

## **Volunteering in German Museums**

Dr. des Toby Alexandra Hentschel

The German cultural sector is divided in a public sector characterized by professionalism, and a private sector, characterized by voluntarism. While small, private museums have always depended on volunteers, volunteering in larger museums is a recent phenomenon. Since the early 90s, museums have been facing budget cuts. At the same time, politics and sciences rediscovered the active citizen. Both developments contributed to an interest in volunteering even among larger museums, which had, until then, relied exclusively on professional staff und public funding. Today, every second German museum is supported by volunteers. While larger museums are still less likely to have volunteer, those who do can often count on a higher number of supporters than small institutions.

In very small museums, volunteers perform all necessary tasks. In larger museums the main areas of volunteer activities are visitor services, shops and education, although the latter is much debated. Reasons against volunteers in museums are lack of need, fear of losing paid jobs, threats to professionalism and difficult communication between paid and unpaid personnel. Reasons for having volunteers include offering more services, support for overworked staff and a strengthening of the ties between museum and community.

Although many museums now involve volunteers, little thought is given to the adequate coordination of this new group of staff. While many different models can be found, professional volunteer management is rare.

Volunteers in German museums tend to be older and female; more than half of them are retired. Motivations and expectations can only be inferred from general survey on volunteering in Germany. Most important are fun with the work, being with nice people and the importance to society or other people. Volunteers also value challenges and wish to get some recognition. Ranking markedly lower is the personal use of a volunteer job.

After many years of warning against volunteering in museums, cultural politics today are in favour of involving volunteers. The German Museum Association has commissioned a working paper on volunteering, giving guidance to both small and large museums, which will be published early this year.

The Network Civic Engagement in Museums, founded last year, brings together museum professionals, volunteers, and scientists from all German speaking countries. It publishes a newsletter on all aspects of museum volunteering which is distributed free of charge to alle partners in the network.

# Volunteering in German Museums

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## Topics

- German cultural sector
- Interest in museum volunteering
- Figures
- Volunteer activities
- Why (and why not) have volunteers
- Who volunteers and why
- Volunteer Management
- Museum politics

## The German cultural sector

Public sector

Professionalism

Larger museums

Volunteers offer  
additional services

recent

Private sector

Voluntarism

Small museums

Volunteers perform  
all tasks

traditional

## Interest in museum volunteering

- 1) Receding public funds
  - 2) New interest in civic engagement and volunteering in politics and sciences
- > Interest in museum volunteering even in large, public museums

## Some figures

- Over 6000 museums
- 50% supported by volunteers
- Over 30.000 volunteers
- Every 3rd museum with volunteer director
- 40-50 larger museums with volunteer programs
- Ca. 10 museums with over 100 volunteers

## Volunteer activities

Accepted:	Visitor services Shops Crafts demonstrations
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Seldom:	Curatorial departments
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Debated:	Education Guards
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## Arguments against volunteers

- No need
- No volunteers to be found
- Danger to paid jobs
- Devalorising profession
- Problems between paid and unpaid staff

## Reasons for having volunteers

- New services
- Support for staff
- Ties to community

## The typical museum volunteer is ...

- ... female
- ... older
- ... retired
- ... highly educated

## Volunteers expect to ...

- ... have fun
- ... meet nice people
- ... do something good or useful
- ... find new challenges
- ... get recognition
- ... gain personal advantage

## Volunteer Management

- Museums don't realize importance
- Different models
  - Friends groups
  - Volunteer agency
  - Some staff person
  - No central organization
  - Volunteer organizer
  - 1 full-time volunteer coordinator
- USA: Volunteer management is profession

## Museum Politics

- In favour of museum volunteering
- Surveys
- Conferences and trainings



## Working paper (German Museum Association)

- Statistics
- Stages of volunteer management
- Volunteer activities
- Legal and insurance issues
- Problems of non-professional work
- Where to find support

To be published in february

## Network Civic Engagement in Museums

- For professionals, volunteers, researchers
- German-speaking
- Regular Newsletter
- Free of charge

**Please join!**