

Why a Jewish Volunteering Network?

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Introduction

I am truly delighted to be with you this evening and to have the honour of giving a key note address on the question of ‘Why a Jewish Volunteering Network?’.

Of course, if I change my intonation a little, this one question splits into two.

First, ‘Why a Jewish Volunteering Network?’ The British voluntary sector has nurtured numerous organisations which coordinate and support volunteering at both local and national levels. So why do we Jews have to have our own particular version of the generic volunteering bureaux and centres already in existence around the country? Is this no more than a reflection of Anglo-Jewry’s constant quest to have its own Jewish version of everything it most admires in British society?

Second ‘Why a Jewish Volunteering Network?’ - we have a Jewish this and a Jewish that, but why does our tiny Jewish community - already struggling to sustain a myriad of groups - need its own *volunteering* organisation as well?

I want to address this two part question in the first place by stepping back a little from our own concerns as a Jewish community. I will look more broadly at the issue of volunteer recruitment and coordination and why it is important for all of us. I will then take a closer look at our own community and explain why I think that the JVN initiative is an appropriate response to a real need – and one that its visionary founders deserve great credit for.

Volunteer Recruitment and Coordination

I know that I don't need to explain to this audience why volunteering is – or can be - an absolute good. It's good – or can be good - for the people who volunteer – helping them to fulfil themselves as human beings. It's good – or can be good - for the health of our democracy and for the maintenance of a lively and independent civil society. It's good – or can be good - for the organisations which involve volunteers in their work. And it's good – or can be good - for the beneficiaries of those voluntary organisations.

I say repeatedly '*can be good*' to remind us that the benefits of volunteering do not necessarily flow easily or without hiccups. Volunteering is good for you, good for me and good for them – *provided that*, as with so many aspects of our complex contemporary society – it is appropriately understood, facilitated and managed.

One of the enduring ideas about volunteers is that they are people whose work is motivated by altruism; a selfless drive to do good for others. Volunteers are supposed to reflect the very best kind of philanthropy, doing good for its own sake out of love for fellow human beings.

Yet we know from research that this is a myth. Every volunteer is in fact driven by a range of motivations. These *may* include a commitment to philanthropy, but for each volunteer there will also be a mix of additional drivers. These might include, for example, wanting to feel needed and useful; wanting to integrate into a local or religious community; wanting to acquire new friends and acquaintances; wanting to acquire work-related skills, experience and contacts; wanting to do something different from what one does in one's work life; wanting to give a shape to one's day; or wanting to express commitment to a cause in tangible way – to 'give something back'. Some motivations to volunteer are in fact ones that we don't want to mention too much in polite society - such as the need to feel relatively powerful which can come from contact with vulnerable people, or the drive to display superior expertise and thereby increase one's own self-esteem.

There is something else we know from research. Successful managers, people who use human resources effectively, are the ones who are able to empathise with the feelings and visions which motivate people and match those up with the needs of the organisation. Their focus is on achieving organisational goals in a manner which is both effective and appropriate; people – ‘human resources’ – are the means to that end. The successful manager will focus on achieving organisational goals by building on individuals’ motivations, even by exploiting them perhaps.

Taken together, these two sets of findings from research – about the varied motivations of volunteers and about the skills of successful managers - lead to the conclusion that involving volunteers in the work of organisations is a major challenge, perhaps more so than managing paid staff. Somehow the complex motivations which volunteers bring to their voluntary work need to be matched up with the needs of the organisation for which they are volunteering, and, most importantly, with the needs of the beneficiaries or users of that organisation. (These organisations might be the familiar Jewish community organisations, national or local secular third sector organisations, or public sector organisations such as NHS hospitals or local primary schools.)

In the absence of the cash nexus which exists in a paid-work context and can be a very powerful motivator for managers of staff to build on, the way to get the best from volunteers is to understand what is driving them and thereby help them to achieve their personal goals through volunteering – while *at the same time* meeting the need of the involving organisation to achieve its own goals and deliver a good service to its customers, clients, members and beneficiaries. If volunteers are ill-matched to tasks and organisations, they can just walk away. This is a horrible waste of the resources that the involving organisation has put into their induction, training and management. And one bad volunteering experience can mean that the person concerned is lost to volunteering for good.

Yet it is the case that some volunteers are not appropriate for some organisations or some tasks. Conversely, some organisations are not appropriate, or do not have appropriate tasks, for some would-be volunteers. People who have a phobia about doing arithmetic calculations will never be turned into good volunteer advisers for Citizens Advice. Accountants who are seeking volunteer opportunities to broaden their interests beyond their professional lives are unlikely to enjoy being Treasurers on volunteer boards. Retired people yearning for a shape to their week and restoration of their self respect should probably not be set to stuffing envelopes on an occasional basis in the corner of a cramped synagogue office. The local mental health day-centre which needs volunteers who can interact with participants should not accept a volunteer, however willing, whose main wish is to work in office administration.

This is where Volunteer Bureaux and Volunteering Centres come in. They are a critique in institutional form of the myth that volunteers should be altruistic and therefore prepared and able to do anything if the cause is a good one. They know that volunteer-seeking organisations have their special features. And they also accept that every volunteer has his or her unique bundle of motivations; that volunteers will not work well or happily unless they are found a work context which not only represents a cause in which they believe, but also provides the kind of work that satisfies their souls. They facilitate the fitting of square pegs in to square organisational holes.

Volunteering Centres are in many respects like marriage bureaux. Their job is not only to match two parties, but also to ensure that neither party receives false or misleading information about the other. They perform a crucial role in a society in which there is an infinite demand for volunteers and a huge variety of volunteering opportunities and potential volunteering opportunities. They perform an immensely valuable public service by improving the levels of both recruitment and retention of volunteers.

The Case for JVN

So in my view the case for volunteering centres in general is very strong. The question, though, remains as to why we need a specialist *Jewish* volunteering centre when there are already plenty of generic ones available and when we are already struggling to sustain the plethora of voluntary organisations which together make up what we call our ‘Jewish community’.

One answer is that we need our own volunteering centre (or ‘volunteer network’ if you will) precisely *because* we have such a well developed Jewish third sector. In the light of the many hundreds of Jewish organisations which we already sustain largely through voluntary donations of time and money, it makes sense to invest some further, comparatively small, amounts of time and money in an infrastructure organisation to support those same organisations. Looking at the Jewish community *as a whole*, it would seem to be more efficient and effective to provide a central point to assist in the recruitment and retention of volunteers than to have individual voluntary organisations each investing separately in volunteer recruitment. And it makes complete sense to offer a one-stop shop so that Jewish people who are interested in principle in volunteering can be offered a good range of possible positions and can be helped to find positions suited to their motivations and the time they have available. This does not of course stop individuals from approaching a cause or organisation they are specifically committed to or individual organisations recruiting directly if they so wish. But it does increase the choices available to both volunteers and organisations and it offers economies of scale.

A second reason, then, to have our own Jewish Volunteer Network – as I can now call it – is that it offers real added value for our community; providing services which no other single organisation would have the resources for, especially our smaller communal organisations. A Jewish Volunteering Network can be much more than a coordinating or match-making service. It can seek out new communal volunteering opportunities and help Jewish organisations to think in new ways about how to involve volunteers. It can also gather together knowledge about new trends in volunteering and adapt them for the

benefit of the community. For example, there are some interesting ideas about e-volunteering and episodic volunteering which challenge traditional ideas about how volunteers can be involved. A Jewish Volunteering Network can help to spread these new ideas and thereby generate new volunteering opportunities; perhaps bringing in people who have never volunteered before but who can be attracted in by ideas which do not conform with the stereotypes of volunteering. May be a JVN can even do some outreach and plant the idea of volunteering amongst people who have not thought of it before. Research has shown that a major reason why people do not volunteer is that nobody has actually asked them to!

A third argument for having our own volunteering organisation is more sociological than pragmatic. Although in theory Jewish organisations and Jewish potential volunteers could use the services of generic volunteer bureaux, and many no doubt do, the reality is that, in common with other religious and ethnic minorities in this country, many Jews find it easier to interact with other Jews. And many prefer to be associated with organisations in which their religious commitments are valued and respected without needing explanation. They are therefore more likely to be recruited to volunteer positions by a specialist Jewish organisation. If, as I suggested earlier, the key to effective volunteer recruitment and management is to understand and accept the many motivations which drive volunteering, it makes good sense to just accept this sociological phenomenon at face value and to provide whichever communal institutions can maximise volunteering by Jews, and for Jews. This does not necessarily indicate parochialism or exclusivism. Having tried out volunteering in a Jewish context, and perhaps gained new skills and experiences, it is to be hoped that some Jewish volunteers will get involved in volunteering beyond the immediate Jewish community.

As somebody who is currently completing a study of local level bridge-building activities across religious and ethnic boundaries (1), and who has also read the recent report from the Board of Deputies about the limits to dialogue between Jews and people of other religions (2), I do feel ambivalent about our tendency as a community to retreat into our communal comfort zone rather than interact with other groups in our multi-cultural

Britain. I would prefer to see us work on finding ways to retain our identity as Jews whilst nevertheless interacting more fully with our fellow citizens.

At the same time, as a former member of the Commission on the Future of Volunteering in England which reported last year (3), I am also committed to doing whatever is necessary to increase the number of people who volunteer and who find fulfillment in being a volunteer because they are well matched to their tasks. A specifically Jewish volunteer resource can achieve exactly that.

So the answer to our starting question – Why a Jewish Volunteer Network? – is that it can increase the number of volunteers involved and retained in the Jewish community in an efficient and effective manner. In this way it can not only support our communal organisations and their beneficiaries but also help to enrich the life experiences of each one of us as members of a vibrant and varied Jewish community. In the future, may be it will also help to enrich the civil society of Britain as a whole by encouraging Jews to volunteer beyond the communal comfort zone and across religious and ethnic boundaries. May be, too, JVN might bring in to our community volunteers from other religious and ethnic groups?

Closing Remarks

In closing I would like to return to my opening remarks and reiterate how truly delighted I am to be here with you tonight. In the early 2000s I was one of the researchers for an ambitious project of the Institute for Jewish Policy Research on Long-Term Planning for British Jewry. In our final report in 2003 (4) we said this:

“For many years, Jewish organizations have reported difficulties in attracting new Jewish volunteers, particularly among younger people, early retirees and those with professional skills. The data collected by JPR show that many people are willing and able to do more but they are not sufficiently in touch with the services that need them. A way of resolving this problem is through a well-funded and efficient Jewish volunteer

bureau, a central agency, which would register the details and interests provided by individuals wishing to volunteer and would then put them in touch with organizations that need them.”

It is a privilege to see how this idea has been turned into reality by people of enthusiasm and vision. JVN has come to birth at a time when the need for volunteers in our community is very clear. Long may it flourish!

References

- (1) Margaret Harris and Patricia Young (2009) *Bridging Community Divides: The Impact of Grassroots Bridge Building Activities* London: Institute for Voluntary Action Research
- (2) Keith Kahn-Harris (2009) *Communities in Conversation: Jewish Involvement in Inter-Faith Activities in the UK* London: Board of Deputies of British Jews and DCLG
- (3) Commission on the Future of Volunteering (2008) *Report and Manifesto for Change* London: Volunteering England
- (4) JPR (2003) *Long Term Planning for British Jewry: Final Report and Recommendations* London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research