

**WORKING FOR VOLUNTEERS: A STUDY OF PAID STAFF  
WORKING FOR NONPROFIT VOLUNTEER BOARDS**

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*Working Paper 37/05  
May 2005*

**DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT  
WORKING PAPER SERIES  
ISSN 1327-5216**



**Abstract**

This paper is an exploratory study which examines nonprofit organisations run by a voluntary board and employing staff to support the work of volunteers. It interviews the CEOs of four nonprofits, first to determine if the six factors already identified by Lyons (2001) as differentiating profits from nonprofits are evident in their organisations, and then to explore their views on what other factors exist in nonprofit organisations that make their roles different from a CEO in a profit-making company. The study identified five factors which the CEOs believed influenced their relationship with their board. These were the degree of autonomy and responsibility, involvement in decision-making, communication, interaction between board and staff, and the level of flexibility for volunteers. In two organisations these factors were deemed by the CEOs to be unsatisfactory and the level of conflict reflected this. While the other two organisations had little conflict, the CEOs still reflected some unhappiness with their relationship with the board. More research is needed in this area to assist paid staff to work successfully with volunteers.

**This paper is a work in progress. Material in the paper cannot be used without permission of the author.**

# WORKING FOR VOLUNTEERS: A STUDY OF PAID STAFF WORKING FOR NONPROFIT VOLUNTEER BOARDS

## INTRODUCTION

What is it like to work for volunteers? It is different from working for people in the for-profit sector? This paper explores the views of the Chief Executive Officers of nonprofit organisations who are employed by volunteer boards.

Not all nonprofits are alike. The sector includes an array of organizational structures. This research looks particularly at one type, voluntary associations, which has been identified as "conceptually and organizationally distinguishable from the bureaucratic service-delivering agencies of the broader nonprofit sector" (Harris 1998:152). These organizations often begin as grassroots associations "locally based significantly autonomous, volunteer-run" (Smith 1999a:443). Hudson (1999) classifies these organisations as mutual-support organisations, and includes trade unions, professional associations, and many voluntary sporting and self-help organisations under this heading. He (Hudson 1999) suggests that the fundamental difference between mutual-support and service-providing organisations is that members of associations both benefit from the mutual support and control the organisations. These type of organisations are identified as an important part of the nonprofit sector, found in every community in the US, UK, and Australia (Harris 1998; Markham, Johnson and Bonjean 1999; Lyons and Hocking 2000). Billis (1993:160) describes voluntary associations as "groups of people who draw a boundary between themselves and others in order together to meet some problem, to "do something". In the Australian context, Lyons (2001:126) differentiates small voluntary associations from the larger nonprofits with, what he describes as, corporate management and he (2001:127) also differentiates between the voluntary associations which are smaller and do not employ staff, and those he describes as "volunteer control" nonprofits, which can be quite large and employ staff, but whose core work is done by volunteers who retain control of the organization. These organizations, Lyons (2001) maintains, employ staff to administrate rather than to manage and volunteers will be directly involved in both management and administration.

Markham, Johnson and Bonjean (1999:152) found that these organisations are "little studied", as did Smith (1999a; 1999b). There have been a few studies of board performance and effectiveness in nonprofits (Bradshaw, Murray and Wolpin 1992; Green and Griesinger 1996; Herman and Renz 1999), and their commitment (Cnaan and Cascio 1999; Preston and Brown 2004) but there are few studies that look at employees who work for these nonprofit boards. What has been studied is the conflict that often exists between staff, particularly the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and the Board. Lyons (2001:128) recognises that there is "great tension" between the CEO and the board, found in all types of nonprofit organizations, but especially in voluntary associations. Harris (1998) also sees paid staff as a source of tension and disputes in volunteer associations, particularly because of the difficulties attached to who retains prime responsibility for the work of the association. Billis (1993) sees this tension existing because of the difficulties identifying whether the role of staff is to assist and support members, or to do the operational work which has been, could, or should, be done by volunteers. In larger, formalised nonprofits, paid staff members are expected to do operational work, but in the smaller volunteer associations, the boundaries are less clear and the potential for conflict is high (Billis 1993; Harris 1998).

What is not in doubt is that the responsibility for governing nonprofit voluntary associations rests with board members. These individuals come from diverse backgrounds. The only thing they may have in common is their willingness to volunteer their time to serve a nonprofit organisation (Axelrod 1994), although in most associations the board members are elected from the membership and an interest in and commitment to the work of the organisation is presumed. It is these volunteers who are ultimately responsible for ensuring that the nonprofit organisations they govern operate in accordance with the law, make sound financial decisions and fulfil their missions (Preston and Brown 2004). These requirements are no different from that of a for-profit board; yet

underlying these responsibilities are critical differences which heavily influence the way nonprofit boards govern. Lyons (2001) outlines the characteristics of nonprofit organizations that differentiate them from for-profits. These include centrality of values, complexity of revenue generation, reliance on volunteers, difficulties in judging organizational performance, lack of clarity about accountability, and conflict between board and staff. Most noteworthy here is the fact that the board members are themselves volunteers, or individuals who give of their own time to serve others to whom they have no obligation and without financial rewards. The differences identified by Lyon (2001) between profit and nonprofit organisations are discussed here as a background to exploring the views of paid staff who are employed in a nonprofit organisation governed by volunteers.

### **Centrality of Values**

As Lyons (2001:22) identifies, most nonprofit organizations are begun by individuals who share certain values as part of religious beliefs, aspects of social concern, or an expression of solidarity, and these values act as "the glue that holds the organization together". Nonprofits are organized around a social mission (Quarter and Richmond 2001) and, beyond the valuing of their initial purpose, they embrace values such as philanthropy, voluntarism, and their independence to act as advocates and obtainers of services for their clients or members (Green and Griesinger 1996; Alexander and Weiner 1998). Hudson (1999:37) asserts that nonprofit organizations "are at their most effective when the people involved share common values and assumptions about the organization's purpose and its style of operation". These values, he (1999) argues, must be cherished, as any diminishing of them destroys motivation and causes conflict. Acar, Aupperle and Lowy (2001) explored the ways in which nonprofit and for-profit organizations viewed their social responsibilities, ethically, legally and philanthropically, again beyond the values attached to their mission or purpose. Acar et al (2001) found that nonprofit organizations place a significantly greater emphasis on their social responsibilities than did for-profit organizations, and a correspondingly smaller emphasis on the need to make, or obtain, money. Further Alexander and Weiner (1998:223) identified values such as participation, due process and serving their community as very strong in nonprofits and also believe that nonprofits have a very strong "collective conscience" which ensures that their values are sustained. Jeavons (1993) warns against a tendency to distinguish nonprofits from for-profits in economic terms as, he asserts, their mission is their primary concern and cannot be overridden by the financial bottom line. Indeed, Jeavons (1993:57) believes that values are not just social or political for nonprofit organizations, but the "ultimate" concern of many stakeholders. This view is reinforced in an Australian study of 118 nonprofit Boards by Steane and Christie (2001) which found that board members' knowledge of, and loyalty to, their sector was seen as more important than any functional expertise they might bring to the organization, and rather than success being measured by finances, issues such as trust, legitimacy and reputation were seen as vital.

### **Complexity of revenue generation**

Hudson (1999) and Lyons (2001) assert that the most obvious difference between nonprofit and for-profit organizations is the complex nature of their revenue generation. Hudson (1999) identifies the different sources of transactions that a nonprofit will have, with donors, grants, contracts and fee for service being the major sources of revenue, while Lyons (2001) adds membership dues, bequests, sale of services, profits from business ventures, and sponsorship. Most nonprofits will have multiple funding sources, and this diversity of forms requires the management of a complex range of funds and relationships (Gronbjerg 1993). Gronbjerg (1993) gives an example of an American welfare organization with a budget of \$1.4 million which received funds from 18 government agencies, five other nonprofit organizations and 73 corporations or foundations.

### **Reliance on volunteers**

Voluntarism is an essential ingredient of nonprofit organizations. As well as being governed by a voluntary board, they rely on voluntary labour, and even a voluntary commitment of extra time and

effort from their employees (Hudson 1999). Lyons, Hocking, Hems and Salamon (1999) found that approximately 9.3% of all Australians volunteered their labour to a nonprofit organizations, reflecting similar figures in the USA and Western Europe. Volunteers place great emphasis on the values of the organizations and are often very insistent on having their demands met (Hudson 1999).

### **Difficulties in judging organizational performance**

Measurement of success in nonprofits is difficult; indeed Forbes (1998) believes the effectiveness of such organizations is unmeasurable. Therefore, nonprofit organizations are often reluctant to be concerned with issues such as the bottom line and evaluation of outcomes (Poole, Davis, Reisman and Nelson 2001). Nonprofits are likely to have vague objectives, which are subject to different interpretation by different stakeholders, making their performance hard to monitor, particularly because of the lack of a financial bottom line (Hudson 1999; Anheier 2000). The stakeholders in nonprofits have been termed "demand-side stakeholders" as their interests are in the provision of services, either for themselves or for others (Abzug and Webb 1999). Anheier (2000) maintains that this is further complicated because nonprofits actually have multiple bottom lines with different stakeholders associated with specific bottom lines and demanding that their needs be met. Their view is supported by Forbes' (1998) meta-analysis of empirical studies of nonprofit measurement from 1977-1997, which failed to show any consistent, useful way of measuring performance in nonprofit organizations.. Overall, Herman and Renz (1997; 1998) found, judgements of nonprofit performance and effectiveness are seldom related to objective indicators and are the source of substantial conflict.

### **Lack of clarity about accountability**

Nonprofit organizations are usually equally accountable to their many stakeholders (Hudson 1999), with no clear ultimate accountability being recognised (Lyons 2001). Members, funders, donors, both individual and corporate, staff, volunteers and the users of the services are all stakeholders, but each has a different stake in the organization and different views of the purpose, priorities, and ways of operating. While membership organizations may seem to have clear accountability to members, the membership is often disinterested in anything other than the service it receives (Lyons 2001). This lack of clear accountability is a continual challenge for many nonprofit organizations, especially in their dealing with government and other funding bodies (Saidel 1998).

### **Conflict between board and staff**

Perhaps as a result of all these factors, conflict between board and staff is another common feature of nonprofit organizations (Lyons 2001). The tension which exists between board and staff is well documented in the nonprofit literature (Drucker 1992; Harris 1993; Carver 1997; Lewis, French and Steane 1997; Harris 1998; Hudson 1999; Lyons 2001). While tension is identified in the large service-delivering agencies it is particularly obvious in voluntary associations (Klausen 1995; Harris 1998). Golensky (1993:177) in a study of what she terms "the board-executive dyad" at four nonprofit organizations, found that stability in this relationship was achieved by accommodation between the board and the CEO, and that this stability led to organizational effectiveness. One small Australian study, by Lewis (Lewis et al. 1997) suggests that nonprofit organisations actually have a culture of conflict and that this culture is solidly entrenched preventing objective acknowledgement of the problems it causes. However, Golensky (1993:177) maintains "the interactional dynamics of the board-executive relationship in the typical nonprofit agency are not well understood".

This research explores the views of paid staff about working for volunteers, particularly from the perspective of the CEO. Is it different or the same as working for a for-profit organisation, and if different, what challenges does it present to paid staff? It seeks to identify if the six differences Lyons identified impact on that relationship and then to discover what other factors the CEOs feel are important.

## METHOD

This research was exploratory and limited to four organisations. Because its aim was to achieve a deeper understanding of paid staff's views of what it is like to work for volunteers, the research was conducted within a qualitative paradigm, employing individual interviews and observations. The interviews were a mixture of structured questions addressing broad topic areas and open-ended questioning. It was important to use open questions so as not to predetermine the type of responses the staff might give. Data was also gathered in observations by the researcher made when in attendance at Board, Executive and Staff meetings. Notes were made of interactions between the paid staff and Board members.

It must be emphasized that the sample was small and purposive, not random. The purpose of the study was not to generalize but to explore the experiences of the paid staff in relationship to the volunteers on the board. Such exploratory research requires qualitative analysis of in-depth discussion and observations from a limited number of people. It is likely that the responses identified in this study may well be broadly applicable, though this is a topic for further research.

## Participants

The research involved interviews with CEOs in four nonprofit voluntary, member-benefit organisations and observations of them interacting with their Board. All four were national organisations with their headquarters either in Sydney or Melbourne. Two of the organisations had a predominately female membership; their boards were all female and their staff also. Two of the organisations had a predominately male membership with male CEOs. As background, their age, gender, qualifications and work experience are outlined in Table 1, together with a comment about their intention to leave the organisation. All were full-time employees of their organisations. The staff worked for organisations that provided welfare, self-help, educational activities and professional certification for particular groups of individuals. Participants for the interviews were recruited through contact with either the organisation's President or through the Chief Executive Officer. Their details are outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1: Demographic details of each CEO**

	<b>Activities Association</b>	<b>Self Help Association</b>	<b>Educational Association</b>	<b>Professional Association</b>
Age	66	30	45	64
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Male
Qualifications	TAFE	MBA	MBA	BCom
Experience	12 years in for profits 24 years in nonprofits	2 years in for profits 2 years in nonprofits	10 years in for profits 12 years in nonprofits	Worked at same nonprofit for 42 years
No of years as CEO	9	1	3	22
Intention to leave	Retiring in one year	Too soon to leave, but planning a move as soon as possible	No intention at the present	Retiring in 18 months

## **Procedure**

Each interviewee was initially questioned to elicit a range of demographic information such as age, qualifications, time at organisation and intention to leave. Then each interview followed the same format, with the interviewer asking a standard set of questions. The topics included the very broad "What is it like to work for volunteers" and "Is it different from working for a for-profit organisation" to specific questions designed to identify if the factors which differentiated profit from for-profit organisations were relevant to the interviewees. Then the interviewees were asked to identify the factors they considered differentiated their working life from that of someone who worked in a for-profit organisation. Each interview ran for approximately one hour and was audiotaped and transcribed. As well, the researcher attended Board meetings and Executive meetings in all four organisations and observed the interaction between the paid staff and the volunteers and recorded extensive notes about what was said and what occurred.

## **Analysis**

The transcripts and notes were coded for each of the key issues raised during the literature survey as well as identifying any other significant issues raised by the workers during the interviews. N\*VIVO was used to assist the process of documentation and analysis. The differences that resulted from working for volunteers that the CEOs identified were defined by the researcher using the interviews. It was recognized that this could lead to misrepresentation of the data, therefore judgments were sought from an independent researcher and interrater reliability was calculated. The interrater reliability was .8125 indicating high agreement.

## **RESULTS**

The comments of the CEOs are discussed below. First in relation to the differences identified between profits and nonprofits. Then the CEO's views of what other factors they identified as relevant to nonprofits, are explored.

It was clear from the interviews that two of the CEOs were happy working for their organisations and felt they had a good relationship with the volunteer board, and two were not. The CEO of the Educational Association "loved" his job and wanted to stay at least five years. The other three CEOs all intended to leave. The CEO of the Professional Association had been in the job for 22 years and intended to retire next year. The Board had already begun to plan a large banquet as acknowledgement of his service. The Activities Association CEO was also due to retire, but in very different circumstances. She believed, "The Board want to get rid of me. They resent my limiting their control, but they are not getting rid of until I am ready to go." The CEO of the Self-help group had been in the position less than a year and stated "I find it very difficult and sometimes want to run away. But I have to stay at least two years or it would look bad on my CV."

### **Differences between profits and nonprofits**

All the CEOs related very clearly to the differences identified between profit and nonprofit organisations, though not always agreeing that each was highly relevant to their organisation.

All believed the values espoused by their organisation were important. Two CEOs saw that the values were the reason why members joined the Board. The Self-help association board were "passionate" about the values to the point where, according to the CEO,

"They don't consider finances, strategic planning, and performance of a business kind at all, as long as the aims and the ethics are right. That's all they get excited about. And they value very highly the fact that they run the Association and not me or the staff, to the point where I can't breath without telling them."

The CEO of the Educational Association saw the centrality of values as very important. “The volunteers give hours of their time to the Association because they think its work is important. You have to respect that.” However, he said that the Board was very clear that it was their job to ensure the organisation was financially sound so that the grassroots volunteers could get on with their work without problems.

On the other hand, the CEOs of the Activities Association and Professional Association did not feel their Board members’ reasons for joining were so altruistic. The CEO of the Activities Association thought that most members joined the Board because they wanted to be involved in the fundraising activities at a state and national level, primarily because they saw them as fun and organising them as challenging and rewarding. The CEO believed this was often a problem.

“It is the staff who understands the values of the association and kept the board mindful of them. Board members seem to want the glory without the hard work.”

**Table 2: Factors differentiating nonprofit from for profit organisations**

	<b>Activities Association</b>	<b>Self-help Association</b>	<b>Educational Association</b>	<b>Professional Association</b>
Centrality of Values	Important to staff	Board passionate about values	Vital to board	Drives all association business
Complexity of Revenue Generation	Five different sources	Eight different sources	Membership fees mainly	Membership fees only
Reliance on Volunteers	Volunteers do most of the day to day activities	Volunteers do most of the day to day activities	Volunteers do all the day to day activities	Volunteers form board and policy committees
Difficulties in judging organisational performance	Judged by success of fund raising	Judged by success of programs	Judged by membership numbers and financial stability	Judged by membership numbers and financial stability
Lack of clarity about accountability	Conflict about who should make decisions	Board wanted to make all decisions – but not always available	Clear lines of accountability – teams and hierarchy	Clear lines of accountability - shared by Board and CEO
Conflict between Board and staff	Simmering	Strong	Very little	None

The CEO of the Professional Association also thought members joined the Board for personal gain.

“They see it as a way of further their career, or their reputation. But having said that, it is in the best interests of their career and reputation that we (Professional Association) do well and it is my job to keep the Board on the straight and narrow.”

Revenue collection was very complex in two of the organisations, with the other two relying mainly on membership fees. The CEO of the Professional Association said “Our money comes from our membership, so we have to keep them happy. It is they who measure our success.” For his organisation, as for the Educational Association, membership figures and financial stability were

the key measures of performance. The other organisation's had less clear measures, though for the Activities Association's Board fund raising was the key, whereas the Self-help Association saw success as measured by the success of their programs. "Despite the fact that we are insolvent, they think we are doing well because of attendances" the CEO commented.

All four organisations relied completely on volunteers to do their grassroots work and also to form the board. Despite this, two of the organisations had very clear lines of accountability with the Educational Association making great use of teams, and the Professional Association relying on good communication and interaction between the CEO and the President. On the other hand, the Activities Association and the Self-help Association appeared to have clear lines of accountability. In both cases, the Board wanted to be in complete control. "The Board want to make all decisions, but I keep telling them that they are there to govern, not manager. And they don't like that", commented the Activities Association CEO. The CEO of the Self-help group was quite scathing about her board.

"They want complete control, but then they say they are volunteers and can't be available all the time. They can't have it both ways, but they don't see it that way".

A high degree of conflict was apparent in both organisations.

### Other factors identified

The research process resulted in the CEOs identifying six other factors that they felt were important considerations in working for volunteers. These are: the degree of autonomy and responsibility allowed to paid staff, their involvement in decision-making, the interaction between Board and CEO, the level of communication between them and the degree of flexibility expected by volunteers.

**Table 3: Other Factors Identified as Important when working for volunteers**

	<b>Activities Association</b>	<b>Self-help Association</b>	<b>Educational Association</b>	<b>Professional Association</b>
Autonomy and Responsibility	Board wanted all control and to limit the autonomy of the CEO	CEO constrained by Board seeking to control every action	A lot of control by job descriptions, guidelines etc	Largely autonomous, though controlled by procedures
Board Decision-making	CEO dominant, but little trust from board	CEO has little say in decision making	Provided background information only	CEO dominant
Interaction between board and CEO	Poor – CEO only meets with Board member formally	Poor – CEO meets Board at meetings only, President once a month	Excellent Regular meetings in teams and individually	Excellent President and CEO meet almost daily
Communication	Board wants to know everything that happens Need to be very tactful	Board wants to be involved in, and approve of, everything	Needs only basis Great need for diplomacy	Needs only basis Need to be a skilled communicator
Flexibility of volunteers	Board members personal needs much come first	Volunteer time is limited	Must fit in with volunteers	Must consider volunteers needs at all times

All four CEOs suggested that lack of autonomy and responsibility, and constraints on their ability to make decisions, were issues that concerned them and that they thought was part of working for volunteers. "In a profit-making organisation, the board hires the CEO, sets the limits and lets him get on with it. That doesn't happen in my organisation" the Educational Association CEO stated. The CEO of the Self-help association stated "Basically they don't trust me and were not prepared to even before they knew me". The Activities CEO did dominate decision-making in her organisation and felt responsible for the running of the organisation, but thought, "The Board would rather I left, though they would never sack me. They feel intimidated by me, and they resent my control and want to take over". The Educational CEO felt that there was a lot of control on his work, laid out in guidelines and procedures and found them very constricting at times. "I can't turn around without checking with someone", but he went on to say "But I understand why the degree of control is there and accept it". Even the very dominant, long-term CEO of the Professionals stated that his role was "Ruled by procedures", though he felt that was reasonable and that, within those limitations, he was trusted.

In two organisations, the Activities and Self-help, the CEO was only part of formal Board interaction. Despite the fact that there was little interaction between Boards and CEO, the Boards of both these organisations wanted to be involved in almost everything that happened. In both these cases relationships between the Board and the CEO were poor. The other two organisations included the CEO as part of a team which, the CEO of the Professionals said "both lead and managed the Association". The Boards allowed the CEOs to manage the organisation without much interference, although both these CEOs emphasised the need to be diplomatic and a good communicator.

Finally, all four CEOs mentioned the need for them, and their staff, to be flexible in their dealings with all volunteers. As one said tried to exert as much control on their activities as possible, creating the feeling in them that they were not trusted. When

"We have to be ready and willing to serve them whenever they need it, but they have the right, as volunteers, to say no, I am too busy now. It makes life difficult at times, but you have to respect their right to say no".

While the others all expressed the need to be understanding of volunteers, all added a proviso that they found the situation difficult to deal with. "Sometimes you need an answer today, and the volunteer is just not available and you get the blame if things go wrong".

## **CONCLUSION**

This study shows the working for volunteers does involve a number of factors which complicate the relationship between board and staff. It demonstrates that Lyons' six differentiating factors are recognised as accurate by the CEOs in the organisations studied. However, the study also shows that there are other issues which paid staff working for volunteers have to deal with which go far beyond these factors, and all appear to contribute to the conflict often apparent between boards and staff in these organisations. There seemed to be some resentment of the degree of control, lack of autonomy and responsibility in all CEOs and two felt this came from a lack of trust. The CEOs also expressed resentment of the fact that they were expected to be understanding of the needs of volunteers, but volunteers did little to acknowledge their contribution to the organisation, and that the volunteers need for flexibility caused great difficulty at times. In the two organisations where conflict was obvious, the lack of trust, lack of decision-making authority for staff, poor communication and little interaction between the two groups were obvious. This research was exploratory and limited to four organisations, but indicates the need for further research to investigate what is different in working for volunteers, and how nonprofit staff and boards can improve their working relationship.

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