

# Research Brief

**March 2016**

## Achieving Mutually Beneficial Volunteer Relationships

Summary of Phase I: Association  
Executive Summary

*Decision to Volunteer* had a considerable impact in advancing our understanding of volunteer opportunities from the perspective of what motivates members to want to be involved. In the fall of 2015, ASAE Foundation launched this research study to address the institutional aspects of volunteer management. The intent is to answer the question, “What components of a volunteer management program lead to mutual benefit between the association and the volunteer?” Phase I of this process was a survey of association staff conducted to collect data regarding association volunteer programs and measuring the associations’ satisfaction with their programs, followed by a series of qualitative interviews. Phase II will involve a survey of the members of several participating associations. Phase III will involve an in-depth audit of key performance metrics.

The intent of this summary report is to share some high-level findings from the first survey in which 1,016 unique associations participated. Please note this report is intended to share the data only; a final report will provide in-depth analysis based on all three segments of the research along with identifying the key attributes of mutually beneficial volunteer programs and recommendations for achieving them.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Structural Change

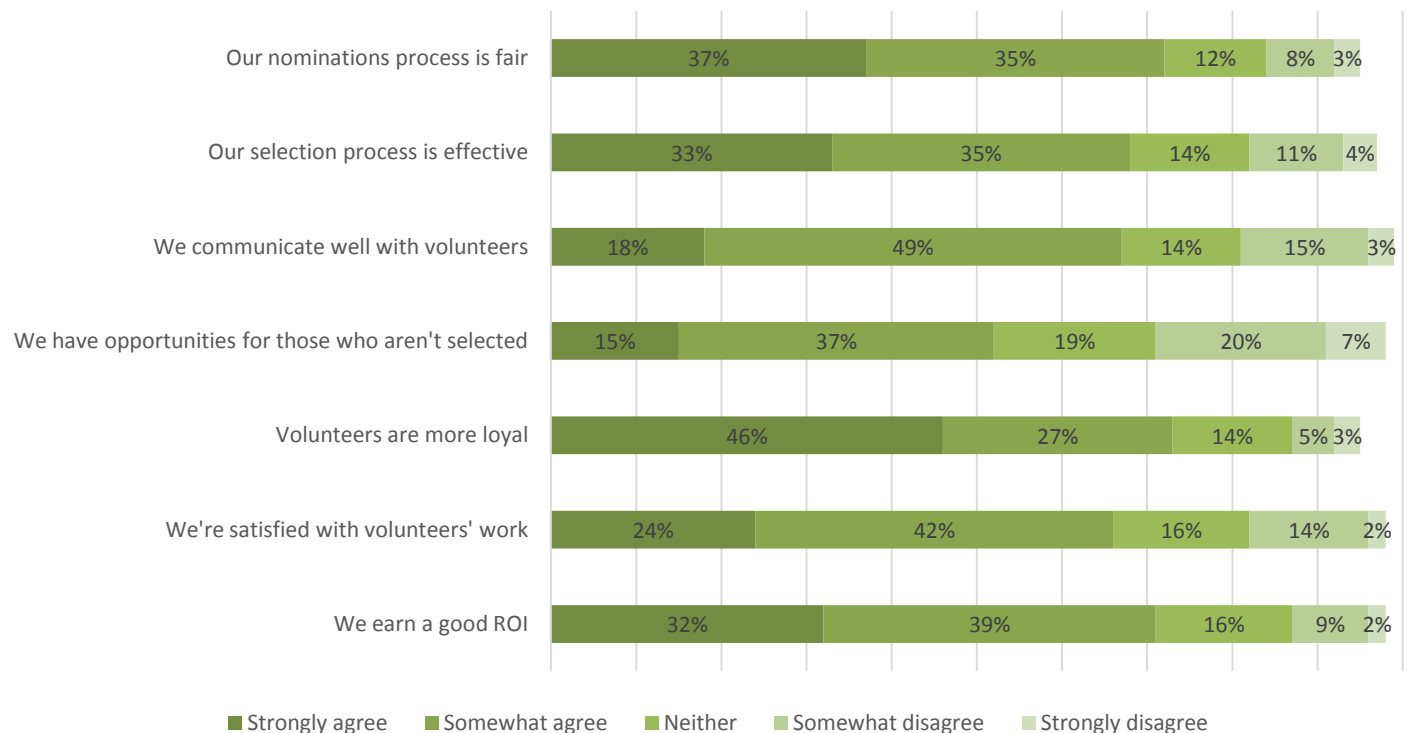
Association volunteer programs are being modernized frequently. In the past five years, 73 percent of associations have systematically reviewed their committee structure and 79 percent have added or deleted committees or substantially changed the mission of a committee. Component structures are also changing: 43 percent indicate reviewing their structure and 41 percent added or deleted components or made a change to the mission of a component within the past five years.

### High Satisfaction with Membership Impact

Associations tend to agree that volunteering leads to a significant difference in membership loyalty compared to members who don't volunteer—73 percent agree with this statement. Associations are almost as satisfied with the fairness of their nominations process and the effectiveness of their selection process. A majority (66 percent) agree that they are satisfied with the quality and volume of work produced by members who serve in committees and other roles.

### Weak Point: Engaging Other Members

Giving sufficient opportunity for others who are not selected to participate and be as engaged as they want to be is generally seen as a weakness. In another question, 27 percent of associations report that turning away potential volunteers over time has led some members to be less engaged in our membership.



## Who Volunteers?

Associations report that an average of 30 percent of their members are serving or have served in a volunteer role in the past and 70 percent have never volunteered.

Associations are almost evenly divided by their expressed volunteer needs:

- 33 percent have considerably more qualified volunteers than they can accommodate;
- 32 percent have considerably fewer potential volunteers than positions;
- 35 percent have a balance between total volunteers and positions.

Half of associations represented indicate that they have to accept some volunteers who are not as committed or qualified.

## What is the Typical Volunteer Structure?

Respondents report an average:

- Board size of 20.2 individuals
- Executive committee size of 6.2 people (when applicable)
- Committee size of 10.4 members

The respondent associations had an average of 11.8 standing committees.

Associations report at a “national” level that an average of 143 members serve in a formally defined leadership role (e.g. board or standing committee) and 216 serve in an informal role (e.g., service functions, on-site conference roles, ad hoc working groups/teams). At a state/regional/local level, an average of 299 serve in a formally defined leadership role and 270 serve in an informal role.

## What are the Common Features of Volunteer Management Systems?

Common characteristics of volunteer management in associations include the following.

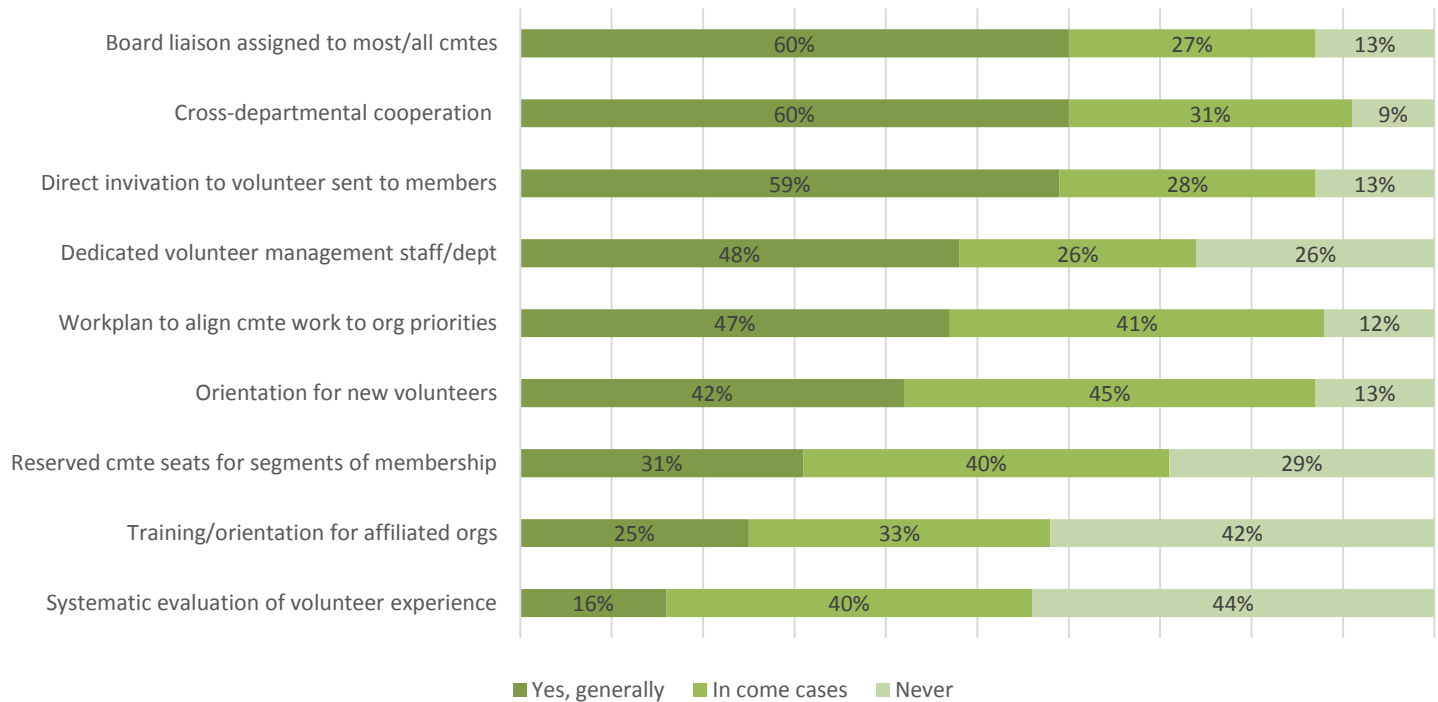
*At least three-fourths report having:*

- A systematic work plan coordinating volunteer activities to the association's priorities;
- A specific staff/office is responsible for overall volunteer coordination; and
- An orientation process is provided for new and other interested volunteers.

*Approximately 60 percent report generally and nearly 30 percent in some cases having:*

- A board liaison assigned to most/all committees;
- A strong cross-departmental cooperation among staff who manage volunteers; and
- Sending direct invitations to all members periodically to encourage volunteering.

Two features that are far less common are (1) using a systematic evaluation process to measure volunteer experiences, and (2) providing support (such as training/orientation) for volunteers among affiliated organizations—only 16 percent and 25 percent, respectively, generally do these.



### How are Volunteer Management Programs Staffed?

Respondents indicate an average of 11.5 staff members who are directly or indirectly responsible for volunteer management of committees and the board. This is 30 percent of the average 38.5 total staff members reported by respondent associations. Working with the board and committees is almost always a secondary responsibility. Only 15 percent of staff members who work with volunteers have this function take up more than half of their work time, and 48 percent have it take up one-fifth or less of their work time. The staff involved include:

- The Chief Staff Officer (mentioned by 80 percent) accounts for 30 percent of the total staff responsible for this function,
- Support positions (AAs, Executive Assistants, or Coordinators) account for 12 percent,
- Other executive management (COOs, EVPs, Chiefs of Staff, or Deputy/Assistant/Associate CSOs) account for eight percent, and
- Membership/Member Services VP/Directors account for six percent.

Although responsibility for volunteer management is diffused across many staff, we estimate that associations dedicate a mean of 2.5 FTE staff to the volunteer management function. This is the expense side of the volunteer equation; our member surveys and assessment of detailed metrics from participating associations will help to quantify the revenue side so we can properly measure the cost-benefit ratio for volunteers.

## How Do Associations Grade Themselves for Managing Volunteers?

**Overall System Ratings.** Just over 60 percent rate as “excellent” or “good” their ability to:

- Provide meaningful, positive experiences to volunteers during their term(s);
- Provide experiences that make volunteers want to remain engaged;
- Leverage expertise/knowledge of volunteers to make good operational/strategic decisions; and
- Provide opportunities for debates/discussions among volunteers to influence association decisions/positions/policies.

Fewer than 50 percent report similar ratings for engaging the best potential volunteers to become future leaders of the field/profession, or for having an inclusive/diverse pool of volunteers that represent a cross-section of individual demographics or type/size of companies.

**Greatest Strengths.** Associations identified themselves as strongest in the following areas:

- Relating the importance of committee/volunteer work to make service appealing to members;
- Establishing reasonable schedules and time requirements for serving;
- Generating prestige around volunteer activities; and
- Ensuring representativeness/diversity of volunteers.

Relatively few associations reported association support (orientation, training/development, or assessment/evaluations) employer support for volunteering, or the cost of volunteering as strengths.

**Greatest Weaknesses.** Time constraints/commitment deterring potential volunteers is mentioned by more than half of respondents as the key constraint on their volunteer systems. While that may be viewed as an external issue, there are several internal issues mentioned by at least one-fourth of respondents:

- Insufficient orientation and training/development, and
- Presence of some/many volunteers not well-suited to their roles.

## Who Answered the Survey?

The respondent profile was representative of the ASAE membership.

Organizational Structure	
Trade Associations	39%
Individual Member Organizations	43%
Combination of Trade and Prof	14%
Other	4%

Position	
Chief Staff Officers	19%
Executive Management	45%
Membership	13%
Other functional areas	23%

Scope/Constituency	
International/Global	31%
State-based	24%
National/U.S.-only	22%
Local or Regional	12%
North America	12%

Location	
The DC Metropolitan Area	29%
The Midwest	26%
The South	16%
The Northeast	12%
The West	12%
International	4%

Annual Revenue (median = \$3.25 million)	
Under \$1 million	29%
\$1-5 million	40%
More than \$5 million	31%

## Summary

Based on Phase I, we now have a baseline of industry practices. We can identify common weaknesses and strengths in volunteer programs from the associations' perspective. The next two phases will add the members' point of view and a look at trends. The final report, expected by August 2016, will feature detailed breakdowns by size, structure, scope, and other variables to help associations find how they compare to their peers.



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