

The quest for association executive committees

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Is the fact that nobody seems to want to do anything for the benefit of society anymore a sign that the world is going downhill? Oversimplifying the problem and our moral view of things is hardly going to help. And in any case, it's not true that no one volunteers anymore – and there are studies to prove it. In Switzerland, there are currently around 100,000 associations, and these are still run by both small and large executive committees. On top of this, there are many political and church-run bodies. Every now and then, an association is forced to disband, but new ones are continually springing up take their place.

It is true, however, that volunteering has lost some of its sense of purpose. This is down to a variety of different reasons. For example, the honour in an honorary post is no longer as embraced as it used to be. Those asked to take on such a role are more likely to think first of the work involved and not of the prestige and recognition that comes with it. Whether rightly so or not, no one is going to get rich from an executive committee position. In addition, the association in itself is looked down on by many as an outmoded organisational structure, at least until they themselves care enough about a cause to establish their own association.

Other reasons may relate to the increasing participation of women in working life, meaning that they no longer have the time to spend on such activities at their fingertips. The jobs of women and men alike are taking up a large part of their free time. And if further training, overtime and/or family labour is then added to the mix, there's hardly any "social time" left over. Organised free time has also become more important than ever. It's easy to forget that many leisure activities only exist because of association structures and executive committee work.

So how do you go about finding new executive committee members? Read on for some tips and inspiration.

Getting people interested in what the association does

If you're trying to attract a non-member to committee work, try to "sell" the association's objectives and duties as best you can.

Explain how you yourself identify with the association and describe your motivation for getting involved.

Hand out documents and explain (success) stories.

Hardly anyone is interested in working on an executive committee in general. Selling what the association does and forging ties with people is key. One person might feel compelled to join because they can bring special knowledge to the table, while someone else might be looking for something to balance out their professional life and turn their hand to something completely different.

Targeting the right people

It's usually always the same people who decide to get involved in a committee, and those people often already have their hands full with such work. It's worth looking beyond the usual spectrum to people who wouldn't instantly come to mind.

While young people rarely get involved in associations, let alone committee work, why not still ask the question and get them thinking about it? Or target unassuming individuals that tend to fade into the background, who probably wouldn't ever put themselves forward? They may feel honoured by such a request: Being asked will give them the feeling of being wanted.

Targeting people in the right way

Experience shows that **speaking to people** in person is still the best way of attracting people. There are also **job boards** for volunteers (see box S.) which have shown some good results.

Writing letters to members and asking them to consider joining the committee is usually ineffective. And most importantly: requests that appeal to people's conscience usually miss their objective. Moaning about being overworked on the committee and a lack of solidarity are hardly likely to get people excited about joining.

Instead, make it clear that you're targeting that person specifically because you need their **skills in particular**.

Putting the right people on the hunt

Establishing a kind of **selection committee** consisting of two to five people, not all of whom on the executive committee already, is a tried-and-tested method. These people should care about the association's objectives and its continued existence. They should have a clear mandate with a clear time period. Under certain circumstances, they may be relieved of other tasks during this time.

Describing the tasks expected to come with the role and leaving space for new ideas

Most people want to know what they're letting themselves in for, both in terms of tasks and time commitment.

It would be good if you had a **description of the tasks** to hand out and could be as specific as possible about the time commitment involved.

It's important that future committee members also have **some scope to introduce their own ideas**. Trying to perform a task in the exact same way as the predecessor did for many years can be obstructive and not particularly appealing.

When someone steps down, **space needs to be made** for a new person. Changes within the committee are a good opportunity to rethink the individual units and tasks and redistribute them if necessary. In the event the actuary steps down, for example, it may be worth considering whether the minutes should be taken on a rotating basis in the future. Or, if nobody wants to take on the role of chairperson, the idea of co-chairs could be considered.

Offering something in exchange

Hardly anyone takes on the role of a committee member out of pure idealism. Rewarding volunteers for their commitment is the right and legitimate thing to do. They should also gain something from their work. Though voluntary work is not generally compensated for with money, other options can be considered:

- **Learning environment and skills**

You can learn a lot working on the executive committee of an association. Knowledge and experience acquired may be useful later on, whether personally or professionally. This can be gained by running meetings, organising work, managing finances, making public appearances, managing personnel, driving organisational development, dealing with conflicts, working as part of a team and much more. Voluntary work can and should also be officially certificated. Volunteers simply need to provide proof of hours worked and obtain a social identity card (Sozialausweis).

- **Contacts**

Committee work gives people opportunities to get to know others. Once the items on the meeting agenda have been addressed, the meeting is often followed by an informal part where a range of matters might be discussed: perhaps someone knows someone with a free flat, or someone else is willing to put in a good word for a job vacancy. Often, the committee is a place where people can feel at home, feel valued and feel like they can make a difference.

- **Further education**

Executive committee work is challenging and those asked often don't think they're up to the task. To ease their transition into the role, offer them the opportunity to do a course, paid for by the association. If possible, both association-specific and personal interests should be covered.

- **Payment for expenses**

The usual expenses (travel, postal charges, materials, etc.) are compensated for by time or on a flat-rate basis. Nobody should have to pay out of pocket. Drawing up some rules on expenses is recommended. Many associations (especially clubs) pay members for attending meetings.

- **Extras**

In addition to the usual bunch of flowers, present and words of gratitude at the executive committee meeting, you can also pay tribute to committee members during the year: a telephone call or a birthday card from or to the chairperson; or a joint excursion as a

reward for everyone. All of this serves to strengthen the feeling of being in it together. Or feel free to use your imagination!

Planning the induction for the new role

For future committee members, it's important to know that there will be an induction process before they start their new role. Enough time should be dedicated to this. It's not good to bombard new members with too much information in one single meeting.

It would be helpful for the new member to have someone to **mentor** them to start off with, a person who is available to answer any questions they may have.

A well-functioning association with a good image

The best way to acquire new committee members is and will always be to have a robust association with good management, exciting tasks and an intact appearance. This includes prudent management by the committee and appropriate structures.