

Australian Youth Advisory Network Flexible Vounteering



October 2016

Introduction

In September 2016, the Australian Youth Advisory Network (AYAN) 2016 Boundless summit saw 30 young members from Queensland, Victoria, the Northern Territory and New South Wales come together on the Gold Coast to participate in professional development, networking and consultation opportunities.

To determine a young members views towards episodic volunteering within St John Ambulance Australia, AYAN conducted a consultation with the aim of generating ideas on whether such a model of volunteerism would be conducive with St John's existing model of operation .

A recent trend has seen a shift away from regular, long-term volunteering to more episodic or one-time service—this is particularly so for young people. While this has created significant challenges for many organisations that depend on consistently available volunteers (such as St John's current Event Health Services model of volunteerism), the reality is that more and more volunteers, especially young volunteers, are looking for ways to get engaged in a short-term capacity. (Queensland Council of Social Service, 2014)

This trend is especially true given that episodic volunteering may not always be about time availability but rather time of year. For example, lots of people seek to volunteer during the holiday season of November and December. (Action Without Borders, 2011)

The question put to Boundless participants was "Are there opportunities within St John's existing structure that will accommodate the episodic volunteer and potentially engage more young citizens?"

Findings

Learning & Training

It was identified that flexible training options would greatly aid volunteers (especially young volunteers) in being able to partake in St John training. E-learning was mentioned several times as an effective and efficient tool which could be used. Short training sessions and intensive training was also suggested. Participants commented that if training was delivered in a short time frame (e.g. over a weekend) it would suit the current time constraints of many young volunteers (especially students).

Support

The need for adequate and appropriate support for university students was identified. It was a reoccurring theme amongst participants that there is a need and want for a mentoring program within the organisation. This mentoring program would connect an expert in their field with a student so that all parties can benefit from the exchange. Participants felt that if such a program were in place, it would greatly assist in their ability to give back to the organisation.

Culture

Participants' identified that the organisations understanding and demands of young member's availability to attend events needs to be addressed. Many participants felt as if the organisation expected them to be available to attend events consistently. Participants made it known that young people have other extra-curriculum activities and could not be available every weekend to assist in the coverage of events. It was also identified that when a member turns down a request to cover an event, at short notice, they are often made to feel guilty for doing so. Participants suggested that a cultural change needs to happen to become more understanding of young volunteer's time commitments.

Volunteering opportunities/projects

Participants' felt that there are many projects or tasks that St John completes in its day-to-day operations that could be an opportunity for episodic or short-term volunteering. An example of a task would be the preparation of first aid equipment and kits for events. It was noted that there should also be a focus on skills other than first aid (e.g. logistics, communications) and that volunteering should be suited to the individual. Participants also suggested that not only should these flexible volunteering opportunities be available to current volunteers, but there should be recruitment based on these flexible/short-term positions to attract more young people to the organisation.

Participants also felt that more information distribution regarding other opportunities available within the organisation (such as in community care, training, the First Aid in Schools Program and so on) would be welcomed by many young members.

Another key point of discussion was the recruitment of people with relevant experience and/or qualifications in a particular area, to work on a short-term. For example, engaging a marketing student to work on a state-based project. Projects such as these will benefit both the individual and the organisation.

Marketing

Participants' were of the view that episodic volunteering opportunities should be advertised to both potential and current members. It was the general consensus amongst participants that if the organisation recruited based on short-term opportunities, more people would be likely to volunteer and engage with the organisation in the long-term.

Recommendations

Based on the consultation findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. St John Ambulance Australia should investigate how the organisation may better utilise e-learning modalities in the delivery of Cadet and Event Health

Services Training, including for example utilising short, intensive courses with an e-learning component.

2. AYAN should investigate the viability of a national mentoring program for young members.
3. St John Ambulance Australia entities to introduce more flexibility in dealing with young volunteers, particularly in understanding the time constraints of young members.
4. St John Ambulance Australia entities to investigate opportunities for episodic volunteering, short-term or project-based and strategies developed to implement the same.

Conclusion

St John Ambulance Australia would benefit from adopting practices that allow volunteers, especially young volunteers, to engage in episodic or flexible volunteering modality. The organisation would particularly benefit from addressing the culture of pressure to volunteer regularly at events, as this is a turn off for young members. If more flexibility was introduced, young volunteers would be able to give back and work with the organisation in a way which suits them best, by fitting volunteering in around their busy schedules and lives. With society's young people adopting the episodic volunteering trend more and more, St John will be doing itself a disservice if we don't adapt to meet the needs of the current market.

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