

Capabilities and limitations of museum volunteers: examples of restoration practice in small museums

Kornelius Goetz – Question and answer session

Note - Kornelius was unable to attend the workshop and his paper was presented by Andrew Schroeder of the Australian War Memorial.

Alison Wain: The one thing that interested me was – I mean this is a different culture, over the other side of the world – and yet it really resonated with what we had found from our point of view. And it's also very similar to what Ian and Nigel were saying from the volunteers' point of view about consultation and appropriate expectations and use of skills and knowledge, so there's a few clear themes coming out there.

Chris Knapp: Do you actually pay any of the expenses for your volunteers, such as fuel money, as travel expenses?

Alison Wain: We actually pay for protective clothing but we don't pay for fuel or anything for them to get here. Anything else we pay for? Oh yeah and we give them tea and coffee. But we tell them not to drink too much!

Nikki King-Smith: Our volunteers are paid \$10 a day that they work, and that's to cover their lunch expenses and parking which is always a cost to our volunteers. But there's one thing I'd like to say about volunteers, and I think it's probably a lot about communication, is that quite often volunteers have – and whilst they're very valuable members of staff, if you like, and we like to think of them as a staff – quite often they have an expectation that we can't meet, and as our projects crumble, so does their respect for us. So I don't know how people deal with the respect from the other side, from volunteers respecting that we've got positions which we have to work from. And I do have a bit of trouble with some of our engineers and stuff coming in and saying "Well, you just don't know enough" and we have different principles and difficult situations in which to work and quite often we come unstuck with that. So I don't know what anybody else's experience is.

Chris Knapp: What I do with our volunteers – if I get a political animal, the ones who start trying to run things, I get rid of him...or her. It's just too much trouble to have a volunteer who wants to start trying to run the museum.

Alison Wain: Do you have volunteers sign contracts?

Chris Knapp: No. We don't have any contracts for our volunteers. They have an induction period and either side can say "Thankyou very much, but no thankyou". It's rare that happens but on occasion I will tell a volunteer I don't want them any more because they're causing trouble.

It's a very big social event for our volunteers. I've had to extend the staff alcohol ban to the volunteers because most of them are retired and every couple of weeks they'd all disappear down the pub on their lunchtime and come back half cut because it was somebody's birthday. But they get a great deal of pleasure on the social side as well as helping the museum.

Michael Eisen: Our volunteers have to sign a contract and do an interview process. We have a volunteer and internship co-ordinator. On top of that, as well, they have to do a government security check as well as we provide a health and safety medical examination, and that's on an annual basis. Does anybody else do that?

Alison Wain: Yes, we actually do most of those things. The volunteers sign a...it's called our Volunteer Agreement and that also sets out the Memorial's responsibilities towards the volunteers. It does things like...intellectual property that they develop while here remains the property of the Memorial and that includes things like taking photos and so forth. And we also – to answer Nikki's question about problems (and this was part of what Nigel referred to as the reorganisation of our program), we moved to a probation period, because we did find that sometimes what initially seemed to be a good match between a volunteer and their skills and personality and the organisation, after a little while wasn't such a good match. And so we've moved to...they work on a small project or a trial project for about 50 hours, and given that they usually work one or two days a week that actually covers a few weeks. And if they seem to be working well with the team and still enthusiastic after 50 hours...that seems to knock out the people who "Just want to touch the Lancaster" – because after 50 hours they've touched the Lancaster and they want to do something else. And so we find that if at that point they're still enthused, they're working well with the team – at that point we buy them their safety boots and we go from there. So that's one way we try and deal with that problem of the mismatch.

Chris Knapp: We lose up to 50% of our volunteers within a very short space of time, because a lot of them think they're going to come in and work on wildly interesting projects - strip engines, rebuild engines – but they've got no skills, so those are the volunteers I don't want. The ones we've got left are dedicated. Usually don't have any skills – we teach them to do what we want, and we're actually in the process at the moment of setting up a nationwide training scheme for aviation heritage volunteers so we can take no-cost training to the smaller museums and train the volunteers how to look after their own objects, and that will be extended to the volunteers that work for the larger museums as well. But hopefully that's going to be government funded.

John Kemister: Another issue where we do deal with rewards, if you like, for the volunteers, is we have the hourly badges. Okay what are they? 200, 500, 1,000 hours, that sort of thing – 1,500, 10,000. And the volunteers do take great pride in getting those badges, which are presented at a formal ceremony, a formal evening by the Director or an assistant director, so it's made a big thing. We are selective with our volunteers and I think we've got to be. That's been spoken to before, you know, that in fact if you get too many people who can't handle the work you end up going backwards. We have wonderful volunteers and you've seen two of them here today – they are two of a select few in a sense that we would welcome them back at any time, any time at all, because of their skills and their commitment. I've had a number of people working on projects of mine, some of them have passed away, some of them are still around, that I would have back any time.

There was something else I was going to say too. Yes, we do have a responsibility to them – they have a responsibility to us for commitment, we have a responsibility to them. And practically speaking one of the hardest things is maintaining continuity,

given that we have discrete projects generally. Different in vehicle maintenance and things like that, that Andrew and Jamie are working on, but when we have large discrete projects subject to funding, subject to gallery development requirements, it's very hard to maintain continuity, and this is a continual heartache if you like, in keeping these dedicated people on board. I don't have any answers to that one.

Alison Wain: However, it's really heartening to hear Ian and Nigel saying that they can get a lot of satisfaction out of viewing the maintenance program as a whole over a year – and yeah, there is a lot of routine stuff about it but it does have an outcome that is really good. Because that, as John is saying, is one of the few things we can offer with continuity, and the plums sort of come up in and around that. But I think you were talking Nikki about the disappointment when a project sort of falls over, and sometimes that's true, that's happened, the plug's been pulled for one reason or another. And I guess that comes back partly to what Ian and Nigel were raising, and someone else was talking about communication. And that what's been the problem there in a few cases, I think, is that we haven't told them enough about the process and what's happening and why – why we can't keep that project going. So maybe if we can involve them in those discussions more it'll be less of a blow that's like a bit of a slap in the face, and more something that they can understand in the context of our budgets and priorities.

Ian Smith: The thing that goes a long way to a volunteer is, when you're going to walk out the door, your supervisor says to you "Thankyou for the work that you've done". That really helps you, and you know then from the supervisors and that, that you are appreciated. And that goes down a long way, you know? And because of that the next day you're going to come in - which I do a Tuesday and Thursday – I'm waiting to come back Thursday again. So it is, it goes a long, long way.

Chris Knapp: We won't recruit volunteers to work on a specific project because of the disappointment if it folds and problems we've had in the past when the project has been finished. We've had teams of volunteers who don't want to move onto the next one. So my volunteers work in a team with the staff, they get treated the same as the staff – they all get abuse from me, they're used to it – and when their project is finished they move on to the next one. I insist that all my volunteers - the same as all my staff - have got to be flexible. They're there to help the museum as well as get pleasure from it - and I'm not knocking that at all - but they're there to help the museum and if we've got jobs that need doing (a lot of staff get the same jobs), they're not specific to the project. They could be on anything.

Alison Wain: Yeah – we've very much adopted the same principle, and that's one of the things that the volunteers come into the program knowing about now – we make that quite explicit when we do go through that interview process. That, while there might be these nice projects coming up and they might have special interests - which is valid and valuable - they do have to recognize that we have other jobs that need to be done, and they'll need to muck in too. I think it's a really important thing for people to stress at the start of a volunteer's involvement, so they're not under any illusions.

Vanessa Roth: I just wondered if anyone had any comments regarding the use of volunteers in smaller institutions? Where I work I'm the sole objects conservator, and

while I think it would be very nice to have volunteers to help me out, I also have to think about the time I would spend to organise the volunteers, find them tasks to do and supervise them. And at the moment I just can't imagine having the time to do such a thing. But then I kind of think there would be some great projects I could get done if I did take the trouble. Has anyone else had that experience?

Linda Clarke: We do have volunteers – it's quite a small museum, but in contrast to what Alison was saying we're very much project based, because we find that we just don't have the projects that we can continue all the time. So once a project's finished then we say thankyou to the volunteer, but we don't have them back until we've got another project that we need them to work on.

Chris Knapp: Vanessa – you were saying about the time taken to find tasks for the volunteers – I would suggest if you've got to find tasks, maybe you don't need a volunteer at the moment.

Vanessa Roth: I guess there are always tasks, but then they're not always suited to the volunteer.

Davina Bonner: I'm out at the workshops for our museum at the moment and I can say that we've always got more volunteers knocking on our door than we've got jobs to do. There are always hundreds waiting to come in and we just haven't got the staff or resources to find jobs for them. Some of the things that we do set up are – and they have this running here at the War Memorial as well – is a gallery maintenance program, where we get them in the galleries. Under supervision you can normally have quite a few going at one time, where you're dusting and inspecting the collection on display – the volunteers can feel really involved in the collection that way and it's sort of a way to get a few going at once.

Alison Wain: That's one of the programs in which we involve other staff within the museum. We usually have one conservator to a number of other staff that may come from personnel or finance – in those areas they don't have much opportunity to be involved with the collections in a hands-on way, so it gives them an opportunity to do that and it means we get our collections maintained without having to put full-time dedicated staff on that job. But Vanessa's problem is really what Alayne was talking about, I think, earlier - that even if you are running a volunteer project you can't run more than a certain amount of volunteers without a complete collapse in your ability to move forward. And I know what you're saying, Chris, about if you're trying to find jobs for them then you don't need them, but at the same time if you don't have the ability to construct a suitable project and match the skills to the volunteers and take the time to make sure you're communicating with them, you're keeping them up to date, you're supervising them, then the whole thing can collapse in a heap and they make a mistake and it can get rather nasty. I think that's perhaps what Vanessa's alluding to and it is just a juggling thing.

Vanessa Roth: You might be called away to do something else and...

Alison Wain: That's true...and perhaps what it's suggesting is that in fact it's harder to find a place for a volunteer program until you've got a certain critical mass of staff. But the other problem is - what happens if your staff member can't come in that day

– they're sick or their kids are sick or something – you've got to have someone there to inform the volunteers and take care of them?

Chris Knapp: I don't know any museum that actually uses volunteers that could cope without their volunteers. I know ours are absolutely invaluable to us – we just could not run and do half the things we do without our volunteers.

Nikki King-Smith: At the West Australian Maritime Museum the submarine is run by the volunteers – they take all the tours through. If we didn't have the volunteer staff we wouldn't open the boat. But I don't use them on the conservation programs.