
Diversifying volunteering: new ways to volunteer

Society doesn't stay the same, and neither does volunteering – or at least the context it takes place in. In this training we look at the social changes that might affect the work we do, and new forms of volunteering we could consider embracing.

Our intention is not to tell you you **SHOULD** be doing all or any of these forms of volunteering. You have to consider whether you have the resources to implement them, whether they are practical for the kind of work you do, and whether there will be sufficient benefit to you doing so. Most organisations will always need their regular, one afternoon a week volunteers. Even here though there will still be opportunities to be flexible, to meet the needs of a changing society, and at the very least their content or the way you sell the role to potential volunteers could change.

This information sheet:

- Gives an overview of the modern day context of volunteering
- Describes some new forms of volunteering that may help to engage volunteers given this context
- Offers links to further information and support

The context of volunteering

Civic participation/Activism

While there has been a decline in voting, there has not been a decline in interest in socio-political issues. Single issue campaigning and activism have grown as people seek to act directly to counter things that concern them. We have seen waves of major causes – road protests, global debt relief, globalisation, live animal exports, austerity and cuts – but it's not just the headline grabbing campaigns, it's a growing trend. Just in my own neighbourhood I can think of recent campaigns and ongoing protests against workfare, the closing of local hospital sites and housing policy.

People want to make a difference – and what is volunteering but direct action to help a cause? This doesn't mean that volunteering has to be about placard waving or squatting a condemned housing estate. But we should be better at explaining how what we are doing *is* civil action, *is* changing the community, *is* changing people's lives.

Ageing population

According to the final report of the Commission on the Voluntary Sector & Ageing by 2033 nearly a quarter of the UK population will be aged 65 or over, and in the same time period the value of older volunteers is expected to rise by £5.3bn to £15.7bn

The ageing population is often held up as a social problem – the ratio of people claiming pensions to those in work is set to rise, there are concerns about the provision of social care and so on. However for our purposes we have a fantastic resource to draw upon. As well as living longer lives we tend to be healthier for longer. This means that there will be an increasing number of people who have skills, experience, and the desire to remain active.

We should bear in mind however that there is likely to be a growing wealth gap among older people as time goes on. There is also a danger that volunteering will be seen as ‘what older people do’ if their numbers come to dominate volunteering.

Busier lives!

Our lives are increasingly busy – even on the commute or at weekends some of us are checking work email on our smartphones. On top of this there is more competition for our leisure time. We have box sets, X boxes, pictures of cats on the internet to share, sport, art, theatre.

For a lot of people volunteering isn’t accessible. It goes on during normal work hours, and/or demands an ongoing commitment. Clearly, if we can find ways of involving people outside the 9 – 5, where they don’t have to be on site, or where they don’t have to make a massive time commitment then we widen the pool of potential volunteers.

The world of work is changing

The world of work has changed substantially over recent decades. The idea of staying in the one job for life is well behind us. Employers demand a ‘flexible workforce’, industries rise and fall, technology makes some roles obsolete², there is increased competition for jobs, and so on. Getting an edge in the employment market becomes more and more important.

The work experience that volunteering offers has a role here, and not just in terms of helping unemployed people back into work. Universities are often looking for extra-curricular activities from potential students, and people’s CVs need to stand out. Volunteering can also be a way of trying a potential new career.

There are also additional complications – the lines can be blurred by compulsory schemes such as Community Work Placements. This isn’t the place to go into the rights and wrongs of such programmes per se, but there may be a danger that volunteering gets confused with or tainted by them, so at the very least we should be clear that the two are not the same, and that volunteering is freely entered into.

¹ <http://www.economist.com/news/christmas-specials/21636612-time-poverty-problem-partly-perception-and-partly-distribution-why>

² A third of jobs are under threat over the next 20 years according to one study: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-29987173>

Changing communities

Some areas have and are seeing new migrant communities arrive. For the voluntary sector there are two broad implications – how do we provide support to the needs of these groups, and how can we involve these people in our communities and our work? For us the latter is the main concern.

There can be barriers – for example, language, or cultural expectations. Formal volunteering – that is helping people in the community through a group rather than just the everyday lending a hand (or perhaps rather than as part of religious practice) – might be new to many people. You will need to make active steps to recruit rather than relying on such people coming to you. In my experience migrant support groups tend to be really pleased to hear from people offering volunteer roles to the people they work with.

This is not just about being community minded as an organisation - migrants will often have the desire to be active and/or lots of skills to tap into. It's a sad truth that many of the people who have the resources escape awful situations will be from skilled, professional backgrounds.

New forms of volunteering

Below we give an brief overview of new ways to involve volunteers. If you are interested in implementing any of them you are welcome to contact the Volunteer Centre for advice and support.

Online/Remote volunteering

Some roles do not have to be carried out on site. People could be doing them from home, and often outside of normal working hours. Typically these could be based around research or writing. They might involve online tasks – overseeing social media, coordinating content for your website and so on.

There are some considerations here.

It can be easy for the volunteer to feel isolated and not part of the wider organisation. And due to their not being on site you could end up regarding them in such a light. You should take care to keep them informed and engaged.

Remote volunteers still need support and supervision. Schedule in telephone or Skype meetings to catch up with them and give and receive feedback.

Microvolunteering

Microvolunteering refers to helpful activities that people can do in a short space of time. This is typically carried out online or through smartphone apps, but the concept does not have to be computer based.

Academia seems to have led the way with this through 'citizen science', for example crowdsourcing galaxy classification. Computers aren't so good at sorting images, but if thousands of individuals are looking at astronomical photographs in a spare 5 minutes they can easily distinguish a spiral galaxy from a lenticular galaxy.

For voluntary organisations the key applications of microvolunteering tend to be campaign/advocacy driven – signing an online petition, emailing a politician and so on. However there are some clever innovations, such as being the eyes of a visually impaired person. The individual takes a photograph of something they need clarification of – which tin in my food cupboard is the red kidney beans? - and people using the app can give them an answer. App development sounds a little beyond the reach of most small groups, but you could approach colleges – it would make an excellent student project.

Just as we said that some roles do not need to be carried out in the organisation's office, we could break this down into individual tasks. For example, you could recruit volunteer proofreaders to look over information sheets, web content, funding applications and so on.

One-off volunteering

One-off volunteering involves creating a task or tasks that people can turn up and carry out in a day or part day, that's satisfying for them and useful for you. This was very much pioneered by conservation groups who often ask for people to help with a group activity. It's also common for employer supported volunteering, where a group of people from a private company support a local group, the clichéd activity being painting the walls of an office or community centre. It is really useful for such tasks – you can get things done that you might never otherwise get round to, or have the person-power to get done.

Something to consider with one-off volunteering is that it could lead to other forms of involvement. People who enjoy their experience may want to support you in other ways. They could decide to volunteer on an ongoing basis. They may become donors or trustees. They will almost certainly tell friends and family about what they did, which could also lead to more volunteers, donors and so on through their social networks.

Episodic volunteering

Episodic volunteering simply means enabling volunteers to come in either as and when needed, or when they are free. The most obvious example of this is event volunteers – typically organisations holding regular events will maintain a pool of volunteers to call upon.

But the other side can be interesting – are there tasks you can give volunteers that they can work on in their own time? This could be a form of remote volunteering, or it could be onsite. For example, we have seen archives within museums set aside boxes of items for individual volunteers to work upon at their own pace.

One way to think of this would be as discrete projects that are not particularly time constrained.

Family volunteering

Family volunteering is still fairly unknown, but has been up and running in North America for some time now. There are two rationales behind it. Firstly, practically speaking it's a way of involving people who would otherwise be unable to volunteer. Very few organisations can afford to reimburse childcare costs for parents while they volunteer – this is a different way of solving the problems. Secondly it means involving children in volunteering at an early age. Hopefully it's an activity they'll keep returning to throughout their life.

Do remember though that 'family' covers a wide range of family groupings single parents, same sex relationships, extended family involvement – don't address all your publicity to the image of a family straight out of a 1970s sitcom.

The activities have to be thought through. They need to be something that is both appropriate for younger people and will hold their interest. Similarly the parents need to be involved too, so it is something that is genuinely shared.

Further information

Commission on the Voluntary Sector & Ageing

<http://voluntarysectorageing.org/>

Help from Home

The leading microvolunteering platform.

<http://helpfromhome.org/>

Skills for change

A different take on microvolunteering – you ask for help with a challenge, and registered skilled volunteers offer their services – e.g. to design a logo for a campaign or event.

<http://www.skillsforchange.com/>

Team London Speed Volunteering

As well as advertising on this website it's worth having a look at it as inspiration for roles that tend to be short term or quick to carry out. In the categorisation I've used most content falls somewhere between microvolunteering, remote volunteering and episodic volunteering.

<https://speedvolunteer.london.gov.uk/>

National Trust Family Volunteering webpage

Family Volunteering is well established in North America, but the National Trust were the first large organisation in the UK to embrace it.

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/get-involved/volunteer/ways-to-volunteer/family-volunteering/>

Jayne Cravens

Jayne has long championed virtual – online – volunteering.

<http://www.coyotecom.com/>

Volunteer Now's guidance on irregular or one-off volunteering

Volunteer Now is Northern Ireland's volunteer development agency.

<http://www.volunteernow.co.uk/fs/doc/publications/occasional-volunteering-information-sheet-nl.pdf>

Volunteer Centre Bexley

bexleyvc@bvsc.co.uk

www.bvsc.co.uk

Last updated: June 2016