# Informal Projects Management with Volunteers Participation

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The article briefly presents some experiences and results of research which has been conducted in order to identify key elements influencing the success of projects managed in informal way with volunteers' participation. These experiences were collected during the realization of several "soft" projects. The general aims of these projects were sports competitions' organisation, cultural events and charity projects for big groups of people. Within research of project management, the following issues were discussed: the project area of activity and function possible to make by volunteers, the rules of volunteers employment in project, factors describing key elements influencing the success of projects including: the trust as the base of informal projects management, wide-understand communication, cooperation and team work. Project risk, reporting and controls of project execution and the role and element of project culture as elements influenced on project success are also discussed.

**Keywords:** project management, volunteers, participation.

## Introduction

Volunteers are commonly and globally engaged in "soft" projects which happens in the economic world. The main reason for engaging volunteers is that they are offering for free their time and skills. Projects with volunteers are generally managed using the same rules that are used for managing "normal" projects. Looking at these kinds of projects, we should realize that volunteers are working without salary, have no legal agreement with employers and are not available full-time. Therefore, attention should be paid to regarding specific character of management and execution of these projects. Management of these projects is often done in an informal way, and these kinds of projects are not managed using any worldwide known methodologies described in literature. Management on these projects is based on common sense, learning new experiences and intuition of people who execute projects. Research is carried out in order to identify key indicators having influence on success of soft projects with participation of volunteers.

## Volunteers and Reasons for Hiring Them in Projects

The foundation of volunteering is free-will, unpaid, conscious, exceeding family relationships (and relationships between neighbors) work for others. Everyone can be a volunteer. You are a volunteer if you want to work for others without payment, just because of free-will.

People give different reasons for working as volunteer and different expectations about working in this kind of projects. Here are most common reasons:

- Will to improve skills and will to gain practical experience, what will increase value one employee market
- Will for new experiences,
- Attractive topic of project,
- Gaining non-material benefits connected with attending this project - for example chance to attend interesting concert,
- Will for self-testing,
- Will to make own life more attractive, having new adventure,
- Do someone's moral duty.

Project executives are hiring volunteers because they are working for free (we should realize that in some projects low budgets limits hiring full time employees). We need volunteers usually for short time, in different period of time and only for some tasks in a project. Looking at these aspects we can see that volunteers give flexibility in this area. Volunteers are usually attending projects executed by non-profit organizations, for example:

- Non-government organizations, foundations,
- Local associations of local government agencies,
- Churches
- Entities under public administration and supervised by municipality.

The number of this kind of project is really huge, but they are undervalued by project management methodology.

More detailed research was done on eight projects. Quality researches were done by interviewing people who manage following projects and by interviewing volunteers working in these projects. Researches were focused on following projects:

a) Organizing musical concert for about 110 000 people,
b) Preparing huge sport event with on-street marathon for about 550 sportsman,
c) Charity event - collecting food and preparing Holiday event with meals for 1 200 people with low social status,
d) Organizing Tall Ships' Race,
e) Wedding party for about 150 people

Owners of all this projects say that projects were finished with success. Some opinions were confirmed by media and newspapers. But not in all cases it is possible to give indicator which were used to asses success. Concert was delivered in planned time, charity event has happened and so one. Projects did not exceed planed budget, but no one assessed satisfaction of people attending these events.

Here is a short characteristic of these projects:

- "Soft" projects, in different areas, where results of project are not material, so it is hard to identify and measure effect of project,
- Time of these projects is diverse: from a few months (charity event) to a few years (Tall Ships' Race). We can observe that there is intensive work (connected with the final product of the project (concert, sport event and so one)) at the end of the project,
- Project are executed under time pressure (for example it is not possible to change concert data),
- All projects were very complicated,
- Public media were interested in these projects, and opinion given by this media could not be ignored (but in some cases media did not have all knowledge to form right opinions).

Volunteers were important part of all of these projects. All these projects were managed in informal ways, without using any project management methodology. Managers were using intuition to manage projects. In details, we can characterize management of these projects as follows:

- Poor administrative documentation about course and results of the project (low level of "paper work").
- Most communication was don as individual, informal, face to face meetings,
- Reasons for making some kinds of decisions were not specified,
- Budged was low, but not exactly specified.

Organizational structure of all these projects was simple. Here are most important components of this structure:

- Project manager - he or she played key role and was support by organizational office which consisted from a few people,
- Specialized subcontractors,
- Group of volunteers. In some projects (for example. wedding party, Tall Ships' Race) number of volunteers were significantly bigger then number of employees, but in other projects (concert) it was in the other way. In all projects number of people needed in different phases of project was changing dynamically.

All projects were managed by organizations with poor awareness of project management methodology. Project managers didn't posses any certificates proving their project management skills. Their knowledge in this area was fragmentary, and came from personal experience, but not from professional trainings. On the other hand, project managers had great knowledge about topic of the projects. This knowledge came out of the previous experience. Project Managers was nominated as PMs because of this knowledge about the topic of the project.

Basing on observations of these people and basing on assessment of skills of this people we can point same key characteristics of people who should be involved in managing huge project (or people who are managing big work packages in projects):

a) Project manager should be full time employee, chosen basing on skills not on functions,

b) Leadership skills, ability to work with people, open, with good interpersonal skills, people who can build trust relationship,
c) Enthusiastic, with ability to motivate other people, giving enthusiasm to other people (volunteers),
d) Well motivated, and goal-focused,
e) Having skills in human resources management.

You should pay attention on choosing people for project management, especial if you want to nominate volunteer as a project manager. If you are choosing a volunteer as a project manager, you should be 100% sure if this person will attend this project until the end. If this person will resign the project before ending the project you will notice "information whole" and this will have great impact on the future of the project.

## Rules for Recruiting and Hiring Volunteers

There was no problem in finding people who will meet basic requirements about qualifications and understanding issues connected with general purpose of project. Volunteers were recruited by press and on-line advertisements. Some of advertisements were focused on special group of people. For example there were advertisements focused on students interested in sailing (Tall Ships' Race) and sport event (sport event). Advertisements contained slogans like "great satisfaction guaranteed". Many volunteers were recruited using personal contacts of people employed in this organization and contacts of already recruited volunteers. People were engaged basing on oral declarations of candidates. People were declaring:

- Will to attend the project,
- Free time for attending the project,
- Education and overall skills. In some cases people were asked to prove skills. For example all medical stuff had to show appropriate certificates.

In very attractive projects (like concerts, Tall Ships' Race) which attracted attentions of many people, there was a preference for people with some experience in similar projects.  It is necessary to pay attention on interview, which was not always appreciated by managed (because of lack of time). Skills, experience and abilities were independent from age of volunteers. It is important to asses all skills, to choose appropriate people, who will bring value to project, but these should be two-way relation - people should be satisfied with taking part in this project.

Usually interview was the only tool to verify skills of all volunteers. What is more interesting - in most cases all this declarations were enough. In most cases declared skills were followed by real, high scored, work. Of course some lack of experiences could be fixed by training. But analyzing training delivered during the project we can say that most training was delivered as short overview, rather than detailed trainings. It is important to how the volunteers will enter the project. Volunteers should:

- Engaged at the right time, he or she should have enough time to understand tasks he had to do an to "feel the project",

- Be assigned to right person, who is managing project (or some aspects of project) and is contact persona, working as mentor for a volunteer.

There was no formal agreement between volunteer and organization preparing the event. Volunteers did not ask form agreements

### Areas of acting, rules and right of volunteers in project

In projects which were analyzed, volunteers had the following kinds of tasks:

- Not complicated task in which there was no need for complicated skills,
- Routine, toilsome tasks,
- In some tasks it was necessary to have some special skills. For example: driving license, fluent speaking in some languages, ability to give first.

Some examples of work done by volunteers are:

- Giving information at information point, giving brochures.
- Technical assistance, assistance at the office,
- Animate events that were accompanying main event,
- Help in doing main task in event, for example gathering food in charity event,
- Taking care for spectators, artists, sportsman or VIP,
- Working as a first aid stuff,

Volunteers were obliged to do some things connected with their role in projects:

- Be punctual,
- Work in suites delivered by organization,
- Attending meetings with management.

To do their jobs in right way, volunteers were obliged to find right information about what is happening in project (where and when) and what changes happened in project. They should know who is responsible for different are and should be able to contact this person.

Volunteers hired for projects had some rights. These rights came from oral agreements or local law. Because volunteers should not be charged for any their activities in project, managers were responsible for providing budget for covering expanses connected with volunteers' expanses. For example all volunteers should be insured against accidents, right to meals during working hours etc. It brought additional costs to projects.

Management should cover all other costs related to volunteers' work. For example (but not limited to) they should cover following costs:

- Business trips,
- Material and suites,

- Phone costs, internet costs etc.

In some cases volunteers were paying some small costs on their own (for example in charity event).Assigning tasks to people was based on oral orders, given during meetings with managers responsible for appropriate aspects of projects. Following aspects were specified during meeting:

- Setting scope of tasks,
- Giving instructions for doing tasks,
- Setting rules for contacts in the future.

After delegating tasks to volunteers, they were responsible for these tasks. In some cases formal responsibility were put on volunteers, but in most cases the manager who delegate task, took formal responsibility for this task. Most of decisions were oral decision, but in special situations decision were written down as a note from the meeting.

## Project Planning Issues

Task planning was the weakest side of projects that were analyzed. It was because of the informal character of project - informal project management caused informal scheduling. No official methods like Work Breakdown Structure and Gantt Chart were used to plan tasks. Generally project managers were focused on milestones. They estimated data for milestones, as a reference data for other tasks.

Estimation of project duration was done using intuition and previous experience from similar projects. Sharing experience with specialist in different aspects of project was done only from time to time.

This informal scheduling effected in missing some tasks or wrong estimation of work needed to finish tasks (very often assumed work was smaller than real work). This under-estimation was brought to light in less inspected moments. Project managers, using intuition was predicting problems in project managements, and were starting initiatives were early (looking at the finish data - for example concert start data). But sometimes early start was causing lack of discipline, because everyone was thinking, that they have enough time.

One of big problems was volunteers availability - they were not full-time available. Their availability did not always match project managers' expectations. In some cases the declared availability which was not real availability, due the additional work or wrong estimation of time needed to normal, everyday duties.
Non-distinct planning caused that were peaks of work needed to do. These peaks were very high at the end of the project. Hiring additional volunteers and assigning new work to available volunteers helped to solve this problem but in some cases over locating caused that volunteers rejected new tasks, or were quitting the project. Lack of resources at the end of the projects, affected the quality of tasks and results of some task was not as good as it was expected.

## Communication in Informal Projects

Good communication is key aspect of efficient volunteer oriented-projects execution. This conclusion was made by most of PMs after first failures. They said the main reason for these failures was poor communication. After this conclusion owners of subtasks were obligated to make sure that all volunteers have appropriate information about duties, tasks and project. It was necessary to get confirmation that volunteers understand all this information. There was a communication not only about tasks and duties but also about safe work, and safety at the project. During projects, communication happened differently in the following ways:

a) Informal, individual talks with volunteers - it was main form of communication (even in projects with large number of people). During these talks tasks were described in more details, detailed instructions and deadlines were given. These talks were great opportunity to share and discuss experience. It is important to say that this kind of communication has some pains: they are not documented and it takes a lot of time to communicate in this way. This is natural that volunteers wanted to say own opinion about project and informal meeting take longer time that it was expected. The volunteers were honest and were not afraid to say critical opinion (they were not afraid of losing a job).

b) Two-way sharing experience (during only few meetings) between people doing some parts of the project. The reason for this meeting was sharing experience, opinions and integration. Some people were glorified for good job, during these meetings.

c) Written, formal notes were done not so often. Written communication was very often done using real-time communicators. In some cases (Tall Ships' Race) there were prepared short leaflets with instructions about tasks to do.

## Volunteers Motivating

The reason why volunteers are taking part in projects was given at the beginning of this article. All given reasons cause that volunteers are self-motivated. This means that they are motivated by emotions, and their will to attend in something special and by desire to gain expected results. Future satisfaction from attending interesting project is important too.

Volunteers want and need to have impulse, which will stimulate them to be more engaged and to work more effectively. Well motivated people have more enthusiasm in doing their jobs and are more resistant for small failures. In projects that were analyzed project managers forgot to motivate volunteers. Volunteers, working for free cannot be motivated by financial aspects - so they should be motivated in the different way, to be well-engaged in projects. They can be motivated in following ways (but not all this methods were fully used in all projects):

- Showing appreciation for volunteers for well done job (for example by praise and thanks or other different kinds of oral appreciation),
- Internal prizes. Internal prizes were given not in money, but for example in tickets (for example tickets concerts or ability to attend a party).
- Making sense of community and team working with other volunteers by identifying with each other by: having these same suits, having meetings with meals for volunteers, making chances for networking and building relationships.

In these kinds of projects it is difficult to use punishment as a way for stimulation volunteers. It is almost impossible to use financial punishment or make legal consequences for volunteers, who are not doing their job well. In some cases negative motivation was done by some symbolic punishment like loss of prizes - for example, people who will not do their job well will not receive tickets for concerts or will be move to less prestige tasks. Motivating people by oral appreciation and small punishment seems to be the best solution for motivating volunteers.

## Risk and Trust in Projects with Volunteers

Hiring volunteers raise some risks in the project (which should be summed with other risks in project) - to optimistic estimation of task start and finish data, lack of cost control and so one. In generally there was no deep researches done by PMs about risks and especially risk raised by hiring volunteers but PMs took same intuitional operations to identify risk and mitigate them. It is possible to identify some typical risk which occurs in these kinds of projects. Here are some examples:

a) Smaller than expected efficiency. Reasons why this can happen are:
    a. Wrong people were chosen and task are assigned to people who are not available enough a do not have appropriate skills, knowledge and experiences,
b) Quitting volunteers from project (sometimes without notifying management about this) what can bring problems especially in peak work time. Volunteers were quitting because of discouragement, which is caused by:
    a. More intensive and more difficult work than it was expected,
    b. Lack of identification with project,

After identifying this risk they can be mitigated by hiring other volunteers with better sense of responsibility or hiring more volunteers then it is necessary. All problems with volunteers are connected with recruitment processes. Each volunteer have different personality, and declarations they gave at the interviews were not always right. Sometimes they were over-scoring their skill. Looking at the time restrictions it was not possible to make good recruitment process. Trust plays a key role in cooperating with volunteers. Managers delegating task to volunteer trusted them and hoped that they will do their jobs in appropriate way. Management depends on volunteers more than they depend on managers. Two different attitudes of management can be observed (all of them are basing on life experience of management):

a) Full trust - some managers were assuming that people will do their jobs well. Usually managers trusted well known people and people with references.
b) limited trust - in limited trust volunteers were regularly monitored. After good results of monitoring limited trust was slightly changed to full trust.

The best method for monitoring was *Monitoring by Walking Around*. This method put stress on observing and talking with people (personal contact). During these meetings it was possible to send feedback to volunteers, asses their work (it motivates people) give other instructions, inform about changes, and so on.

## Summary

Soft projects like organizing concerts, sport events, charity event are not always appreciated. Sometimes they seem to be less complicated and not so valuable as for example bridge building or skyscrapers. Project managers of soft projects are not as appreciated as PMs of normal project, so in some cases it was difficult to hire right skilled managers. Informal methods of project management are used because PMs were not familiar with formal project management methodologies.

In soft projects volunteers were engaged to do some jobs. This brings benefits for both sides. Volunteers are usually enthusiastic people working for free in selected tasks. It could be hard (from manager perspective) to hire volunteers to project. Sometimes they are not well prepared; have poor skills (looking at the tasks which are assigned to them). In some cases costs and problems that are generated by volunteers are bigger benefits they bring.

Key aspects which have influence on projects with volunteers' participation are:

a) You should accept every volunteer who want to access the project. Skills of this people should be assessed in appropriate way.
b) Trust play key role in this projects,
c) Monitoring by Walking Around is good solution for monitoring volunteers,
d) Communications should be, accurate clear and well organized
e) Non-material motivating is important for people who are by default self-motivated,
f) Written communication should be done where necessary, especially in peak time,
g) Real availability should be periodically refreshed,
h) Project manager should be chosen basing on skills, have leadership skills, ability to work with people, open, with good interpersonal skills, people

Given above elements are guidelines for initiators and people executing project with volunteers' participation. Using these guidelines will make those chances for success in soft projects will be bigger. Also training about project management for people who will manage project will improve efficiency of this people.

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