

Volunteerism in the Arts – Major Opportunity or Downfall for Institutions and Its Audience?

Dr. Gesa Birnkraut

Birnkraut | Partner arts+business consultants
General Manager

Gesa Birnkraut has a university background in business administration and arts management. In her Ph.D. she compared volunteering in the arts between the US and Germany. After several years of experience in the non-profit and for-profit sectors Birnkraut founded her own consulting company in 2004. She is the academic leader of the arts management program at the Estonian Music Academy in Tallinn and teaches at the Institute for Arts and Media Management in Hamburg.

Abstract

The matter of voluntarism is a much discussed issue in the late political debates in Germany. And not only in the social - where it is very well established since centuries - but also in the cultural field. Volunteering is a very common tool of North American cultural institutions to help the daily business in many ways. Not only fundraising, but also public relations, information or marketing are fields of volunteer work. On the contrary high-profile German arts institutions hardly know of the existence of this tool. The basis for this paper is a quantitative research in arts institutions in the US and Germany about the use of volunteers. As a result a consulting project with accompanying research was created to implement a volunteer program at the *Konzerthaus am Gendarmenmarkt* in Berlin. The combination of the two works gives a good insight view in current opportunities and threats for volunteering in the arts.

Keywords

Volunteer management, symphony orchestra, arts institution, Friend-raising.

Introduction

The following paper bases on two different research projects which are connected with each other. The first was done for the doctoral dissertation in the field of arts management of the author in 2001 and is a quantitative research on the topic of “Volunteering in the arts – a comparison between the US and Germany”. Following the findings of the PhD-research a project was initiated to create a “volunteer program in a box” – a guide line specifically outlined for arts institutions on how to create a volunteer program. This project was financed by the Robert Bosch Foundation and is based on a long-term pilot project (2003-2004) at the *Konzerthaus am Gendarmenmarkt* in Berlin, Germany. Following both researches will be introduced shortly. Out of the combination of both research projects under point 4 and 5 conclusions can be drawn to enhance volunteerism in the arts.

Volunteering in arts institutions - a comparison between the US and Germany

Historical Background

The history of volunteering in the US and in Germany is paradoxically very different and very similar at the same time. Many of the developments that resulted in the strong communitarism in the US arrived with European immigrants.

In Germany and in all of Europe there is a very long tradition of taking responsibility for the community you live in - to take responsibility in political and social fields. In the late 18th century, a lot of registered societies and charities were founded. Most of them had the sole purpose to educate their members, a multitude of music and literature societies were founded as well as amateur choirs (Gall 1989:196). From that time Germany still has a very strong network of registered societies for the recreation and education of the citizen. In these societies there always has been and still is a lot of volunteering. Though Germany has a strong tradition in volunteering in the amateur arts field and the socio-cultural field, the major arts institutions have almost no volunteers. A reason for this might be that in the early days the ruling aristocracy founded most of the arts institutions in Germany (BIRNKRAUT 2003:80). Every noble court had its own musicians, painters and actors. But especially in the 19th century there were also a lot of initiatives originated by interested citizens who founded theatres and financed opera houses. After a while, the city government partly or wholly financed these institutions. In 1918 – after the First World War – all noble court institutions were transferred into the hands of the state. This development has been continuing until today where most of the major German arts institutions are heavily subsidized by the state. German art institutions still have concerns about private money and the influence of private donors on the arts. So in Germany the government took over a lot of the responsibility of the single citizen for the arts. This had a strong influence on the attitude of institutions towards volunteerism but also on the attitude of the single citizen and its interest in volunteering for arts institutions.

As for the roots of volunteerism in the US, there was ever since the State declaration a very strong tradition to help the community. It was a vital part of the Puritan religion to take charge for your own life but also to give back to the community. Americans are more or less still educated in this sense: “You are going to get a lot in this life but you have to give a lot back, too.” (STEVENS). And donating money does not only show this, it is also spending time for the institutions you care for. This illustrates the different founding of arts institutions in the US. Devoted citizens not only donated the first funds but also initiated the support of the community and founded most of the art institutions (DOBKIN HALL 1992:39). As for most arts institutions in the US there first was the community’s wish to found a symphony orchestra and then they started raising money and hired professional artists. Support and financing of these art institutions remained in the hands of citizens and were not handed over to the government. Until today, the citizens still have the responsibility for the arts institutions; without their support they could not exist.

The Research Outline

A qualitative design was used for the research. More than 60 interviews with a length of about one-hour each were conducted with arts institutions. The qualitative research was aiming at recording the employment of volunteers in cultural institutions in the US and Germany. The research also focused on the attitude of the institutions and their volunteers to specified problem areas. It also concentrated on the evaluation of the volunteers and their integration into the organizations. The interviews were held with partially standardized interview guidelines. The

main topics of the interview guideline focused on the following questions: The collection of data and facts, the organization and contents of the individual programs, the recruiting process, the relationship between employees and volunteers especially volunteers and artists, threats of positions, professionalism and responsibility, results of volunteer activity, introduction of management theories, basic advantages and disadvantages of the employment of volunteers, motivation of the volunteers. Further interesting topics occurring during the interviews were the question of the profession of the volunteer manager, corporate volunteering and the general trend of volunteerism.

The research concentrated on four types of cultural institutions: symphony orchestras, art museums, operas and theatre. In each city the institutions with the highest profile were interviewed, i.e. in Chicago the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Lyric Opera, the Goodman theatre and the Arts Institute were asked.

The interviewees were always volunteer managers. In Germany, in institutions without volunteers, the person who would be most likely responsible for a yet to be founded volunteer program was interviewed: in most cases these were the heads of communication or the marketing manager. Apart from that, in each institution volunteers were interviewed, too.

Results

Based on the interviews a variety of results has been found – some of them self-explaining and some of them surprising. In this article a broad overview on the general results will be given.

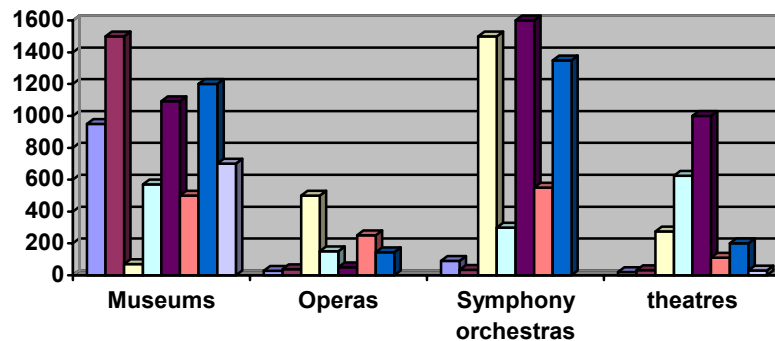
Who Has Volunteer Programs?

While every interviewed institution in the US used volunteers (26 institutions), only 8 out of 20 institutions in Germany had a volunteer program, 6 of them being museums.

How Many Volunteers Were Involved?

In the US, the number of volunteers ranged from 70 up to 1,600, the German institutions had between 1 and 170 volunteers. The next table shows, that there is not be found a clear structure to what kind of arts institution uses how many volunteers, still there is a trend, that museums and symphony orchestras in the US tend to have more volunteers than theatres and opera houses. Shown in the table are all interviewed 26 US institutions (Museums are: Seattle Art Museum, Denver Museum for Nature and History, Dallas Museum of Art, National Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Arts Institute of Chicago. Opera houses are: San Francisco Opera, Washington Opera, Metropolitan Opera, New York City Opera, and Lyric Opera of Chicago. Symphony orchestras are: San Francisco Symphony, Seattle Symphony, Dallas Symphony, Philadelphia Symphony, and Chicago Symphony). There is also no significant relation between the number of staff and volunteers. Sometimes you find more volunteers than staff and the other way round.

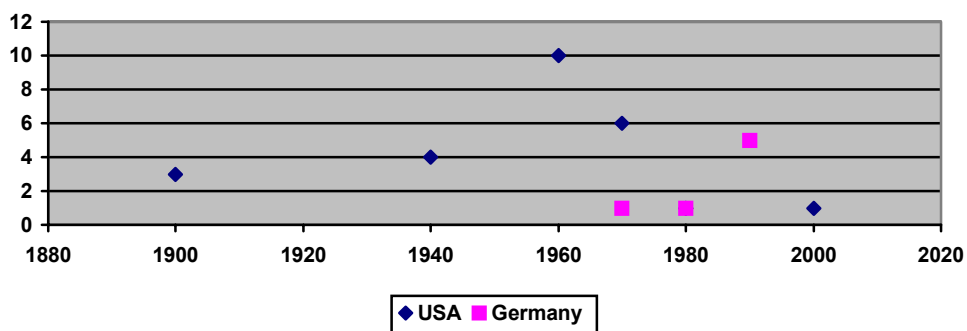
Table 1: Number of volunteers in the different programs of the interviewed institutions



When Were the Programs Founded?

The programs in the US were founded mostly in the 60ies and 70ies but there were some that were as old as 98 years, founded in 1904. The existing volunteer programs in Germany were mostly founded in the 90ies; the eldest was founded in 1976.

Table 2: Number of volunteer programs founded over the years



There are parallel phenomena here, because both countries went through hard economic times in the described periods. Obviously, volunteering has its origins much more often in times that are difficult and financially rough.

Profile of the Volunteers

With all the US institutions it is clear that the average volunteer is female, in her 60ies and with a fairly well established background, education and financially wise.

Fields of Volunteer Work

Looking at the fields in that the volunteers in the US work, mostly every type of job could be found: from fundraising to data archiving to guiding or giving pedagogical lectures, helping the curator or doing translations, selling tickets and ushering. A clear determination of the volunteer managers was to find the appropriate job for every volunteer and not the other way around.

The research shows that American art institutions have specialized their volunteer programs in different areas:

- In theatres and operas volunteer work is concentrated on admissions and ushering. This however is only the case in institutions that are not unionized. Volunteers are frequently awarded free admission as a reward.
- The symphony orchestras use most of their volunteers for fund raising and in the last few years also for education. Symphony orchestras in the US use education programs as an active tool to strengthen the bonds with the community.
- Museums focus on informational guest services and they also developed broad educational activities with the help of volunteers. A very special type of volunteer is the volunteer guides because of the long and rigorous training they have to go through before they start working. Guides often have to go through one or even two years of training including weekly lectures by curators and at least 1-2 days library work per week as well as written and oral exams. For these positions volunteers have to sign long term commitments (for example a 3-year contract at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City). Despite the difficult requirements and the long training period, the request of volunteers for these positions exceeds actual positions, which in turn creates waiting lists.

The only institutions in Germany which work with volunteers are museums in museum shops, at information desks and for guided tours. All six interviewed institutions, which explicitly have volunteer programs, are museums.

Integration into the Organization

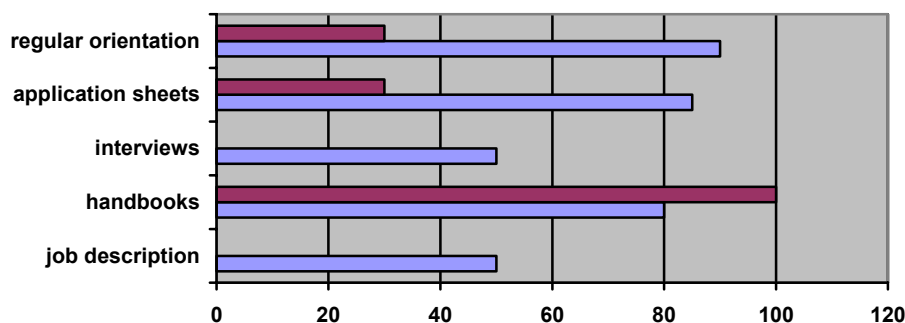
Volunteer programs are integrated into cultural institutions in the US in a variety of ways. Some are subsumed under the personnel department (Seattle Symphony); some belong to in the development department (Philadelphia Orchestra, Chicago Symphony). Some have their own department directly under the senior management (Metropolitan Museum of Art). Sometimes the volunteer activities are included in the organization of special events (Oregon Shakespeare Festival, San Francisco Symphony) or in the sales activities of the shops (New York City Opera). There are many different possibilities that have developed over the years, which are not always favored by the acting managers. It is the person who initiated the volunteer program in the institution who almost always made the initial decision. Interestingly enough once a decision about the organizational setting is made it will not be changed even if the initiator is not longer part of the organization and/or the management feels that their volunteer program is not located adequately in the organization.

The German institutions also do not have uniform prerequisites. Only the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart has a job description characterizing the duties as volunteer coordination. All the others belong to the first generation that has initiated volunteer programs and are thus the precursors of these projects.

Structure of Volunteer Programs

The structure of volunteer programs plays a very important role in the success of a volunteer program. Not only that the bigger a program gets, the better the organisational part has to be, but it is also clear, that the clearer the needs of the institution and the needs of the volunteers are identified, the more efficient the program runs. The following graph shows the various instruments that are used by US institutions. In Germany usually these structures are still not used for the management of volunteers.

Table 3: Percentage of volunteer programs using the described instruments



Reasons against Volunteerism

In Germany there is a general concern that the work evolving by a volunteer program would be higher than the use of it. Most of the institutions do not see any potential areas of work for the volunteers – who perfectly illustrated that, the major arts institutions in Germany are still quite well staffed. Moreover, there is a concern that the volunteers will not represent the institution properly.

An impressive result from the research was the trust US institutions have in their volunteers. Most of the volunteer managers interviewed – especially in the education and the guide programs – have their volunteers represent their institutions to all of their visitors, potential donors and customers.

In Germany, the institutions do not see potential work fields for volunteers and thus they do not see any potential volunteers either.

But the institutions already working with volunteers in Germany experienced an enthusiastic response to their first call for volunteers. All of them expected no more than 20-30 people while actually facing 200-300 people.

Arts institutions in the United States gave no reasons against volunteerism. Most of the US institutions stated that the programs executed and supervised by volunteers simply would not exist without their support.

Advantages / Disadvantages of Volunteer Programs

Two main advantages were named by the US institutions:

- volunteers are their ambassadors in the society and for potential sponsors
- volunteers serve as motivators of a multitude of programs that only existed because of them

Of course, the advantage of the massive financial gain of having 1,500 volunteers working for the institution without raising the personnel expenses can not be denied.

The disadvantages were that founding a volunteer program means an investment in time and money. There is a certain dependence on the volunteers. If they stop working on a project this results in additional work for the staff. Sometimes it appears to be easier to work with paid employers than to work with a volunteer.

In general, German institutions that already worked with volunteers named the same reasons. They explicitly stressed the fact that time and money have to be invested first in a volunteer program before it pays off.

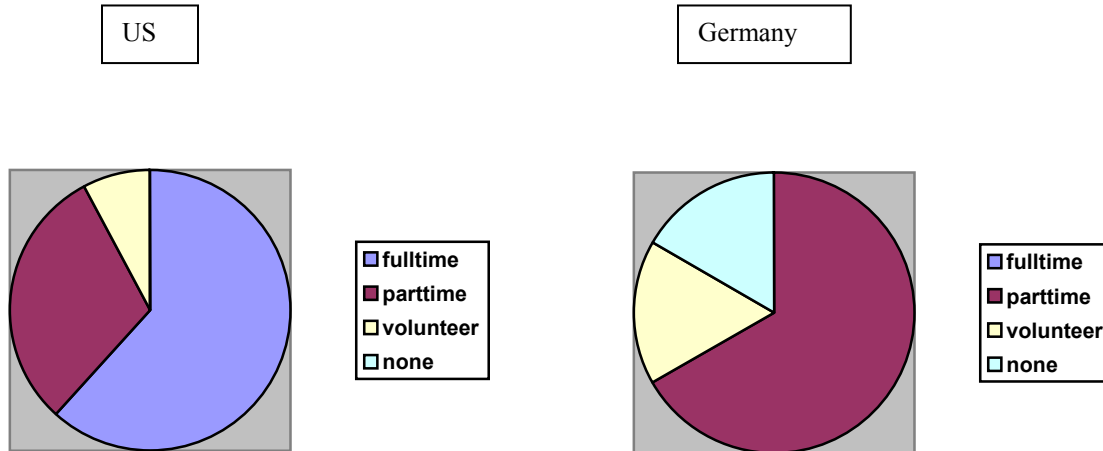
Volunteer Manager as a Profession

In the US, the profession of the volunteer manager has been fighting for acceptance since its beginnings 40 years ago. Many of the volunteer managers found themselves in this position either because the job was vacant or because it was the only way to be promoted. The acceptance, importance, and interpretation of the position vary greatly in different institutions. The reasons for this lie probably in the multiple important personal attributes that are necessary for the position of a volunteer manager: "Creating & communicating a shared vision; embracing diversity while nurturing pluralism; accepting change & managing ambiguity; acting within shared values & championing ethical behavior; linking effective management to personal leadership; reflecting." (SAFRIT 1999:28-43) Many volunteer managers in the US are aware of a wide field of professional training but don't see the necessity to participate in special training (PIRTLE 2001). Networking between volunteer managers of different cultural institutions is a fairly recent development thanks to the initiative of a few.

In all the American institutions that were interviewed there was a special, permanent manager whom volunteers could address. The positions differ however in the paid status of the manager, the number of staff in their division, and in whether the management of volunteers is only part of their job.

Only two institutions had volunteer coordinator positions. In the case of six coordinators the work with volunteers constitutes only a small part of their position, and there were two half time positions. All others devoted themselves full-time to work with volunteers and had up to seven additionally paid staff in their division (four institutions had over five employees, and five institutions had up to three co-workers).

Table 4: Percentage of institutions that employ volunteer managers



The starting time when paid volunteer managers were first introduced varies. Seven institutions had positions back as far as 20 years ago (the longest was 36 years ago). Three institutions ranged between ten and 20 years, six had paid managers from between five to ten years, and four institutions had paid managers for less than five years. These facts illustrate the long tradition and importance of the position in cultural institutions in the US, it also shows that compared to the social sector in the US, i.e. hospitals, the profession of volunteer managers in the arts is fairly young (ELLIS). One can also see the different situation as well as the different attitude of the management towards volunteer work compared to Germany.

Only one of the institutions interviewed in Germany had one part-time employee working exclusively with the volunteers. This half time position at the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart was initially financed by the Robert Bosch foundation and was limited to three years until the end of 2002. The museum then integrated the position into their financial budget. Other institutions that work with volunteers have similar structures as in the US. They have volunteer volunteer managers and part-time positions. If you regard the newness of working with volunteers in big arts institutions it is impressive that the few institutions actually working with volunteers also see the necessity to have at least part-time staff that is concerned with the management of the volunteers.

Implications and Follow-ups

Arts institutions in the US are part of a much more economic market than this is the case in Germany. Most institutions are dependent on the relationship with the community: on their visitors through ticket sales but also on private funding through time and/or money. Volunteers are seen as a vital part of the activities of the institutions. They are the ambassadors of the institution for the community. Volunteers are part of the unique selling point that each institution has to display on the US market to survive the competition. Institutions and citizens both want volunteer activities as part of their life and both sides appreciate taking on responsibilities.

The German institutions still have to go a long way. As they are still being subsidised by the government they might be in a better situation than US arts institutions. But with budgets

stagnating and/or sinking and a rough economic situation that also affects the ticket sales, the institutions have to find new ways of connecting with their audience. Volunteerism might be a way for them to change old habits. Another argument is that fundraising and education programs still are not as much developed as possible. Here is yet another chance to enhance existing or create new activities possibly with the help of volunteers.

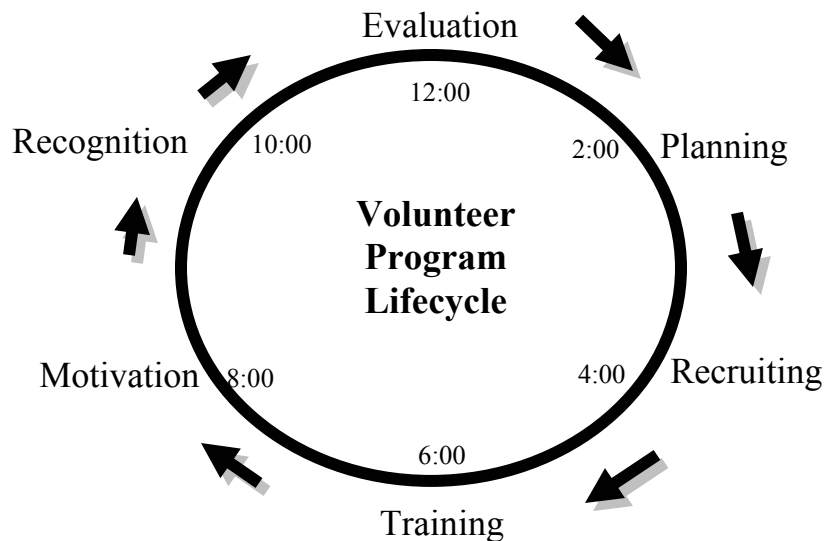
Volunteer effort can be most effective if a strong structure is implemented before you start utilising volunteers. It is necessary to find the right place within the organisation and to have a maximum backup by the senior management of the institution.

For US institutions this research allows a different perspective and shows that apart from all the success volunteer programs have there still is the need for even more professionalism and improved networking. Long range planning and strategic planning still have to be implemented as normal instruments for volunteer programs. The level of volunteering in the arts accomplished so far has to be the initial point for even higher efforts.

Volunteer Program in a Box

While the qualitative research made clear that the US institutions are much more used to reach out to their community, it also shows that Germany's major arts institutions are not against volunteerism in general. It is more a kind of a waiting process on both sides. Not only the institution lack initiative, the indifference lies also on the side of the single civic person. This phenomenon is also interesting in front of the discussion lead in Germany about new contemporary forms of volunteering. It became clear that most of the institutions were positive about volunteerism, but didn't know how to do it and was afraid, that the founding of a program like that would eventually cost more time and money than effective output and a plus in customer relation and work load and image. With this background the following research project was implemented. With the financial help of the Robert Bosch Foundation the institute for arts and media management Hamburg was able to go to the next step.

Over the course of a year the institute for arts and media management Hamburg launched a pilot project at the *Konzerthaus am Gendarmenmarkt* in Berlin, Germany to found a volunteer program as the first official volunteer program at a German symphony orchestra and concert house. This process-oriented project was documented and a handbook was created for arts institutions how to found a volunteer program and how to structure it. Together with the US-American consultant and volunteer management expert Connie Pirtle in ideal type of program was created.



Planning

In the course of planning the needs of the institutions were collected, resources concerning finances, personnel and material were budgeted, a time schedule was created and the responsible team was named. The planning phase took about 3-4 months in the described case.

Integration into the Organization

One of the major requirements for the success of a volunteer program is the integration into the organization. The leading management of the institution has not only to agree to found such a program, but has to support it strongly. At the *Konzerthaus* the head of the program is the head of communication who is also member of the top management circle of the institution. He has a volunteer counterpart who is together with him responsible for the management of the program. There is another staff member of the communication department who is helping with the volunteer program.

Fields of Volunteer Work

One of the most important premises of volunteer effort in the arts is, that no existing jobs are tried to be substituted by volunteers. Volunteers never replace, but always add value to the activities of the institution. After intensive discussion with all departments, the *Konzerthaus* decided on the following projects: Information desk at the concerts and tours through the *Konzerthaus* for early-birds before the concerts. This program was even enlarged and now there are also daily tours of the *Konzerthaus* offered. The second project is the support of the education program of the *Konzerthaus*. The Berlin symphony orchestra (BSO) invites school classes to rehearsals into the *Konzerthaus*. The volunteers take the part of a pre-rehearsal school visit and a feedback visit in the schools. They go into the classes and tell the pupils essential facts about the symphony orchestra and the program they will hear at the rehearsal. This leads to more sustainability for the whole education program.

Recruiting

For the recruiting several methods can be used. And every institution has to ask itself where they will find their target group of potential volunteers. The *Konzerthaus* program decided on the following methods: extensive press work, production and distribution of a flyer at the concerts, the circle of friends and the orchestra, distribution of the flyer at the open day of the *Konzerthaus*. Interested people were invited to come to a first information night. On this information night application sheets were given out. People who applied were invited to a personal interview. After the interview process the program leaders decided who should join the team. It was important from the beginning on to choose rather than just accept whoever is interested. Although it is quite difficult to deny an interested person it will save the institution a lot of time and problems if they have a strict policy from the beginning. The program at the *Konzerthaus* started with ten volunteers. In the second round of recruiting about half a year after the start of the first grade, there were already about 50 applications and another 25 volunteers were taken on the team.

Training

The training process does not only include the training sessions itself but also the whole process of documentation. For the training at the *Konzerthaus* the following documents were prepared: Exact job descriptions for the different programs, a handbook with an A-Z about the *Konzerthaus*, the work the volunteers were expected to do, but also the benefits they are getting. Furthermore the training sessions were prepared. The higher the quality of the training of the volunteers the higher will be the motivation of the volunteers. The training at the *Konzerthaus* included a three hour session for both programs together and two to three three hour sessions for each of the programs for special content. The training was done by the leaders of the programs with an early involvement of the full time staff of the *Konzerthaus*. The profile of the volunteers showed the normal characteristics with some interesting exceptions. Most of the volunteers are female and over 50. With the second application process there were already about 10% applications of younger men and women around 30-40 which shows that these positions are also interesting for people in the middle of their working career.

Motivation and Recognition

Motivation and recognition are very important instruments for the work with volunteers. As they are engaging themselves without any financial advantages, non-financial incentives are vital. At the *Konzerthaus* the volunteers are getting a limited amount of concert tickets, meetings with the artists and invitation for the annual press conference to name only a few. There are regular meetings of the volunteers together with members of the full time staff.

Evaluation

Evaluation really is also a part of the motivation and recognition because the volunteers themselves will feel much more valued if they see that their feedback is wanted and that their opinions and suggestions are taken seriously. And feedback is of course a major evaluation tool. It makes only sense to begin with an intense evaluation after 2-3 years of a running program. Until then informal regular feedback meetings will be the instrument to get input for improvements and necessary changes. At the *Konzerthaus* these feedback meetings are done about every three to six months.

Main Findings and Conclusions

The main findings were that a good structure and a strategically approach for volunteer management provides the institution with a positive and very effective tool to help the institution not only in its daily work but also in the overall image. Volunteering blends into the omnipresent friend-raising and fund-raising in the arts and also can become a main part of customer relations. In a time of stagnating budgets volunteerism is no tool to substitute full time staff – in the contrary it is a tool which enhances the activities of an arts institution and in the long term creates new job opportunities. The success of the program shows that the strategic process shows of in very short terms to be successful.

Conclusion

Both researches show that volunteerism in the arts is not only an Anglo-American phenomenon, but can be a positive influence also for German arts institutions. Although there still is a different attitude towards volunteering, there is a big potential for volunteer programs in the arts. From the experience of the *Konzerthaus* it becomes clear that a well structured volunteer program can be a win-win situation for the institution as well as the volunteers and the audience. This will of course only be the case if there is a motivated leader of the program who sees the long-term positive aspects of such a program. It also shows that most of the German institutions will probably need some initiative help to start such a program. The *Konzerthaus* example showed that without the consulting a lot of the now used structures would not have been implemented in time. It is more than helpful to have an external consulter who can create structures together with the full time staff that will help them to save time and problems later on.

Recommendations

The projects above show that volunteerism in the arts still need more promotion on both sides: the institutions have to be able to estimate the chances and threats for their institution. The citizens need more transparency that there are also opportunities at art institutions. Another important point that became obvious is that volunteer programs without a clear structure will not be successful in the long run. This leads to the recommendation, that there should be more budgets and consulting of the municipal authorities who want to improve the civil society. Other recommendations would be for the arts management courses at the universities to teach volunteer management. Most arts managers will not be able to follow their careers without interacting with volunteers as this is going to be a more and more common instrument for friend-raising and fund-raising. One of the most important things will be to educate the potential arts managers how to manage volunteers effectively.

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