
How to find the right volunteer role

Volunteering has a lot to offer, but if you end up doing something you don't enjoy, or that wasn't what you expected, it can be a poor experience, a waste of your time, and often of little benefit for the organisation you are supporting.

This information sheet gives advice on how to choose a role that is right for you.

What do you want to get from volunteering?

This can help narrow things down. If you're looking for specific experience then obviously you'll know what kind of roles to look for – e.g. admin volunteering if that's the kind of role you want to do.

But you might have other motivations. You may want to feel like you've made a difference, or meet new people. You might be considering a change of career and what to learn new skills, or could be retired and want to put old skills to use. Whatever your goals are from volunteering bear them in mind when looking at the various roles on offer. If they aren't being met you won't enjoy your role.

What kind of organisation would you like to support?

For some people it's not so much the role that they're interested in but the cause they are supporting. So you might be interested in helping a disability organisation if you feel strongly about disability rights issues.

This can be different from thinking about the kind of role you want – for example, if you want to support an animal charity they need all kinds of help, from fundraising to admin to helping out in a charity shop – it doesn't have to be something working directly with animals.

How much time do I have free?

This can help you narrow down your search, especially through the Volunteer Centre. Usually offering a half day a week is fine for most roles, but occasionally organisations might want a bit more time from their volunteers, or only need volunteers on specific days.

Many organisations are looking for volunteers who will be with them indefinitely. This doesn't mean you can't leave – they will accept that people's lives change, they find work, have new commitments and so on. It's just that they are unlikely to want to take on someone who knows they can only volunteer with them for a few weeks. This is because they have to recruit and train volunteers, which takes their time and resources.

This is not to say however that there won't be some shorter term (or "micro") opportunities.

How do I find volunteer Roles?

The Volunteer Centre can help you. We act like a recruitment agency for volunteering. You can let us know what you're interested in doing and we will match you up with opportunities in the local area. We have an online database of voluntary roles (volunteering.bvsc.co.uk) that you can search directly based on what you want to do, what kind of organisation you want to support, and how much time you have free.

Organisations will also advertise directly, on their websites or on noticeboards in community centres, GP surgeries, faith centre halls, sports centres and so on.

Your family or friends might already be volunteering somewhere, or know of an organisation that's looking for help, so why not ask them to put you in touch, if you are interested?

How will I know what the role will actually be like?

Organisations should be able to send you a role description. The name sometimes varies – role outline, task description – but all it is, is a document outlining the role. Usually they summarise the role and its purpose, then list the kind of tasks they would want you to do. This should help you decide whether the role is going to be right for you – rather than start and find out it wasn't what you were expecting at all.

There might be some things on the role description that you are unsure of, or really don't want to do. If everything else looks good to you then talk to the organisation about this. Sometimes it's just about getting some reassurance that you'll be trained and supported in the areas that concern you. Or they may be willing to be a little flexible with the role. Perhaps some tasks can be taken out of your role description until your confidence grows for example. This is not always possible – some roles are hard to make changes to, and some organisations are not so good at thinking flexibly – but it's always worth discussing this with them.

Smaller organisations may not use written role descriptions in which case it's fine to ask them to describe the role and what they'd want you to do verbally.

Some groups offer trial or taster periods. This means you can try the role for a few weeks to see if you enjoy it and whether the organisation feels you are right for the role.

What should I expect when I apply to an organisation?

Each organisation's recruitment process will be different. Some will invite you in for a chat, others might send out an application form first.

Something to remember is that although the process can be like that for getting a job, it shouldn't be as nerve-wracking. Organisations aren't expecting you to compete with other

potential volunteers. What they're interested in is finding out about you and why you want to do the role. The focus isn't on picking the person with the best CV. Fill out the application form honestly and clearly. Don't try to exaggerate skills or experience – they aren't looking for the 'best' candidate, and in most cases aren't expecting volunteers to be coming to them with a background in that area.

Whether there's an application form or not, they will generally invite you in for a chat or an informal interview. You should think of it as a chance for you both to find out whether the role's right for you. This means it's your decision too – don't be afraid to ask questions.

Lots of organisations ask for referees. This can be hard for some people, especially those who have been out of work for some time. Usually though they will say that people who know you on a personal basis are fine, and if you are having trouble thinking of referees talk to the organisation about this.

How should I decide whether to take on a role?

You don't have to agree to volunteer anywhere if you don't think it's right for you. It's perfectly fine to say "no" at the end of the recruitment process. Here are some things to consider:

Is the role what you were looking for?

This means thinking back to your motivations for volunteering. If you wanted something sociable then being on your own in an office won't meet this. You might have made assumptions about the role from the initial poster or leaflet and then discovered it was completely different from seeing the role description or talking to the organisation.

Does the organisation seem to care about volunteering?

First impressions can sometimes count. If the organisation don't seem too interested in your offer of help they're unlikely to be very supportive once you start. It's worth remembering though that some volunteer managers will be very busy and/or work part-time, so they might not get back to you straight away.

Will you get training, will there be support for you?

You shouldn't be thrown in at the deep end. You should be told about training, and how you will be supported by the organisation. This might be through having a named supervisor that you can turn to with questions or concerns. Often organisations will have a volunteer policy and/or agreement in place that will spell out how they will treat you. This can be a good sign that they care about volunteers in general.

Can you meet their expectations?

For example, the organisation might be looking for someone who will be regularly available on a Monday afternoon, but you know that sometimes it will be tricky to get there on time. Although you are not an employee, and have no legal relationship with the organisation you

should still be fair to them and meet any commitments you've made. Where there might be issues like this, bring them up right at the start.

Can I afford this?

If you are on benefits or a low income then the cost of travel and perhaps buying lunch can be really off-putting. Many organisations will reimburse expenses though – if they don't say, ask.

Volunteer Centre Bexley

bexleyvc@bvsc.co.uk

www.bvsc.co.uk

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