SI 501 Final Report

Prepared for the Farmington Community Library
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Executive Summary:

We are University of Michigan students from the School of Information who, in working closely with the Farmington Community Library, have gained valuable insight regarding their volunteer hiring system. Our goal was to assess current systemic breakdowns and offer recommendations for streamlining these processes. The purpose of this report is to share our findings with the Farmington Community Library (and our School of Information instructors); in doing so, we hope to provide the library with useful recommendations that improve the implementation of their volunteer application system. We used contextual inquiry methods to identify these breakdowns; this includes conducting interviews, observations, and organizational flow modeling to determine work patterns and obstacles related to hiring volunteers. We found that, while library staff highly value their current volunteers, inconsistency in the Volunteer Coordinator position has interfered with the overall success of this system. There also seems to be little motivation for staff to create new volunteer positions and hire new volunteers. Our recommendations include creating an incentive plan to boost staff involvement, increasing the Volunteer Coordinator's communication with department supervisors, creating a disposition schedule for applications to limit accumulation, and to make minor updates to the volunteer application to improve hiring efficiency.

Background Information:

For this term's "Contextual Inquiry and Project Management" course, our client was the Farmington Community Library; their presence within the Farmington Hills community is integral, as they work toward constant engagement and support of city residents by providing immersive volunteer opportunities throughout their library system. The focus of our project concerned their volunteer application process; we were informed, via submitted dossier, about a perceived flaw in their volunteer application system. This involved the communal use of a binder that housed volunteer position descriptions. The binder is meant to facilitate a continuous partnership between the designated Volunteer Coordinator and various library departments, promoting a congenial atmosphere for the training and retention of volunteers system-wide.

Overview of Project:

To better discern the system's flaws, we employed several data collection methods: in-depth interviews with staff members, interpretation sessions (wherein data from those interviews was tabulated during two-hour meetings following each interview), photo capture of workspace organization, visualization of interview data using consolidated models (which meant creating charts of the library's internal workflow), and the creation of an affinity wall (which meant grouping interview notes into detailed, hierarchical categories for systematic analysis). All of these methods served as powerful catalysts throughout the contextual inquiry process. Interviews were conducted with members from several library departments, including Technical Services and Circulation. We also interviewed those currently, and previously, involved in designing or using the binder, and conducted interviews at the Farmington Community Library's sister branch to better understand how these issues impacted the overall library system.

The following report presents a summary of our findings, analysis of the data we obtained, and comprehensive suggestions for improving the library's current volunteer application system.

Findings:

#1: Staff Involvement - Though many staff members deeply appreciate their current volunteers, and benefit from the time they dedicate, their overall motivation to hire new volunteers is fairly low. Staff motivation and morale play a large role in employee interaction with volunteers and the binder, itself.

Evidence:

During our interviews with Farmington Library staff members, it became clear that there was a lack of motivation with regard to hiring and training new volunteers. One staff member made a particularly poignant comment: "We all complain about having too much to do, but do not want to take the time to hire and train volunteers to help us." Though training volunteers does take time, several interviewees stated that (for their department) the process typically lasts 15-30 minutes, or at most an hour (when combined with an introductory library tour). For many staffers, training time is a significant deterrent that makes them less likely to hire new volunteers. The only exception is when staff believe that volunteers are willing to establish a long-term commitment with the library, thus providing a return in their time-investment. However, this poses a problem; it indicates that staff members want long-term commitment so they do not have to train new volunteers often, which means rarely hiring new volunteers. This, in turn, affects their motivation to create new volunteer positions for display in the binder.

Short-term Recommendations:

- Draft an editable version of job descriptions that can be easily be altered by staff when new positions are created. This drafted document could save staff members time, which is obviously very valuable at the library.

Long-term Recommendations:

- A possible option to improve this situation is to create an incentive program. This program could be a competition to see which staff member could introduce the most new volunteer positions in a given amount of time (perhaps in six months to one year). The winner would then receive a prize that would motivate and reward their endeavors.

Positive practices to continue:

- Volunteer appreciation is an excellent practice that the library actively engages in. This is integral to retaining volunteers for the long term.

#2: Volunteer Coordinators - Lack of a consistent Volunteer Coordinator lead to breakdowns in staff communication and inconsistent staff involvement.

Evidence:

We met with several department supervisors at the main and branch libraries to discuss how each of them recruited volunteers. Only one had created volunteer position descriptions and fielded applicants using the binder system. They did this by speaking with the Volunteer Coordinator about their need for volunteers and having the Volunteer Coordinator find them qualified applicants. Further, interviews revealed that the Volunteer Coordinator position has been in constant flux; different Volunteer Coordinators interacted with library departments in different ways, and each took on varying responsibility depending on their schedule. Without a consistent Volunteer Coordinator, and consistent expectations regarding the position's responsibilities, it seems library departments have been uncertain how best to recruit new volunteers. One staff member mentioned that she was not aware of the binder's existence until two days before we interviewed her, and has since devised their own methods to find and retain new volunteers.

Short-term Recommendations:

- Establish a central Volunteer Coordinator, with explicit responsibilities, to manage the entire binder system for the library.

Long-term Recommendations:

- Ensure that the Volunteer Coordinator properly communicates with all library departments, per the following suggestions:

  1. Speak with the Branch Head of both libraries to address any needs that their departments have regarding volunteers. This should facilitate a larger conversation that involves volunteer recruitment at a systematic level, between the two libraries and within them. Regular meetings will help keep all stakeholders up to speed.
  2. Conduct individual one-on-one meetings with the managers of each library department (preferably monthly). This will allow the Volunteer Coordinator to gain firsthand knowledge of how each department is currently utilizing their volunteers, identify any challenges staff members face, and help devise new ways to utilize volunteers within a given department.
  3. Set aside two days per month to address new volunteer applications the library has received, contact potential volunteers for interviews, and clean out archived applications.
  4. Create a standard email to send to volunteers who apply, notifying them of the library's volunteer application procedures and average response time. This should reduce the amount of repetitive phone calls from patrons regarding their submitted application.

5. Help departments craft editable job description templates for high-traffic positions. These can be added to the binder quickly and without additional effort.

#3: Application Backlog - A backlog of unattended applications caused strained relationships with potential volunteers and further work for the Volunteer Coordinator, who was then responsible for sifting through them and fielding phone calls from confused applicants.

Evidence:

Multiple interviews revealed that the previous Volunteer Coordinators had trouble maintaining the large number of volunteer applications received throughout the year. We found that even though the library had no new openings for volunteers, candidates continued to submit applications. These applications would then accumulate, forcing the Volunteer Coordinator to filter through a large number of outdated materials. They would then have to contact applicants and repeat their original statement regarding the lack of volunteer opportunities, creating a redundant cycle of communication between the two parties. Throughout this process, some applicants have also continued to call Volunteer Coordinators several times per week to inquire about their application status which can cause Volunteer Coordinators to feel a great deal of frustration towards potential volunteers. In addition to creating a potentially strained relationship with future volunteers, applicants contacted after a period of backlog indicated that they were no longer interested in volunteering, or that they had found other opportunities.

Short-term Recommendations:

- Consider placing signage next to the Volunteer Binder that communicates important information, such as average response time and current policies on properly inquiring about their application status.

Long-term Recommendations:

- Create a disposal schedule for all volunteer applications; this might mean agreeing to dispose of applications received more than x months ago. In doing so, the number of pending applications can be better controlled so that the Volunteer Coordinator handles a manageable, and current, selection of applications at all times.

- Conversely, inform applicants that their information will only be held for a certain period of time (say 90 days), and that qualified applicants will be contacted within this time frame if a position suits them. If they are not contacted within this predetermined time period, their application will be removed from your internal system, preventing an unnecessary backlog. Highly interested applicants could always be encouraged to reapply after the expiration period.

Positive practices to continue:

- Despite the application backlog, the new Volunteer Coordinator successfully managed to contact previous applicants and update them with the necessary information.

- The large amount of applications received suggests that the library has a good rapport with the community it serves.

#4: Outdated Application - The current volunteer application form must be updated to better facilitate communication between Volunteer Coordinators and potential applicants. Updated contact methods and clearer expectations of desired volunteer commitment would greatly benefit all parties.

Evidence:

Our collected data suggests that communication between the Volunteer Coordinator and potential volunteers is largely effected by the volunteer application. Currently, applicants are contacted using the phone number provided on their application. However, this is a cumbersome process; calling individual applicants demands additional, and incredibly valuable, time from the Volunteer Coordinator.

Unique application questions have proven to be incredibly useful in determining the overall quality and interest of various applicants at the library. However, the organization of these questions is fairly confusing. Questions about technology are mixed with questions concerning people skills, which, when sorting and evaluating applications, makes it difficult to properly match applicants with specific departments.

Subsequent interviews also revealed that most staff members believed potential applicants should be willing to commit to a minimum of 6 months volunteering with the library. However, the current application allows persons to select a time commitment that ranges from 3, 6, or 12 months. The library's desire for long-term commitment is not made evident enough to potential volunteers.

Short-term Recommendations:

- Given that email has become common practice, we recommend that an "Email:" field be added to applications, so as to make it easier for the Volunteer Coordinator to follow up with applicants.
- The current section indicating volunteer commitment, "I anticipate my availability will be _ 3 mos. __ 6 mos. __1 year. __1 year+" should be changed to reflect a minimum requirement that the library deems necessary. An example might look like this:
    - "The Farmington Community Library values the commitment of its volunteers; therefore we require a minimum of 6 months commitment from all incoming applicants."

- To further clarification, questions could be rearranged to reflect the following topical order:
  - Location and Availability
  - Technology and Computer Skills
  - Miscellaneous

  These would help the applicants complete relevant sections with ease, and would likely help the Volunteer Coordinator process applications more efficiently.

Long-term Recommendations:

- Add unique sections that correspond to different departments and ask applicants to list two departments of their choice. This would allow the Volunteer Coordinator to better categorize and process applications as they match volunteers to specific departments.

- Update public-facing materials on your website to indicate the current Volunteer Coordinator's information, availability, and role within the organization. You might also consider updating your printed documents to reflect the Coordinator's contact information, too.

Conclusion

The Farmington Community Library is an essential part of the Farmington community, and to help facilitate their prosperous relationship with their patrons, the library employs many volunteers. Furthermore, volunteers at the library play a huge role in the library's overall success. Subsequently, attention must be devoted to the volunteer hiring system. It should be streamlined to ensure that the process is easy for applicants and convenient for the Volunteer Coordinator to identify and select suitable prospects throughout the hiring process.

Throughout this term, we have worked closely with staff at the library to gain valuable insight into the current volunteering hiring system. After rigorously analyzing these interviews, we have devised crucial short and long-term recommendations that should improve their current situation and facilitate necessary change. Each short term recommendations should immediately impact the system, thereby providing time for each long term recommendation to take effect.

To conclude, our time working with the Farmington Community Library has been wonderfully enlightening. We have gained valuable experience by participating in this process, and we hope that the recommendations provided will help improve the volunteer hiring system at the Farmington Community Library.