**Volunteer Retention**

**In Your Volunteer Program**

Volunteers aren’t free. Consider the many costs of bringing a volunteer into your organization before their first shift. There are hard cost, such as background checks, training materials, badges, uniforms, TB tests, just to name a few. Then there are the soft costs such as the time and resources spent recruiting, interviewing, screening, and training. These costs can add up quickly. Logic would tell us that it is important to retain our volunteers for as long as we can – or at least until we recoup these costs. However, in a 2013 survey conducted by the United Way of Central Indiana it was found that 60% of the respondents “struggle with retaining volunteers once they have started”.

This tool was created to clarify some retention terminology and identify the various ways that volunteer retention can be measured. We challenge you to select a method and diligently track your volunteer program retention.

**What is Volunteer Retention?**

The retention rate is the percentage of volunteers who were volunteering at the beginning of a period, and remain with the organization at the end of the period. The retention rate tracks particular volunteers over time and is unaffected by subsequent volunteers who start. The downside is that it does not track the departures of volunteers that joined and subsequently left during the period being tracked. It should be noted that the average volunteer rate is not a retention rate.

**What is the Average Volunteer Rate?**

An average volunteer rate is calculated by counting the number of volunteers at the beginning of a time period and comparing it to the number of volunteers at the end of a time period without regard to departures and new volunteers. It simply compares actual numbers of active volunteers. While there may be some value in knowing how much your volunteer base is growing, this method can hide issues that surface through retention tracking.

**How is Turnover Rate different than Retention?**

Turnover rate is the ratio of volunteers that leave your organization and need to be replaced over a given period of time to the average number of volunteers. A turnover rate is calculated by taking the number of volunteers who became inactive or left and dividing it by the average number of volunteers during that same time period. In human resources, 8-12% turnover rate is good for employees. An good turnover rate for volunteers may be slightly higher and is likely to range 10-20%. While turnover rate can be a valid volunteer tracking mechanism, it should not be used exclusively in place of a retention rate.

Turnover Rate = (# of volunteers who left / Average number of volunteers) x100

**What’s the difference between Returning volunteers and Retained volunteers?**

Returning volunteers are volunteers that leave during a retention period but return to volunteering in the same or a later period. These volunteers cannot count as retained volunteers but you may want to track them separately. The most common reason a volunteer reports that they did not come back: They were not asked! Lapsed volunteers may be an easy group to recruit – but they will also require you to engage them more deeply – if you lose them a second time, they will likely not come back

**Eight Ways to Track Retention**

* Point in Time Annual Tracking – select an annual tracking period - track specific volunteers from one year that continue volunteering into the next – calculate the percentage of those that continue
* Multi-year Tracking – Take 3-5 years worth of retention rates and average them for your program – then compare year to year averages to determine if your retention rate is changing
* Rolling Annual Tracking – calculate the retention rate from the start date of each volunteer - more complicated tracking, but creates a more realistic retention rate
* Actual Years Engaged – tracking all volunteers by years of engagement
* Average Years Engaged – tracking the average tenure of your volunteers
* Annual Activities - the number of activities completed in one annual year
* Commitment Completion Rate – the percentage of volunteers that complete commitment
* Conversion Rate – the percentage of volunteers who complete orientation/training that actually begin volunteering

**Comparing Your Retention Rate: Indiana Volunteer Retention Rates  
Source: Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS)**

You may want to compare your retention rates to the national averages. The chart below gives you some data to compare to. The three year average retention rates were determined through a multi-year tracking average. The same group of volunteers who completed the survey were asked in the following year whether they continued to volunteer to determine a one year retention rate. However, the three most recent years were then averaged to attain the three year average rate. To assure a fair comparison, it is important to complete your retention rate the same way.

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| **Year** | **US Volunteer Retention Rate (3 year average)** | **Indiana Volunteer Retention Rate (3 year average)** |
| 2008 | 47.4% to 78.6% | 68.6% |
| 2009 | 49.1% to 80.1% | 68.0% |
| 2010 | 49.6% to 76.3% | 63.4% |
| 2011 | 47% to 76.6%  (64.6% average) | 66.9% |

**The Challenge**

* We challenge you to select a method and diligently track your volunteer program retention. You will see the rewards of this work through:
* A better understanding of what’s really happening with your program
* Concrete numbers to provide to grant writers and executive staff
* Data that can be used to compare your program to national or local programs

What method have you chosen? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

What tools will you need? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

When will you start? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Types of Volunteer Retention Tracking**

1. Point in Time Annual Tracking – select an annual tracking period - track specific volunteers from one year that continue volunteering into the next – calculate the percentage of those that continue

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| Count all volunteers that are active in one moment – one-time volunteers or planned terminations (such as interns, project based activities, event volunteers, etc. are usually not counted) | No new volunteers are counted through the year, even as they start – however, they are tracked and will be counted in the following year for retention purposes | Volunteers are tracked through the year - accurate active and inactive status must be tracked to get an accurate number– if a volunteer stops volunteering at anytime during the year, they are counted as a lost volunteer | At the end of the year, the same group of volunteers are counted again – it’s important to count how many are still active and which ones are not - the retention rate is the percentage of the original group to have stayed |
| Example: | | | |
| 300 volunteers | 50 new volunteers through the year | 30 volunteers become inactive through the year | 270 volunteers are retained; 270/300 x 100 = 90% retention rate |

Calculating Volunteer Retention Rate:

Retention Rate = Total Number of Active Volunteers Remaining in December X 100

Total Number of Active Volunteers in January

Above Example Retention Rate: 270/300 x 100 = 90% retention rate

1. Multi-year Tracking – Take 3-5 years worth of retention rates and average them for your program – then compare year to year averages to determine if your retention rate is changing

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| Calculate the point in time annual retention rate from year to year | Once you have at least three years of data, you can develop an average retention rate | It’s important to remember that trends are difficult to predict without 5-7 years of data, so averages are effective ways to consider | You can also compare several years worth of data over time without averages to see if retention is growing or slowing |

Calculating Volunteer Retention Rate:

Three Year Retention Average

3 Year Average Retention Rate = Sum of 3 Years of Retention Rates

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Example:

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| Year 1 Rate: 30% | Year 2 Rate: 45% | Year 3: 22% |

Average Retention Rate: (30 + 45 + 22) / 3 = 32%

Multi-year Trend Graphing

Tracks retention rates over multiple years and compares to see if there are trends.

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| Year 1: 45% | Year 2: 50% | Year 3: 52% | Year 4: 62% | Year 5:40% | Year 6: 30% |

Trend Graphing

1. Rolling Annual Tracking – calculate the retention rate from the actual start date of each volunteer - more complicated tracking, but creates a more realistic retention rate – tracking retention this method without a database or program that calculates it is very intensive - otherwise, the process follows similar rules to the above two processes
2. Actual Years Engaged – tracking all volunteers by years of engagement

Example:

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| **Year 1**  250 volunteers  0-1 years = 20  2-4 years = 50  5-9 years = 130  10-19 years = 30  20+ years = 20 | **Year 2**  275 volunteers  0-1 years = 50  2-4 years = 75  5-9 years = 112  10-19 years =20  20+ years = 18 | **Year 3**  300 volunteers  0-1 years = 75  2-4 years = 75  5-9 years = 125  10-19 years = 10  20+ years = 15 | **Year 4**  350 volunteers  0-1 years = 105  2-4 years = 100  5-9 years = 130  10-19 years = 5  20+ years = 10 |

1. Average Years Engaged – tracking the average tenure of your volunteers

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| Must track actual start date for each volunteer | Must also accurately track volunteer departure from the organization | Volunteers must reach a threshold to be counted – for instance volunteers who participate for less than 4 or 6 months may be excluded | Volunteers who leave for a period (4 months or more) and return start over with a new start date | All volunteers (both active and inactive) are tracked for years or months of participation – if engagement is tracked in months, an average month engagement is determined and then converted into years |

Some software programs track average years of service. Each volunteer’s service must be converted into months if your software does not track years of service ( each year = 12 months – 5 ½ years = 66 months)

Example:

247 volunteers – 12,017 months of total service

Average Years Engaged: 12,017/247 = 48.6 ; 48.6/12 (months) = 4.05 years

1. Annual Activities - the number of activities completed in one annual year or over two years

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| Establish what activities constitute an acceptable retention and what time period they must complete them | Track each volunteer engagement in the activities during the time period | New volunteers are not tracked until the following year | Volunteers that become inactive OR remain active but do not complete the expected number of activities are excluded | Calculate the percentage of volunteers that completed the required activities during the time period |
| Examples: | | | | |
| Goal: All volunteers facilitate 4 or more of 5 career development workshops in a six month period | Actual: 45 total volunteers;  30 facilitate 5 sessions;  5 facilitate 4 sessions;  5 facilitate 3 sessions;  3 facilitate 2 sessions;  2 facilitate 1 session | 15 new volunteers start and 10 facilitate 4 sessions and 5 facilitate 3 sessions | Exclude: 10 original volunteers who did not meet the goal and all new volunteers, even ones that meet the goal | 35 of 45 volunteers completed the goal or 35/45 x 100 = 78% retention rate |
| Goal: Deliver meals at least once a month for one year | 15 total volunteers; 10 deliver meals once a month | 10 new volunteers join two months into the year; all deliver meals once a month for the 10 months they volunteer | Exclude: 5 original volunteers who did not make the goal and all the new volunteers | 10 of 15 volunteers completed the goal or 10/15 x 100 = 67% retention rate |

1. Commitment Completion Rate – the percentage of volunteers that complete a pre-determined commitment

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| Establish a commitment goal | Volunteers may join throughout the year if the commitment allows for it | All volunteers who complete the commitment are counted |
| Examples: | | |
| Commitment: Mentor a youth for one full year starting in August | 30 volunteers start in August | 25 complete their commitment in July – 25/30 x 100 = 83% retention rate |
| Commitment: Tutor for a full school year | 500 volunteers start in September, and another 500 join from October through February | 847 total tutors complete the tutoring commitment in May – 847/1000 x 100 = 85% retention rate |
| Commitment: Maintain the community garden from May through August | 15 volunteers start in May; 10 more join them in June; 6 more join in July | In total, 25 are active volunteers in August – 25/31 x 100 = 81% retention rate |

1. Conversion Rate – the percentage of volunteers who complete orientation/training that actually begin volunteering

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| Number of volunteers who sign up to volunteer | Number of volunteers who complete orientation and training | Number of volunteers who begin volunteering | Number of volunteers who are still volunteering in 30 days |
| 95 volunteers sign up in one year | 80 of them complete orientation and training | 70 start volunteering | 65 are still volunteering in 30 days – 65/80 x 100 = 81% conversion rate |

1. Turnover Rate

Turnover rate is often defined as the number of volunteers who left divided by the average number of volunteers during that same time period. The most common formula used to determine turnover is the number of exits divided by the number of volunteers for a given period.

**Turnover Rate = # of volunteers who left x100**

**Average number of volunteers**

* **8-12% turnover rate is good for employees**