Differences Between Key and Episodic Volunteers

Few community projects will be successful without the combination of leaders who envision and plan the event (Key Volunteers) and event-day volunteers who do the work (Episodic Volunteers). Key volunteers are critical to the success of project-based volunteerism. They often come from those closest to your organization: current and former board members, unpaid volunteer staff, and donors. They may also come from other organizations with an affinity to your project, such as non-profits or government agencies.

As obligations mount and people become more and more busy, their desire for short-term volunteer opportunities is increasing. In addition, as traditional forms of linking people to their community decline, Episodic Volunteerism offers a critical community-building opportunity. The social component of volunteerism is becoming more and more important.

For many reasons, Episodic Volunteerism is on the rise. The most important step you can take in terms of strengthening your volunteer program or efforts is to structure as much of what you do into short-term, episodic volunteer opportunities that leave people with a clear sense of accomplishment.

Topic	Key Volunteers	Episodic Volunteers
Motivations	- Deep concern about or loyalty to a particular issue or organization - Skill development - Professional networking - Looking to see long-term results - A leadership opportunity	- Social opportunity / fun - Desire to complete a specific task - Looking for immediate results / satisfaction - An opportunity to be "put to work"
Duration	Likely to participate consistently over time	Participate for a few hours on event day
Needs	- Ownership and responsibility - Clear responsibilities / position description - Recognition - To see progress toward long-term results - Regular check-in and debrief	- Specific task they can complete - Event day organization and attention - Recognition - Incentives – food, fun, etc. - Tangible event-day accomplishment
Challenges	- Burnout - Staying engaged and challenged - Fresh ways to encourage and recognize them - Delegating responsibilities	- Connecting them to the big picture - Task variety (avoiding monotony) - Competition from other events - Keeping it fun - Seizing the opportunity to turn episodic volunteers into key volunteers (the leadership cycle)