



Last Words



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Actively Engaging Volunteers

I have rewritten this article more times than I care to count. If I were writing this article with paper and pen I'd have an overflowing trashcan full of crumpled up pieces of paper! While I am glad that I can save a few trees by using a computer instead of paper, I do miss taking out my frustrations by crumpling up a piece of paper and tossing it in the garbage.

What topic is so difficult to address that I cannot seem to find the right words? Well, I am frustrated by COACH's lack of ability to engage volunteers but I don't want to come across as overly critical of the organization itself or the people who devote their time as board members. I am an ardent supporter of COACH. I think that a Canadian organization representing the needs and interests of Canadian health informatics professionals is of paramount importance and I do whatever I can to promote and support the organization.

Having recently celebrated its 30th anniversary, COACH seems to have forgotten its roots as an organization driven by volunteers who wanted to make a difference in their community. While hired staff and outside consultants are necessary, members can also make valuable contributions. Yet, when I talk to other COACH members, I am finding that there is a growing frustration regarding COACH's seeming inability to engage members who want to volunteer their time.

As an example, a friend and colleague who is a long time member opted to volunteer his time with another similar organization because COACH was unable to figure out how to use his services. Another person, a candidate for the current board of directors, told me that they had experienced a disturbing lack of interest in their offers to volunteer.

When people with whom I work criticize something or someone, I challenge them to offer solutions along with their comments. In this spirit, I'd like to offer a suggestion for how COACH can make better use of its growing member base.

I come from a family of nurses. My mother, my sister, and two aunts are or were nurses in a variety of care settings including hospitals. When visiting these relatives at work, I was often struck by the number of volunteers who selflessly offer their time in various capacities. Even though large hospitals operate with multi-million dollar budgets and can employ thousands of people, they still rely heavily on volunteers. These volunteers provide a variety of services that make a key difference to the delivery of care.

To engage those who wish to volunteer and find meaningful roles for them, hospitals and regional health authorities often employ staff to coordinate the volunteer activity. These people actively recruit and embrace volunteers. They match skill sets and find meaningful roles for volunteers that benefit both the organization and the volunteers.

I propose that COACH take a page from the sector in which it operates and set up a similar structure. Just as COACH has evolved to the point that paid staff are required to oversee day-to-day operations, run conferences, and design/deliver various member programs, perhaps paid staff time is also needed to coordinate the volunteer efforts of COACH members.

Unlike some member-based organizations (e.g. the Canadian Automobile Association), COACH is not merely a "business" that exists to serve its members. Rather, COACH is a network of like-minded people seeking to promote health informatics as a profession and as a tool to improve the delivery of health care services. As a network, members can and perhaps even should take a more active role in many COACH initiatives.

By harnessing the skills, experience, and passion of as many of its 1,500 members as possible, COACH can achieve much more than is possible with any reasonable size paid staff. I respectfully suggest that finding an effective and efficient way of engaging volunteers is an absolutely vital step in realizing COACH's vision. ●