

Association Volunteer Sweat Equity – Making Every Drop Count



Businesses often use the phrase “sweat equity” to explain the work people do for a company without being paid. This same concept can easily be applied to association chapter volunteers.



If you’re lucky, you have members who are happy to write blog posts, update your association chapter website, plan an event, or complete other tasks without payment. They do it because they see benefits you may not, like the chance to improve a skill, contribute to the organization, be part of a community or even just see the chapter succeed because of something they did.

What happens when you can’t find enough association chapter volunteers or when you need to keep adding tasks to your volunteers’ sweat equity plates? Often those volunteers begin to feel overwhelmed and/or frustrated with all they’re being asked to do for free or they’re concerned about the lack of effective processes or tools to get it all done easily.

We’ve spoken with volunteers who can’t send more than 100 emails at a time but need to send emails to the thousands of members in their database; that simple task takes hours. Others have shared the trouble and time it takes to print name badges for events, when they export an Excel file from an event registration list into Word and then print it using a template.



When easy association chapter tasks become complex, multi-step endeavors that require more sweat equity than volunteers were expecting, those volunteers get frustrated. Many feel that they're doing this work because they have to, not because they want to. When this happens, the quality work they were delivering may disappear. If you're lucky, they'll continue to work but they'll share their frustration, and you'll have a chance to do something about it before it's too late. However, many association chapter volunteers don't complain because they don't want to be seen as the squeaky wheel. Instead, they grumble to themselves, their work will suffer and eventually, they just stop showing up.

Before you lose a bunch of volunteers and watch your membership decline as your association chapter's To Do list grows, ask your volunteers how things are going and how they're doing with what you're asking them to accomplish. Follow up regularly, in one-on-one conversations, surveys and focus groups. How long does it take to write a blog post, send out event invitations or reconcile your monthly financial statement? Is it easy? Difficult? How frustrated does the work make them? Are there changes they'd recommend? Gathering this information will allow you to stay on top of how they feel about what you're asking them to do, before it's too late.

The Risks of Association Chapter Volunteer Sweat Equity

Association chapter volunteers are the lifeblood of your chapter. Your chapter succeeds when volunteers do what they need to do, and they do it well. But when sweat equity turns negative, it can make your volunteers feel like you don't appreciate all they do.

It can also mean the outcomes of what you're asking them to do – keep your website updated, market an event, etc. – may not be what you're expecting. If your association chapter web content isn't updated, perspective members can't find you, and if your event marketing misses the mark, less people may attend that event.

Keep Your Positive Sweat Equity from Turning Sour

Think about what you can do to keep your volunteers feeling appreciated and not exploited. Since you can't pay them, if you're not doing so already, give them something in return for their work that is appropriate for the time they're putting in, like entry to an event or education session at no charge or free chapter swag, like a sweatshirt, t-shirt or mug.

Or maybe it's time to take a much larger step and automate some of these tasks by moving to an association management system (AMS). This move can eliminate many of the purely administrative



tasks your volunteers need to complete and give them the time to work on strategic activities they really enjoy that will help grow their skillset and your chapter. Think about what's far down your association chapter To Do list, like a membership engagement plan or board job summaries for the different roles on your board, that you'd like them to have time to focus on.

To understand if it makes sense financially to move to an AMS, you'll need to know how much you'd be spending if you had to pay for the work. If you had to pay someone to update your association chapter website, how much would it cost? Talk to your web volunteer(s) for an idea of how long different web-related tasks take. Then multiply those hours by the hourly rate someone normally charges; you can easily find that information online.

What you learn could surprise you – there's a good chance volunteers are spending more time than you think on basic tasks.

Think about what could do, or may need to do, to keep your members satisfied and working, before it's too late. This is an important task to add to your To Do list, to reduce your risk of losing the volunteers who keep checking tasks off that list.

