

## **Recruiting Volunteers? Get Real!**

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STC is a large community of smaller communities such as geographical chapters, virtual special interest groups, and various committees. Each of these communities, regardless of type, is primarily managed and run by volunteers. That's a lot of volunteer effort going on! We should all recognize, regularly, the unpaid time and energy that innumerable people give to STC on a daily basis.

Yet, we hear a continual cry for help in recruiting and retaining volunteers. At this year's annual conference in Las Vegas, the leadership table session I hosted on this very topic was packed with people who were struggling to build or retain strong leadership teams to grease the wheels of their community activities.

In reality, recruitment is an ongoing effort, not only to fill key positions but also to acquire assistants for key people—with an eye toward succession planning. Perhaps if each community leader had an assistant, or the leadership tasks were spread out over more people, interested volunteers and leaders would not see team positions as overwhelming and involving a huge time commitment.

Regardless of the specific need, recruiting volunteers is a critical activity for the success of STC. To address this activity, I'll break it into three parts: finding the right people, approaching and recruiting those people, and retaining them.

### **Finding the Right People**

Some of you may be thinking you can't afford to be selective when trying to find the right person for a particular job. You just need people. However, as with any job, if someone's skills and interests are not matched to the position, performance suffers. The first task, then, is to define the positions you need to fill, along with the individual skills and qualities needed to fill those positions.

After doing this, you can use a variety of resources to find people. The list below summarizes several ways SIG managers find volunteers.

- Tap into academe to develop the SIG leaders of tomorrow. Identify academics by watching for ".edu" at the end of their e-mail addresses. Keep in mind that teaching, research, and service are the three keys to the involvement of academics in the SIG.
  - Use a spreadsheet to collect the information you gather as people introduce themselves. Capture anything that they mention they like doing or are good at. Later, when you are looking for a volunteer, you can refer to the spreadsheet for possible candidates.
  - Use your e-mail discussion list to ask for volunteers. Send e-mail messages that go to all SIG members a few times each year. Highlight volunteer opportunities in these e-blasts.
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- Use your one yearly opportunity to ask for volunteers face to face—the annual conference SIG business meeting. There are also other opportunities to snag volunteers throughout the conference.
- Never panic if there is a significant job that you can't fill. Eventually, as you begin to build a group of people who meet regularly and support each other, the help will come.
- Gauge members' interest and enthusiasm through your e-mail discussion list. Watch for people who respond to questions with knowledge. Try to connect with them, and ask them to join your team. Sometimes you may have to create a position to involve an enthusiastic person.

### Approaching and Recruiting the Right Person

There are as many ways and styles to approach a potential volunteer as there are recruiters. Seeing recruitment not as a sales job or desperate plea for help, but as a chance to build a lasting relationship, shifts one's approach considerably. Here's how I generally go about approaching a potential leader.

When someone has responded to an e-blast about a position, my next step is to e-mail the person to set up a telephone call in which we first get acquainted and then discuss the volunteer opportunity. If I've had more than one person respond to my e-mail, then I want to not only find the right fit for the specific position, but also explore each responder's interests and skills—in light of the SIG's goals and plans—to see how else he or she could contribute. Rule number one: Never turn anyone down. Always appreciate the offer, acknowledge the desire to contribute, and work toward a mutually beneficial way for each person to participate.

If I have noticed someone on the discussion list **who** I want to recruit for a specific role, I e-mail that person and request an opportunity to talk with him or her by phone. This e-mail has several key components:

**Comment [jls1]:** Who or whom?

- A warm greeting
- An acknowledgement of a strength or interest that I've observed
- A statement of how that strength or interest could help the community
- An inquiry into whether the person has an interest in helping the community
- A description of the nature of the team members and how much fun we have as a group
- A request to set up a phone conference to get to know the person and discuss the opportunity for him or her to contribute to the community or a specific issue/task/cause

Often, when using this approach, I find that people are flattered to be noticed and asked to be included. In fact, I've rarely been turned down when using this approach. Sometimes I need to modify the position that the person would best fit, based on interests or time, but generally people feel recognized and are therefore willing to pitch in.

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Here are several other ideas from SIG managers:

- Set expectations and clearly state the responsibilities, time commitment, and project duration or position.
- Write a short job description of the tasks that you want to see achieved, and express these to the candidate. Chunk tasks so they don't seem quite so overwhelming.
- Everyone is motivated by something different. Help people get what they want out of volunteering.

### **Retaining Leaders**

Once you get leaders, how can you retain them without burning them out? Perhaps the most important aspect of working with volunteers is to be real.

- Be yourself—real and genuine—at all times, with all team members. Be friendly, supportive, and encouraging. Display your sense of humor liberally and create a sense of fun in your team meetings.
- Continue to build relationships through frequent individual e-mails or phone calls that not only discuss community events but also express your interest in people as individuals and friends.
- Have a clear vision or mission for your community and communicate it with passion and enthusiasm, both directly and indirectly. Enthusiasm and commitment are contagious.
- Regularly recognize and appreciate the skills, characteristics, and contributions of the people on your team.
- Help others out when their work or personal lives make it difficult to perform their tasks. Do this yourself or by finding someone else to assist them.
- Have enough leaders that no one is overwhelmed by having to do it all.
- In every communication, thank each person for how much he or she is doing for the community. While end-of-the-year recognition gifts and notes mean a great deal, if a volunteer doesn't feel recognized and acknowledged on a regular basis, the person can become discouraged.

Here are some other ideas from SIG managers:

- Consider developing a transition plan for new leaders, and make an announcement as soon as they come on board. Get their name out there and create some excitement in your community.
  - Mention volunteers in newsletters, etc., and let folks know who is doing what.
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- Stay in touch. Have regular, *fun* leadership team meetings every month or so to build relationships and increase buy-in to the team and community.

In short, when you treat your volunteers with appreciation, respect, and friendship, they'll stay around to be part of the community and share its vision and commitment to serving members.

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