



The Volunteer Experience

It is important to focus on the experience volunteers have with your organisation in order to attract new volunteers and retain those you already have onboard.

Volunteer numbers and hours have dropped recently, resulting in increased pressure on the already stretched resources of not-for-profit organisations. Many older people are raising their grandchildren, families have a myriad of other commitments, and volunteers have less time to give overall. In order to counter some of these issues, it is important to rethink the traditional perception on what volunteers need. Consider each of the following areas and how they contribute to the volunteer experience within your organisation.

Values

Clarify your organisations' vision, mission, values and purpose, and link these to the work your volunteers do. If there is a strong connection between a volunteer's role and the overall purpose of your organisation, your volunteer will have a greater sense of their contribution.

Treating the Volunteer as a Customer

Your volunteers might not be giving you their money but they are giving their time, and deserve to receive the same treatment as employees and customers. Treat them with respect, and make them feel valued and appreciated. Respond to phone calls and correspondence promptly. Be quick to troubleshoot problems. Remember that marketing's greatest tool is word of mouth, so you will benefit from happy volunteers.

Preparation

Volunteers start judging their experience with you from the moment they show an interest in being involved. So before you start recruiting volunteers put some thought into the following key areas:

- *Budgeting*
Do you have the necessary budget to support the needs of volunteers and volunteer related expenses?
- *Health & Safety*
Consider your obligations when recruiting and

working with volunteers. How will you ensure their health, safety and well-being are addressed?

- *Legislation*

Familiarise yourself with the relevant legislation. Volunteers are covered by:

- ⇒ ACC (as a member of the public)
- ⇒ Health and Safety in Employment Act
- ⇒ Human Rights Act
- ⇒ Privacy Act

Volunteers are not covered by the Employment Relations Act.

- *Workplace Wellbeing*

Appoint someone for your volunteers to go to with any needs or issues that arise once they come on board. Plan how will you check in on their progress, and take feedback from them.

- *Culture*

Is your staff culture such that paid employees truly appreciate the value of volunteers? How have you prepared staff for the introduction of volunteers? What training will you provide your staff on how to work with volunteers?

- *Media*

Think about your online presence, and how you will interact with relevant stakeholders, including volunteers.

- *Volunteer Eligibility*

Ensure your organisation has robust volunteer policies in place. Make it clear who is eligible to volunteer with your organisation.

- *Capacity to Lead*

Do you have enough capacity to properly lead and support a volunteer team? Have you thought about who will be responsible for the application process? The induction process? Managing the volunteer programme?



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- *Resources for Volunteers*
Well-written role descriptions for your volunteers are essential. You also need the necessary tools, equipment and space for them to carry out their role and clear procedure manuals to support them in their role.
- *Processes*
Establish an application and induction process that can be adapted for all types of volunteer roles. Consider what recognition method you will utilise, how you will manage conflict, or exit a volunteer if necessary. Solid policies and processes protect your organisation, the people you serve and your volunteers.
- *Code of Conduct*
Give your volunteers an understanding of how their role contributes to the wider vision of your organisation. Make sure the volunteers' rights and responsibilities are clearly spelled out.

Recruitment

The recruitment process is the first contact a volunteer has with your organisation. Consider each of the following aspects within this process:

- *Understanding volunteer motivation:*
People volunteer for all sorts of reasons. Usually there is an element of wanting to support your particular cause, but there are often other motivators. These might include meeting new people, obtaining a reference for future work opportunities, the chance to learn a new skill, to keep themselves active, or to practice English-speaking skills. Understanding the motivations of your volunteers helps determine what sources of recruitment you use, the level and type of support you provide, and what recognition methods will be best received.
- *Volunteer role description:*
Volunteer roles come in all shapes and sizes, so while a role description is always good practice, it doesn't have to be formal and stuffy. Having a clear role description helps prevent misunderstandings and gives volunteers confidence in carrying out their role. Avoid using the term "volunteer" in the title, as this is a pay category, not a role description. Don't be afraid to get a little creative, and always ensure the impact of the volunteers' contribution is part of the description.
- *Volunteer application process:*
Providing a great volunteer experience means valuing your volunteers' time right from the start. Your application process needs to be thorough, but also efficient. Before you begin, think about what information you need from the volunteer and how you will gather it. What information does the volunteer need from you, and how will you provide it? What legal requirements do you need to consider? Who is responsible for each step in the process and how will you communicate with the volunteer throughout the process?
- *Interview process:*
There are a number of ways to ascertain an applicant's suitability for the role they apply for. Of these, personal face to face interviews, using structured interview questions, is the most common. Other options include informal conversations or work simulations. The key is to determine how you will identify if the volunteer is a match for the role they applied for. Think about what you will do if they are not. Where possible interview more than one applicant, ensuring they not only have the required skills, but that they believe in your cause, and they fit the values of your organisation.
- *Inclusivity:*
Teams benefit by being diverse and involving a wide range of volunteers. This may include people with a disability, youth, male volunteers, senior adults, or someone from a different ethnic background. Tap into existing forums



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such as careers expos, retirement villages, or international societies. Don't underestimate the contribution of volunteers from groups outside your standard pool.

- Reference Checking:**
Reference checks allow you to build a picture of the prospective volunteer and help to ensure you are getting a good fit for your team. They are also used for verifying information on the application form or C.V. and can help you avoid issues with unsuitable volunteers later.
- Police Checking:**
A robust recruitment process should include a background check such as a Police Check, which includes information on any contact with the police. Having a criminal record does not mean you automatically exclude a potential volunteer, but it does help you make a more informed decision.
- Fitting the Role to the Volunteer:**
Matching the right volunteer to the role is a two-way process. You need to be clear on the needs of your organisation, as well as the needs and motivations of the volunteer. It can be helpful to break it down into absolutes (such as having a full, clean drivers licence for a driving role), preferences (such as experience in a certain field), deal breakers (such as criminal convictions, or smokers), and what support or training can be offered to a volunteer (if any).
- Length of Commitment:**
The traditional long-term volunteer role does not suit everyone. Consider how you can break down your commitment requirements to make your volunteering roles more accessible and expand your pool of potential volunteers. This might include one-off opportunities, such as a specific project, or roles that can be performed outside of normal office hours, so a volunteer can fit it in alongside their other commitments.

The Volunteer Agreement

A volunteer agreement formalises the commitment made between your organisation and the volunteer. It identifies the obligations and responsibilities of each party from the outset, helping to reduce issues arising from misunderstandings or miscommunication. It is important to include a review period, such as three or six months, to provide an opportunity for both parties to discuss progress and give feedback.

On-Boarding

Make time to ensure that new volunteers are inducted well. Introduce volunteers to each other and to staff and show them what to do. You may want to buddy them up, give them a tour of your facilities, or invite them to attend morning tea before they begin. Providing them with a team directory helps them to get to know people, and encouraging them to attend upcoming events or social activities will help them to feel connected to the team. Access to training, organisational resources and newsletters, and information about their role, health and safety and your office hours are all essential. Consider a good induction as a worthwhile investment.

Volunteer Recognition and Appreciation

Recognising and valuing volunteers is critical to good volunteer management practice. Genuine recognition requires you to think about each volunteer and the specific contribution they have made to your organisation. You might recognise being a team player, innovation, commitment to training or being a positive ambassador. While every volunteer should be recognised, not all volunteers need to be recognised in the same way. Identify each person's "language of appreciation" - this might be Quality Time, Acts of Service, Words of Encouragement, or Gift Giving, and express your appreciation accordingly.



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Volunteer Retention

In some cases there is little you can do to stop volunteers from moving on, indeed some volunteers only want a short-term role, but often people leave for reasons you can easily address. Think about how you can enhance their experience so that they want to come back. Make sure everyone in your team understands how their input contributes to your overall mission, and why their role is an important cog in the wheel. Work out what drives your volunteers and then provide them with rewarding opportunities. Ensure you are speaking their 'language' of appreciation with recognition that is meaningful to them.

Volunteer Management

Volunteer management involves working with and through volunteers to achieve your organisation's objectives. Effective volunteer management involves having clear policies and procedures, practically measuring outcomes and impacts, keeping records of volunteers, and maintaining an effective working relationship with volunteers.

Opportunity for Feedback

Making volunteers feel like a part of the team means giving them regular opportunities to provide feedback and suggestions. Often they have the best knowledge on how things are working and ideas for how to improve your services and systems. This could be done formally, through surveys, evaluation forms, or regular reviews, or it could be carried out more informally, such as by maintaining a suggestion box in the staff room, or simply asking "How is it going for you?".

Performance Review Process

Volunteer performance has an effect on the overall performance of your organisation, so a performance review process both holds volunteers accountable and supports them to success. A well-developed role description features the intended impacts and outcomes of the volunteer's tasks, so it is a great reference for any performance review.

In areas where volunteers are achieving those outcomes, congratulate them and acknowledge their achievements. Where the outcomes are falling short, you can have a conversation about what success would look like, what actions might need to be taken, and then agree on a timeline for changes. It is wise to schedule regular, structured reviews, just as you would with paid employees.

Difficult Conversations and Conflict Management

Conflict is about differences and because of the increasing diversity of the workforce, we're seeing more workplace conflict than ever before. Whether conflict is between volunteers, employees or a combination of these, best practice involves having a written conflict resolution guideline, including an outline of the steps to take, where to seek help and how to follow up. Solving a conflict requires a high degree of communication between the conflicting parties and the team leader. Therefore conflict resolution processes are important for all organisations in order to ensure a productive and peaceful workplace.

Exiting a Volunteer

There are a variety of reasons why volunteers move on, although they don't always tell us directly what these are. Conducting an exit interview with a departing volunteer is a valuable way to find out not just what they didn't enjoy, or what went wrong, but also to identify areas of your organisation that are functioning well and producing positive outcomes. This acts as a debrief, and provides closure while allowing for a smooth, dignified transition for the departing volunteer.