

Growth Hacking for NGOs and Nonprofits: How a Few Staffers Can Mobilize Millions

by Julie Szabo

When nonprofits mobilize, they often focus on breadth—gathering large numbers of supporters as a way to build power. When nonprofits organize, they tend to invest deeply in nurturing volunteer leaders to ensure there are skilled, committed people in place to do the organization’s work. Blending the two into one model, however, may be the special sauce.

Editors’ note: This article is adapted from *Beyond the First Click: How Today’s Volunteers Build Power for Movements and NGOs*, a report copublished by Mobilisation Lab (MobLab), Change.org, and Capulet. This article is an expanded version of an article first published on NPQ’s website, on March 10, 2017.

IF YOU SPEND FIVE MINUTES IN THE COMPANY of software entrepreneurs, you’ll hear the phrase “growth hacking.” It refers to a mixed bag of experimental strategies and tactics that start-ups use to grow quickly and exponentially. So, what does growth hacking look like in the nonprofit world?

Research for *Beyond the First Click: How Today’s Volunteers Build Power for Movements and NGOs*¹ began with a phone call to author and academic Hahrie Han. While studying civic engagement models for a recent book, Han discovered that organizations that *blend* “mobilizing” and “organizing” techniques can engage people at scale more quickly. We (the groups involved in research for *Beyond the First Click*—Mobilisation Lab, Change.org, and Capulet) were intrigued by the idea, and, as we interviewed more NGOs and experts, evidence for Han’s thesis snowballed.

In Han’s definition of *mobilizing*, nonprofits tend to focus on breadth—on

gathering large numbers of supporters as a way to build power. *Organizing* nonprofits, however, tend to invest deeply in nurturing volunteer leaders to ensure there are skilled, committed people in place to do the organization’s work. Han says:

There are some organizations that just do organizing; they do that really deep work in local communities . . . but they’re never able to take the great work they do and scale it. On the flip side, I see organizations that have a ton of scale because they do a lot of mobilizing. But even if they’re able to achieve changes they want to make, those changes are fragile because they don’t have the leadership core, that depth, that continues to advocate for change over time.²

Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) is an example of an organization that is successfully growth hacking by blending

mobilizing and organizing for scale. SURJ has a tiny staff—just two full-time employees and a few part-timers. Still, they support more than seven million white Americans in the movement to end white supremacy and build a racially just society. Scaling the movement with volunteers is central to SURJ’s theory of change.

From hosting kitchen table conversations to organizing hundreds of rallies across the United States, SURJ’s work “just can’t be done without volunteer leaders with very big responsibilities,” says Randall Smith, a member of the National Staff Team. “Without these leaders, SURJ wouldn’t exist.”³

Amplifying an organization or movement with volunteers isn’t a new idea. Becky Bond and Zack Exley, who were leaders in Bernie Sanders’s presidential campaign, say it’s a lost art. They argue that when organizations and campaigns hire more full-time staff, they tend to engage fewer volunteers and lose

power. During the Bernie campaign, we witnessed what volunteers are capable of, and Bond and Exley encourage organizations to follow suit. “Every group that stands for something important, no matter how small, has a list of supporters. Those supporters want to help your effort succeed. Put them to work!”⁴

When 350.org launched its Fossil Free campaign in 2012, it used mobilizing techniques—petitions and public actions—to pressure universities and institutions to divest from fossil fuels. 350.org is an expert at going wide, but it’s also going deep with Fossil Free by building distributed teams of highly trained activists to scale up the movement on university campuses. “We’ve made a very intentional effort to train individuals so they can help broaden the movement,” said Anna Goldstein, U.S. Team Coordinator.⁵ The Fossil Free Fellowship program trains fellows and places them in paid summer internships with host organizations to get hands-on organizing experience.

“Being a fellow brought me into community with other strong, determined organizers and allowed me to find my own role in this fight. It gave me hope, and taught me lessons that will carry me through organizing for climate justice for the long haul,” said Lex Barlowe, a 2014 fellow.⁶ Fossil Free has spread to more than five hundred campuses and institutions globally, thanks to the work of volunteer organizers.

Anyone who works at a nonprofit knows it’s tempting to equate impact with growing supporter numbers. But, isn’t going deep with volunteers who will lead with us and for us just as important? If NGOs are going to build stronger, distributed networks more quickly, Han, Smith, and Goldstein agree, NGOs will need to blend web-based movement-building techniques with a deep commitment to training and nurturing volunteers. That’s their NGO growth hack.

Questions that will help you to explore the roles and the potential roles of volunteers in your organization ⁷

Reflections on volunteer coaching

1. How does your organization coach volunteers?
2. Is there a partner or foundation that could provide resources for leveling up volunteers?
3. How could a fellowship model work in your organization?
4. Which “on-the-job” skills can you teach to volunteers who will practice them immediately in the real world?
5. Who on staff—if anyone—focuses on your volunteers’ health, happiness, and success?
6. Is there an existing training model you can tap into without having to develop your own coaching curriculum?

Reflections on volunteer contributions and performance

1. Do volunteer leaders contribute to strategy at your organization? How?
2. Does your organization back away from giving volunteers mission-critical work and holding them accountable for outcomes? Why?
3. Aside from number of volunteer hours, what metrics do you use to track volunteer performance? For example, how does their work contribute to the mission? Does the work add to your volunteers’ sense of well-being, contribution, and place in society?
4. What steps can you take to support personal successes for your volunteers?

Reflections on blending mobilizing and organizing

1. Does your organization rely on a mobilizing model, an organizing model, or both?
2. What opportunities are there for you to go deep with volunteers? How could they support the mobilizing work you’re already doing?
3. Alternatively, how well are you able to mobilize members, to create opportunities for involvement that match interests that people already have?
4. What would a lightweight, agile experiment with mobilizing or organizing look like for your organization?

Reflections on creating remarkable volunteer experiences

1. What do volunteers look forward to most when working with your organization?
2. How can you make volunteering a remarkable experience?
3. What new or unique experiences can volunteers expect when they work with your organization?
4. Do you back away from asking volunteers to make big commitments—emotionally and/or logistically?
5. In what ways can you explore and support your volunteers’ interests rather than simply expecting them to support yours?

NOTES

1. Julie Szabo and Darren Barefoot, *Beyond the First Click: How Today’s Volunteers Build Power for Movements and NGOs* (Amsterdam, San Francisco, and Burnaby, BC: Mobilisation Lab, Change.org, and Capulet, December 17, 2016).
2. Interview with Hahrie Han, by Mobilisation Lab, December 15, 2016, soundcloud.com/user-926123477/interview-with-author-hahrie-han.
3. This and subsequent quotes are from interviews by the author unless otherwise noted.
4. Becky Bond and Zack Exley, “The Revolution Will Not Be Staffed: How Big Organizing Can Take Down Trump,” *The Nation*, November 30, 2016, www.thenation.com/article/the-revolution-will-not-be-staffed-how-big

-organizing-can-take-down-trump/.

5. Szabo and Barefoot, *Beyond the First Click*.

6. Ibid.

7. These “reflections” were taken from Szabo and Barefoot, *Beyond the First Click*; they have been lightly edited for this publication.

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