

RECRUITING VOLUNTEERS

Factsheet 1

Recruiting and welcoming volunteers is not dissimilar to recruiting and orienting staff, but, unlike paid staff, volunteers have no reason to stay if they do not enjoy their work.

This means that it is crucial that you recruit the right volunteer and welcome them in a way that sets them up to engage with your organisation and succeed.



Why do you want volunteers?

It's a simple but important question. You should never recruit volunteers if you do not have a plan for how they are going to be used. There is nothing worse than recruiting volunteers only to find out that there are not enough activities to keep them busy. If this happens, volunteers will leave and move on. Before you start recruiting and welcoming volunteers, you should make sure that:

- You know what makes a volunteer different from other types of unpaid workers
- You have had a discussion with your organisation's leadership about how volunteers will fit into your group's structure and mission
- You have an idea of what you want volunteers to do
- Your organisation has the organisational capacity to manage and support volunteers
- You have considered how you will make your organisation appealing to volunteers
- You know what motivates people to volunteer
- You have an idea of the laws which apply to volunteers and how they might affect your organisation
- Your organisation has an overarching Volunteering Plan. This does not need to be complex, although it could be. Usually, 1 or 2 sides of A4 should suffice.

Developing a Volunteer Role Description

Having clear role descriptions will help keep your volunteers focused and motivated. Clear role descriptions are also key to volunteer recruitment.

What should be included?



✓ Make your roles appealing

Volunteering roles that are boring are unlikely to attract or retain volunteers, so you should be flexible when you decide on roles. You are more likely to attract volunteers if the roles you create are built on what might motivate, challenge and reward your volunteers.

To get started, list all the tasks you want volunteers to do. You can then group these tasks into roles. Remember, writing a volunteer role description is a flexible process. In some cases, you may want to amend or even create a new role description for a volunteer.

All role descriptions should include:

✓ Benefits for the volunteer

What will this role offer to the volunteer? Be sure to list benefits that might motivate people to take part.

✓ Information about your organisation

This should include the organisation's aims, objectives, mission statement if you have one, a brief description of what you do and details of who you help.

✓ Role title

The role should have a title which sums up what the volunteer will be doing. For example 'befriender', 'mentor' or 'office assistant'.

✓ Tasks and responsibilities

List all the tasks and responsibilities that the volunteer will be asked to undertake. If the volunteer will have a choice of which tasks they do, or if it will depend on their skills or experience, make this clear.

✓ Location

Where will the volunteer usually be based? If volunteers will work in the community, state what the geographical limits of the role and whether volunteers can choose to be placed close to home.

✓ Hours

Give an indication of how much time this role will take. If you need volunteers to be available on specific days and times, say so. If the hours are flexible, what are the limits of this flexibility? If you are asking for long term commitment you can say so, but be aware that this will not be legally binding for the volunteer.

✓ Skills and attributes required

Recruiting volunteers tends to be inclusive rather than competitively selective so only include skills and experience that are really necessary for the role.

Try to avoid including personal qualities or personality traits as these are subjective and can be off-putting. If you must include them, try to phrase them in a way that relates directly to the role. For example, if the role involves telling lots of people about your organisation's work, you might say 'able to speak confidently with a wide range of people' rather than 'bubbly and outgoing'.

✓ Other restrictions

If there are other restrictions on what kinds of volunteers you will accept – such as age restrictions or a need for male or female volunteers – this is the place to say so.

When imposing restrictions, you need to explain why they're being imposed. You also need to be sure that they are essential to the role.

Restrictions cannot be discriminatory or based on stereotypes about certain kinds of people. If anti-discrimination legislation would prevent you from stating the restrictions you're considering in a job advertisement, you shouldn't include them in a volunteer role description either.

Where to recruit volunteers?

Volunteers can be sourced from a variety of locations. Word of mouth is generally considered one of the best ways to recruit volunteers, but other options are available:

- Recruiting through local Free Magazines.
- Via your own organisational website or E Bulletins
- Through the services of your Local Volunteer Bureau
- Recruiting through Events or Conferences
- Through the use of Digital Volunteering Platforms such as CAN (Community Action Northamptonshire)
- Through Social Media

Successful First Contact with Volunteers

Once you've started advertising your opportunities, you'll start receiving responses from volunteers. How you respond to those enquiries is essential.

From the volunteer's point of view, they're offering you a gift – their time for nothing – so if you're slow to respond, unenthusiastic or unwelcoming you risk seeming ungrateful.

Volunteer vs. employee communications

When responding to volunteer queries, you should bear the difference in mind between recruiting volunteers and recruiting paid staff. Applying for a job is a competitive process for the applicants. There is a deadline, several applicants and the recruitment process aims to choose the most suitable candidate and reject the others.

For volunteer recruitment, this is not generally the case. The process usually aims to include as many volunteers as possible rather than to exclude all but one successful candidate.

In fact, when recruiting volunteers the competition is often the opposite of recruiting staff. A volunteer may apply to more than one organisation and select the group that they like best.

Top tips for responding to volunteer queries

- You need to respond quickly to any expression of interest from a volunteer. If there is a delay in response, apologise and explain why you didn't reply immediately.
- Initial contact needs to be friendly, welcoming and enthusiastic.
- The person responding to volunteers needs to be well informed, approachable, able to answer questions and prepared to tell volunteers what will happen next.
- Answer all volunteer questions fully and give volunteers all the information they need to make an informed decision. Your goal is to give the volunteers the opportunity to get involved or move on if the role is not right for them. It may be best to do this in person or over the telephone rather than sending written information so that volunteers will have the opportunity to ask questions.
- Explain any screening and selection procedures (e.g. references or DBS checks) what is involved, what information will be needed and why you need to screen volunteers.
- Remember, first contact is your first impression. Make sure it leaves the volunteer feeling welcomed and enthusiastic about your organisation.

The Importance of Selection and Screening

Every year thousands of people volunteer. Almost without exception these volunteers are keen to give up their time and efforts simply because it helps others. However, just because most volunteers act altruistically doesn't mean that volunteers don't need to be screened.

Lack of care in accepting volunteers can lead to dissatisfaction and disappointment for both the volunteer and your organisation. In a very small number of cases, lack of care in selection could lead to serious danger for service users.

Good selection procedures recognise that the vast majority of volunteers deserve our best efforts to find suitable opportunities for them while also protecting vulnerable people.

Record keeping

However informal or short-term the volunteer opportunity, you should keep a record of:

- The volunteer's name and address with proof of identity
- Contact details
- Details of their next-of-kin or an emergency contact
- Information about any medical conditions or allergies which a volunteer's manager or colleagues might need to know about
- Screening and selection tools

The next sections of this guide explain the tools you should use to screen and select volunteers.

These are:

- Registration forms
- Interviews
- References
- Criminal records and DBS checks

Volunteer Registration Forms

You should ask a volunteer to complete a basic application form.

If this process feels too much like a formal job application it may put volunteers off so be sure to stress that the form is just to collect information. You may also want to let volunteers know that you can help them complete the form if needed.

The form gives potential volunteers an opportunity to tell you something about themselves, their reasons for volunteering and provide you with a basic personnel record.

Interviewing Volunteers

When interviewing volunteers, you need to get the right balance between professionalism and informality. The interview should give the volunteer confidence that your organisation is efficient and well organised without intimidating them.

How formal your interview is depends on your group. If the role is demanding and involves significant responsibility, you may want a more formal process. If the role is more casual you may want to keep it informal and call the interview a 'visit' or 'chat'.

Either way, before the interview, you should let the volunteer know what to expect and allay any fears they might have.

The benefits of interviewing

There are a number of reasons why organisations find it beneficial to interview potential volunteers. These include:

- The opportunity to explain more about the work of your organisation and how volunteers fit into your work.
- The opportunity to assess the suitability of the volunteer and ensure they have the skills and qualities required for the role. If they don't, the interview gives you the opportunity to match the volunteer with a more suitable role.
- Ensuring that all volunteers are given the same opportunity to find out about the role and to demonstrate their suitability.
- The chance to fully explain your induction process, probationary period if you have one and anything else which volunteers need to know before they offer their time.
- Planning an interview
- Planning is key to making sure that you gather the information you need at interview and that your interview gives the volunteer the right impression.

You should:

- Make sure that all staff knows that a potential volunteer is coming and ensure that someone is available to welcome them.
- Have any background information to hand as the volunteer may ask questions.
- Draw up a list of questions in advance based on the volunteer role description. Using the same questions at each interview helps create fairness, but feel free to probe. Remember, the interview is your main selection tool.
- Use open questions. As an interviewer you should be doing more listening than talking.
- If you are interviewing several volunteers, you may need to take notes. Note taking is less intimidating if you explain to the volunteer why you are making notes.
- If you are not going to make a decision during the interview, tell the volunteer when you will let them know about the outcome and whether they can get feedback on their interview.
- The aim of the interview is to match the right person with the task. You should find out what motivates each volunteer you interview and then match them to a suitable opportunity.
- Give the volunteer an opportunity to 'self-select', i.e. to reject the task if they feel it is not right for them.

References

It's good practice to get some form of reference before welcoming a volunteer. Some organisations ask for all references in writing, others prefer telephone references.

What should references include?

You should ask the referee:

- How they know the prospective volunteer
- For how long they've known the prospective volunteer
- Questions relating to the prospective volunteer's role and the skills that role requires
- Whether they would have any concerns or doubts about offering the person this role

Try to ask referees specific questions. These types of questions make it harder for a referee to conceal any doubts or concerns.

For both for practical and equal opportunities reasons, you should make a checklist of questions to ask and to keep a written record of points raised when carrying out telephone references.

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