing a list asking for volunteers.

Retaining volunteers is easier if volunteers feel supported and feel their job is manageable. So spread

the workload among more people by creating more positions and committing to fill them, rather than allow today's most motivated volunteers to do everything.

Difficult or Unsuccessful Volunteers

Under most circumstances, the organization should welcome the willingness of any member to volunteer her or his time to help out. Occasionally, however, there may be volunteers who either perform poorly, tend to create conflict, or otherwise obstruct the smooth operation of the organization. It is not easy to know how to deal with these situations, but a couple things should be kept in mind. First, make every effort to resolve any problems—if there is a way to avoid “firing” a volunteer while still keeping things running well, that is usually the best course of action, even if it requires a huge commitment of patience and understanding where it does not seem to be warranted. Second, be willing to ask a volunteer to step aside; if a situation reaches the point where it is clear that removing a volunteer is the right course of action, do not hesitate. It may seem like a drastic step at the

time, but if it is the conclusion of a careful thought process, it will work out for the best. Third, make any decision like this a carefully considered decision of the board of directors, and publicize it as little as possible—do not try to “cover it up,” but avoid giving the impression that the board is excited about firing volunteers or it could become more difficult to recruit volunteers.

Tips

Talk to representatives in other Ultimate organizations. The USA Ultimate web site has a directory, at http://www.usultimate.org/about/ultimate/where_to_play.aspx.

Visit the web sites of groups about the same size as yours, and email or call some of the contacts listed. Ultimate organizers are usually excited to talk about their group and the things they are doing, and their issues are very likely to be the same as yours.