

## **VOLUNTEERS AS REPRESENTATIVES OF THE COMMUNITY INVOLVED IN THE MUSEUM'S LIFE - SOME PERSPECTIVES**

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Volunteers are “outside-insiders”. They are working willingly for a museum. On the other hand, they are not employees of the museum or even, in many cases, specialists in the specific field of interest or the collections of the museum. Still they could be extremely involved in the museum’s activity, they come very often in the museum – sometimes every day, for several hours – and they could even have their working spaces in the organization. They are not paid by the museum, but still they are subject to the museum’s regulations and they should perform their tasks as if they were employees. In this context, volunteers form a complex universe tightly associated with the museum.

The volunteers’ typology is extremely wide. They could range from teenagers to retirees. They could be highly educated or have no formal specialization. They could have very developed social skills or they could be introverted. Volunteers could be extremely wealthy, or they could have poor origins. Their motivation also varies a lot, from the desire to spend time in an unusual way, to the wish for helping museums and their communities (Zbucnea 2008, 143).

In most cases, volunteers are members of the local community who, for various reasons, dedicate their time, energy and knowledge to serve the museum, to help it better perform its activities, to achieve its mission and to better serve its public. The volunteers’ motives of getting involved in different departments of a museum are wide-range, so the jobs they would get involved into could vary considerably (Goodlad & McIvor 1998, 18). Some of the most common motives are the social and cultural concern or the desire to help the society in general, the local community or specific groups expressly. Others volunteer within a museum because they are interested in its collections and its theme. The members of this



category hope to gain more knowledge in that domain, to understand it better and even to help the scientific progress in the field. Other volunteers pursue increased work-experience hoping for a job with the museum, with other similar institution or even with a company. Some volunteers are in fact interns, achieving specific skills and competences. Other reasons for volunteering are pure curiosity, the desire to keep in touch with people, to meet other members of the community or just to spend the spare time in an interesting and useful way.

Volunteers are a distinct category of persons, with whom museums should permanently maintain contact (Wolf 1999, 96-109). Many persons desire or could be stimulated to cooperate with museums as volunteers. Museums should understand the reasons people volunteer for them in order to help them achieve their goals while serving the museum the best possible way. More recently, some museums are challenging the traditional ways of attracting volunteers, and they look into unusual pools of origin. For instance, at the Manchester Museum and Imperial War Museum North a program of attracting volunteers with an unusual profile was implemented in the last years: unemployed people with limited skills, young defenders or asylum seekers (IWMN). The program, initiated in 2002, has connected even more the museum with its community, by setting long-term bonds by helping the museum's volunteers to participate in life-long learning programs, to improve their skills and to get better jobs.

The advantages which are generated for museums by cooperation with volunteers are various (Kuyper *et al.* 1993, 2-4). Some of them are of economic nature, directly and indirectly generating revenues or attracting funds. For instance due to the free involvement of volunteers, the museum could redirect funds from personnel or outside cooperation to various programs, activities or for the collections' management. Volunteers, who could range from very well trained and highly specialized to medium educated, can replace some employees in activities such as office administration, visitor information, guiding etc. Thus the museum could reduce the personnel in some departments for the benefit of the collection, by permitting their staff to dedicate more of their time to the collections' administration, research or other specific activities.

An extremely important benefit of the museum is increased educational impact. Volunteers augment the educational human resources of the organization by raising the number of persons involved in educational and public programs. They could also diversify the professional

background of the representatives of the museum involved in these programs, contributing to an ever increased interdisciplinary nature of the programs. Thus larger number of visitors and more categories of participants at museum's programs are attracted and better satisfied. In order that the activity of the volunteers involved in educational and public programs is effective and suitable, they have to be trained in advance. This would generate additional responsibilities for museum's employees, but the final result would be increased educational impact of the museum, therefore better achievement of the museum's cultural mission (see more on the management of the volunteers in Zbucnea 2008, 144-145).

Volunteers, as being not just part of the museum but also of the public, could help museums better understand the public. They could be a source of information on the outside environment. They also could be sources of ideas for new exhibitions and programs of interest for the community. They could be the voice of the community when designing different public programs, including exhibitions. On the other hand, they are an open communication channel from the museum to its communities. Through volunteers, formally or informally, the public could get information on museums, on their activities. Volunteers could become an important tool of developing the museum's image within community, and also of interaction with members of the public. Volunteers could be creatively used by the museum to better and friendlier relate to the local communities.

In this context, another significant benefit of the museum would be the development of tighter relationship with the local community. Involving different categories of members of the community in the museum's activity will increase the image of the museum as a friendly and dynamic place, concerned with the situation of the local community. The presence of volunteers in the public spaces of museums or during various public programs will create a friendly and familiar interface for the museum's audience. Volunteers will also become knowledgeable advocates of the museum.

Besides all these advantages, volunteers are a distinct type of clients, not only a category of partners. Thus a museum should not only take into account how to use and benefit from volunteers, but also how to satisfy their needs. As a result, the activities of the volunteers will be more efficient, and they will feel more closely connected with the museum, partly responsible for the museum's achievements (they won't leave the



organization unannounced in the middle of projects and programs; they will cooperate with the museum on long-term basis etc.)

Volunteers have to be well trained and organized so their activity corresponds to the museums' and visitors' needs, and to be of high quality. Volunteer management (Zbucnea 2008, 144-145) is a practice that is not yet widespread in Romania, even if museum volunteers seem to be continually increasing.

The activity of volunteers should be planned in advance, as part of the museum's policy. It has to be formally coordinated by a member of the medium or upper level staff (Kuyper *et al.* 1993, 137-140; Goodlad & McIvor 1998, 98-99). So the volunteers' activity will be effective, they will know whom to talk to, and the museum could easily find them when needed and could better organize their work. This "volunteer manager" has to fully cooperate not only with the museum's volunteers, but also with all the departments that benefit from volunteer work. Together they have to plan the activity in advance, taking into account the type of activity the volunteers are going to be involved in, or the competences needed.

In order to be effective, the volunteer management (Kuyper *et al.* 1993, Goodlad & McIvor 1998, Kotler & Andreasen 1991, 306-312, Zbucnea 2008, 144-145) should be based on well established managerial practices. For instance the museum should develop specific job descriptions and, especially in the case of large museums, a volunteer handbook. It presents the responsibilities related to volunteers, the administrative concerns regarding this specific group of people, the procedures for selecting, training and cooperating with volunteers etc.

The above mentioned handbook is extremely useful for organizing the volunteers' activity and for clarifying various administrative matters. Still various malfunctions can occur due to the actual interaction between a museum and its volunteers. For instance volunteers should feel welcomed in the museum, not as a useful tool for museum personnel but as team members. They have to know that their work is appreciated and that their capabilities and competences are properly considered and employed. The interaction with the museum's personnel has to be beneficial for both. The activities of the volunteers have to be planned so as not to bore them, while solving various administrative problems (Ellis 2006). They should not feel they are disadvantaged compared to other volunteers or even to the regular employees. In the same time the museum's employees

have to feel equally appreciated and not disturbed by this specific group of “outside-insiders”.

The relations with the volunteers are not always smooth even if they are sincerely dedicated to helping the museum. They want to do their best, but in many situations they do not have enough knowledge or experience to perform certain activities and sometimes it is difficult to stop them of getting involved in fields that are beyond their capabilities. Sometimes their attitude and actions damage the museum's image or disturb visitors and their relations with the museum. These situations are eliminated by proper training of volunteers, good practices in volunteer management and application of the volunteers' handbook. Diplomacy is sometimes needed not to turn away important volunteers, meaning influential persons within the community who get involved in cultural activities but are not so flexible in obeying the directions of the museum's employees.

Integration in the museum's community is another issue of concern related to the relations between employees and volunteers. Cooperation with volunteers is not enough to obtain the best results. Volunteers should feel they are part of the museum, members of the team. It is not enough to appreciate their work and involvement, one needs to integrate them into the museum's organizational culture. When volunteers feel they are a real part of the team, their confidence in the museum increases, as well as their involvement. If they are not integrated into the museum culture, the museum could not only rely more on them, they could just disappear when something occurs and they are not able to participate in museums programs. As part of the museum team, they will promote the museum inside the community and attract more visitors. Studies reveal that there is a direct influence of the level of confidence and that of volunteering (Bowman 2004). We highlight that the volunteers' involvement and confidence will also determine the confidence of the local community.

Even if a high level of confidence regarding a museum exists within a community, that museum should develop special promotional campaigns in order to attract volunteers. Members of the local community could be open to getting involved into cultural and educational activities, could trust the museum, but they could not know what are the opportunities offered, the capabilities required etc. They could be reticent to offer their services or just they do not believe that they are suitable to work with the museum. Therefore, the museum has to actively offer them the opportunity to volunteer for their benefit, for the museum's, as well as for the local community's and for the museum's and visitors' profit.

In order to effectively attract volunteers and to manage them properly, the museum should understand its volunteers and interactions that occur inside the museum related to them, as well as the volunteer market. In this context, even if they are sometimes time consuming and not very inexpensive, the museum should periodically undergo marketing research. The most important research topics are the characteristics of volunteers, the motives of volunteering and the context in which volunteering occurs (Bussell & Forbes 2002, 245). Based on these studies, the museum should develop its volunteer policy, recruitment procedures as well as volunteer opportunities. By understanding volunteer expectations, the museum could better design organizational support and the volunteers' activities.

The volunteer management is a process of continuous exchanges. It will be successful if all the involved parties are satisfied. The beneficiaries are not only the museum and its volunteers but also the museum visitors and the community of which the volunteers are part. Thus volunteers could become a bridge between museums and communities and a source of museums' development.

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