

Volunteering in libraries - libraries and volunteering

In Germany a lot of volunteers work actively in numerous organizations and institutions. Whenever accidents happen, houses burn or social services are needed, citizens rely with confidence on the volunteers working for fire brigades, the Red Cross, Caritas or similar organizations. They trust that well-trained people care for them.

Civic participation is getting more and more important in society as well as politics. The way the people involved view themselves has changed significantly during the last decade. They don't see themselves as cheap helpers for tasks regular staff can't or don't want to do, they rather strive to shape their field of work in a qualified and responsible way, to contribute their varied skills and perform meaningful duties for others.

Libraries too gain increasing experience with volunteers. It is above all in public libraries that the way to deal with volunteers has been discussed extensively and also controversially for many decades. The tensions get more complicated as times get financially rough.

Civic involvement in the library world takes many forms and shapes according to the tasks, size and mission of the library or depending on the extent to which volunteers take responsibility. Above all civic participation must not fill the gaps when public agencies pull out of their responsibility. Would a city or community chose to have its public works department led by a do-it-yourselfer instead of a professional due to budget constraints?

With more than 200 million patrons per year libraries are one of Germany's most used cultural and educational institutions. As service providers, they need qualified staff in appropriate numbers. Sufficient funding is crucial. Therefore library associations call for library-related laws that guarantee the establishment and maintenance of high-performance and modern libraries. As part of their civic commitment, associations of friends, sponsors, donors and volunteers have already been supporting libraries in communities, churches, districts, universities and other academic institutions for decades.

Voluntary participation has been very common in public and academic libraries for decades, from the beginning it was controversial and is still confronted with sometimes fierce rejection. The fear of professional staff of having tasks taken away from them has aggravated the discussion recently. Additional factors are plans of financially weak towns and savings glut of many communities which would have liked to replace vacant positions of professional staff with seemingly free volunteers and which intended to close branches or even whole libraries and have them run by volunteers.

There is a fear among salaried employees that volunteers might take away their work and ultimately their jobs. However, the contrary is true; deploying volunteers responsibly does not imply that professional employees are going to be supplanted, because civic participation needs to be accompanied and supported by professionals in order to enable an appropriate professional library service. It is not acceptable, though, neither from the users' nor from the professionals' perspective, that the operation of libraries relies entirely on volunteers, without taking into account professional standards or showing evidence of basic library qualification and knowledge. Deploying volunteers must not lead to the loss of the achieved effective and efficient standards. Permanently handing over tasks in libraries in an isolated manner without professional support or supervision is doomed to failure!

It makes sense to divide volunteer commitment for libraries into four forms in order to make the distinction between qualitatively different levels of relevance. The details are as follows:

- * The volunteers' role is *complementary*: they bring additional services into the library which however are not crucial for fulfilling the core mission.
- * The volunteers' role is *supporting*: they improve the library's original service portfolio.
- * The volunteers' role is *vital*: they make the library's service possible in the first place.
- * The volunteers' don't play any role: civic involvement does not happen at all or only in the form of donations of money or things, for example.

A survey of the German Library Association from 2010 showed that in two thirds of local public libraries volunteers get involved to different degrees. Supporting as well as complementary work are most widespread. Relevant fields for volunteers are library tours, circulation, supervision, shelving, book maintenance.

Apparently getting involved as volunteers is very important to a lot of people in Germany. If you translate the weekly volunteer hours as so called donation of time with a payment of 20 Euros per hour into a whole year, the donation amounts to 175 million Euros!

Having volunteers also entails a number of problems that mustn't be concealed:

- * Low planning reliability, high input for supervision required
- * High effort for organizing, a lot of on-the-job training
- * Qualified training necessary
- * Due to the volunteer nature of the work the job can be quit at any time. The results are high employee turnover and less predictability
- * Volunteering is volunteering, i.e. if the respective person doesn't regularly participate in library life it gets hard for employees to make plans
- * Decisional authority / regular, reliable appearance / leave, substitute
- * Availability
- * Danger of unreliability
- * No absolute reliability, after all, people work voluntarily
- * Training and control
- * Lack of commitment, maybe unreliability, frequent change
- * Assignments are hard to schedule, family commitments are likely to be more important, tight schedules due to family constraints
- * For special activities arrangements have to be made well in advance so that enough employees will be available
- * It's hard to find reliable volunteers
- * Tasks can't be "assigned"
- * During the holiday season it is difficult to schedule the volunteers' circulation desk duties
- * Collisions with the job or further voluntary commitments

Many agencies responsible for libraries think that having volunteers is free of cost. This is wrong, civic participation can't be had for free! A precondition for effective and qualified library work is the constant training and continuing education of the volunteers. In addition professional manpower is tied up by the need for a contact person for volunteers. Funds have to be allocated for this and for creating the necessary framework. It is often overlooked that volunteers also need well-equipped workplaces.

The special characteristics volunteers offer are their diverse skills, their points of view from the outside, but rarely extensive library-specific knowledge. Volunteers only have a limited time budget. The requirements have to match their personal qualifications and previous knowledge as well as the time budget.

Positive aspects of voluntary staff members are:

- Only really interested people who identify with the work apply to volunteer
- Motivation is high. Work is fun because it is entirely voluntary.
- Only those who really enjoy library work volunteer.

In order to serve the interests of both the library and its users and the volunteers, the latter have to be employed under circumstances that are laid out as clearly and explicitly as possible for both sides. Rules and regulations for voluntary work are necessary. They should be framed as an agreement between the agency responsible for the library and the volunteers. They can be fixed-term (e.g. for two years). This makes it easier to take over a task and hand it over or terminate it. The fact that the contract is fixed-term encourages to assess results and check the working conditions in the library on a regular basis.

The German Library Association, together with three church-related associations Borromäusverein e.V., Evangelischen Literaturportal e.V. – Verband für Büchereiarbeit und Leseförderung (association for library services and reading promotion) and Sankt Michaelsbund, Landesverband Bayern e.V., has redefined its stance on civic involvement in libraries. The associations call on decision makers in politics and administration to acknowledge voluntary involvement, not abuse it as a makeshift and provide a clear framework.

Regarding civic involvement, the library associations call for:

- Clear definitions of resources, standards and spheres of activity in day-to-day library services
- Qualified and adequate supervision by professional employees
- Continuing education and training
- Commitment through legal security
- Appropriate and tangible appreciation

In principle, voluntary service has proven its worth in public libraries for decades, but it has to continue to evolve. In order to achieve success and acceptance, volunteering has to include continuing education and training as well as the use of services offered by specialized and central organizations. Only then will the library strive and stay alive, because if you don't keep up-to-date, you will become obsolete in no time.

Civic participation in the form of volunteering is accepted in many libraries. The future potential for development of volunteering can be advanced by complementary involvement in order to expand or try out services. Libraries that plan to deploy volunteers primarily in the areas of mobile book service, fundraising and internet services go in that direction. Complementary or supporting civic participation is suitable for charting new paths and trying out new services but also for networking with players from civil society and economy. This way volunteers can help strengthen the bridges to civil society and win new partners so that libraries as crucial cultural and educational institutions are and continue to be on the agenda of the public and politics.

If all preconditions are met, volunteering is worthwhile for all involved. Civic participation complements, supports, sustains day-to-day library services. Conscious consideration of the topic and the creation of an appropriate framework are essential! If the circumstances are okay, working in libraries is fun for the volunteers and they consider it a positive activity. The library's profile will be raised too. Civic involvement in libraries enables a wider array of services for the users and this is a boon to society as a whole. So it depends what you make of it!