

Prestige and high standing – a thoroughly modern concept

It could be so easy. There are people over here who need trustees and there are people over there who want to be trustees.

Most boards reportedly have between one and five vacancies and there are lots of people who would benefit from being a trustee. Just get them together and all is well.



'I see they're interviewing potential trustees today.'

But it doesn't seem to work like that. There's a bit missing somewhere – there's a message that just isn't making it from one side to the other.

It brings to mind the cartoon of the French and the English hailing each other as they pass when digging the Tunnel deep beneath the Channel: 'I say old chap what's all this about metres?' 'Excusez moi monsieur qu'est-ce c'est ces 'feet'?'

To get the message

across to maybe-one-day would-be trustees, recruiters may wish to reflect on what's going on in their minds.

For those with a bit of an arrogant streak this may be 'I'm good at loads of things, why hasn't His Honourable Lord Thingamajig invited me for lunch and onto the board of the LetsChangetheWorldSingleHanded charity'. For those a bit down on themselves it may be 'That's for upper class people, not me'.

Both stem from a bygone, but still with us, class based view of society. And so people don't act. Fuelled by our specially British cultural inheritance, we carry a sense that trusteeship, being a gift relationship, means we feel we should be asked to be elevated to this position of prestige and high standing.

To have to put ourselves forward is felt to offend that gift relationship and make it a commercial transaction – not terribly British at all.

But ask the average third sector person and they'll tell you that the correct, decent and thoroughly modern way to go about getting new trustees is by open recruitment.

The fact that some 80 per cent of trustees are still recruited by word of mouth, just like the old days, reflects a market that is not working – in spite of the many efforts of many good people who have set up lots of perfectly good websites and other trustee recruitment mechanisms.

OK. What could be done? How would it be if when we want to recruit trustees we put political correctness on one side and directly addressed what's going in the deeper recesses of the minds of potential trustees?

How would it be if we used language which proposed the many tangible benefits of trusteeship including the fact that, in well-governed charities, trustees have prestige and are highly regarded both within the charity and outside? It's a natural part of us to seek the status that can come from having a trustee position. Say it like it is. The advert is another way to tap potential trustees on the shoulder, just like the old days.

And of course, charities would also set up streamlined modern processes so that when people do respond they are swiftly and courteously dealt with throughout and then have proper inductions to the board.

O hail prestige and high standing – a thoroughly modern concept! ●

Martin Farrell
Chair, Time Banking UK
Director, get2the point
martin.farrell@get2thepoint.org
020 8404 8661

Websites advertising trustee vacancies include: www.civilsocietyjobs.co.uk and also www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/index.asp?id=2317