

Working with Volunteer organizations

As it turned out, most of the work I have done since leaving the Corporate fold has been for organizations whose staff are volunteers. As pretty much everything was new to me when I started out, some characteristics that these organizations shared didn't really strike me for quite a long time, so I'm passing on some revelations to help others who have similar clients.

Time doesn't run at the same rate for a volunteer. In the corporate world, if someone asks you to do something, and you send them the results, then you can expect them to take a look at it and get back to you. Maybe not the same day, but soonish. Usually, I recall creating a database application for a client which appeared to be eagerly anticipated. Finally the product was ready and I sent it off. (One nice thing about creating things on a computer is that shipping is not a major issue!) Then I waited. And waited. I began to imagine that there were terrible problems and my client was agonising over how to break the bad news. I waited some more. They even paid my invoice, and still there was no feedback. Finally, I heard back — almost everything was fine. What I hadn't realized was that while the project was important to my client, it wasn't as important as his own business. Making your living comes first, and your volunteer responsibilities — especially if they can wait for a while — come second. It wasn't that he didn't care, it was just that other things took priority for a while.

Volunteers look after their organizations' money.

Recently, a new client asked me to take over some work which another consultant had been doing. We talked and corresponded; we hit it off and eventually got down to talking about money. Apparently, my rate was higher than the previous person's and furthermore, *they* had had a discount for non-profit. So I expounded on my virtues, years of experience and so on, and said my rate was my rate. I got back an e-mail saying I was hired with a "sort-of" apology for being careful with the money, but he had a responsibility to spend the money wisely. He still is careful with the money — to this day, this is one client where I never have any doubts as to what the budget is for each task, and actually, I find that useful; I know when to stop perfecting something. At least, I know when to stop billing.

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He is semi-retired but accepts contracts to help finance his expensive hobbies. David retired from a 33-year career in corporate IT and now specialises in developing database applications for Windows platforms, web-sites, and generally in improving business processes by simplifying, clarifying and beautifying all kinds of business documents.

His articles are regularly published in the Microsoft Small Business forum.

You can learn more about the work he does at www.creekwood.ca.

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Volunteers come to life on weekends and evenings. Think about it. They have day jobs! This means that if you need a decision from your volunteer client which involves her reading the 20-page analysis you prepared, then you'd better think about delivering it on Thursday or Friday, because she'll be reading it on the weekend. By the same token, if you need to discuss something, 10 am Monday isn't going to be a preferred time. Prepare to keep your schedule flexible to accommodate theirs, or your projects are going to run forever!

No doubt I'll have further insights into volunteer clients as time goes on, but one misconception I might have had has been thoroughly dispelled. If you think that office politics has no part in a volunteer-based organisation, or if you think I'm going to illustrate that with some juicy tales — you're wrong! I've thoroughly enjoyed working with the volunteers in my client organizations; I hope these few insights will help you to do the same.