

Where do things go wrong?

Your aim is a healthy volunteering programme, where both the quality and quantity of volunteers is enough to meet your needs, and volunteers, staff and service-users are happy with your volunteer involvement.

But something is wrong – you're not getting enough volunteers, or they aren't staying very long. Maybe you're not attracting the right volunteers for your roles. This information sheet looks at common errors volunteer-involving organisations make, and gives suggestions for getting things right.

Not giving adequate information to potential volunteers

Put yourself in the shoes of a person seeing your poster or Facebook posting asking for volunteers. What is it telling them? A poster that simply says 'we need volunteers' will, in most cases, say little about what exactly you want people to do, and why. Unless a person has a real affinity with an organisation and wants to help in any way they need to know what it is you are offering, and what it is you are looking for from a volunteer.

Clearly there is only so much you can say in your initial recruitment material – a wall of text is not attractive. Yet many organisations have little supplementary information for people who have shown an interest. Again, put yourself in the place of a potential volunteer – you're likely to have questions and concerns, or at least want to know more before deciding to give up some of your time.

What can you do?

Think about the messages you use when promoting roles. Are you letting people know what the role is, and why they should do it? Would someone seeing your call for volunteers have a decent idea of what to expect from it?

As we've said most people are unlikely to know much about volunteering, so take steps to let them know what the role will be like, how it helps your organisation and its service-users or aims, and what the expectations are of your volunteers. This means that they have a clearer idea of what the experience will be like, and if this is something they want to get involved in.

A key tool that is generally under-utilised by organisations is the website. Here you are not limited by space in the way you would be with a leaflet. On websites you can give full information about the role, and how it helps you and others. In addition to giving basic information you can also humanise your roles by including case studies from current volunteers. You can let people know they will be inducted, trained and supported. This helps break down concerns that potential volunteers might face – for example from a lack of confidence or a fear of the unknown.

Do you provide role descriptions for people who have expressed an interest? They give people a detailed overview of what they'd be expected to do as a volunteer. Again, you could have them on your website.

Not advertising the role properly

It sounds obvious, but it's often overlooked by many organisations: you can't volunteer for an organisation if you don't know they're looking for volunteers. This can cause two problems – firstly it's obviously harder to recruit adequate numbers of volunteers. Secondly it can lead to a lack of diversity, as only a limited pool of people have the opportunity to volunteer with you, especially if only certain groups of people are seeing your calls for volunteers.

What can you do?

Think about where your messages are going. Who is likely to see them? Who is it missing? For example, if you rely on twitter and Facebook to promote your roles it's likely that many older people would never see your call for volunteers.

You should also consider this in the light of the comments in the section above. There is little point in getting posters or leaflets in dozens of venues if they are unlikely to attract anyone's attention.

Don't forget social media. It's a key source of information for many people. As well as building a profile and relying on people to pass on your roles you can also pay for promoted posts.

For some roles direct targeting might be more appropriate. For example, if you have a role based around arts and craft sessions for people with learning difficulties you could approach evening classes or college courses in relevant subjects.

In addition to the Volunteer Centre you can also post volunteer opportunities to [Team London](#) and [Do-It](#), two online volunteering databases.

For more information see our information sheet on [recruiting volunteers](#).

Not getting back to volunteers

A common time where organisations lose volunteers is at the start of the recruitment process. Picture someone who has picked up a recruitment leaflet and contacted the organisation, interested in volunteering for them. They wait. Time passes. Or having filled in an application form a month goes by without hearing anything. Imagine how this feels. It sends a message that the organisation doesn't really care about their offer to help. If and when the organisation gets back to them the chances are their enthusiasm will fade, or they will have found something else to do with their time.

What can you do?

Take steps to ensure that enquiries receive a prompt response. Even an automated email response lets people know their email has been received and will be answered. If you are sending out hard copies of your documents have packs already made up, ready to send.

Try to avoid unnecessary delays in the process. Sometimes they can't be avoided – due to staff time, DBS checks, training/induction at fixed periods and so on. Where this is the case let volunteers

know why they will be waiting, and roughly for how long. Try to maintain communication with them – this could be sending them volunteering updates or bulletins, or simply emails/phone calls to let them know they haven't been forgotten.

You could also begin parts of the process – for example, volunteers could start training while waiting for their DBS checks to come back, or could come to volunteer or similar meetings.

Not giving or asking for feedback

A lack of communication can have a massive impact on a volunteering programme. If you aren't aware that volunteers are unhappy then you can't take steps to improve things. This applies both to individual volunteers and your volunteers as a whole.

Volunteers need feedback – they should be told where they are doing well, as well as where they might be getting things wrong. They also need a voice. It's very dispiriting to feel that no one listens to you, or that there's no opportunity to raise issues either individually or as a group.

What can you do?

Find ways of giving/receiving individual and collective feedback. How you do this will need to fit your volunteer involvement – offering and asking for feedback for gardening volunteers who work every few weeks is likely to be different to that with an admin volunteer who comes in twice a week.

For individual feedback this could be regular supervision meetings or informal catch-ups. Volunteers should always have a named supervisor, and should be encouraged to ask questions or raise concerns.

Remember to let volunteer know where they're doing well – feedback needn't be negative!

For collective feedback you could try volunteer meetings or surveys. Bulletins and noticeboards can help give volunteers news and information. Other ideas include having volunteer representatives who gather views and raise issues on behalf of others, or closed facebook groups for volunteers.

You should take care to show that you are listening to volunteers. This does not mean you have to do everything that volunteers request – e.g. some suggestions that arise from volunteers might be impractical – perhaps requiring too many resources – but you should let volunteers know why you are not implementing an idea.

See our information sheet on [Supporting Volunteers](#) for further guidance on volunteer feedback.

Not dealing with problems

When an organisation is facing a big problem with a volunteer, it's often the case that it could have been dealt with at an earlier stage with a lot less fuss and awkwardness. It's much easier to deal with a small issue informally than a large one further down the road. Not tackling the problem means that the volunteer can assume that what they are doing is acceptable.

While it's natural to feel loathe to face a difficult situation sometimes this reluctance to deal with poor behaviour comes from an uncertainty about the volunteer relationship. Groups can be unsure about the legal position of volunteers, or feel that as volunteers are giving up their time they can't be held to the same standards as paid workers.

On the first point: volunteers don't have the legal protections of paid staff. The law on grievance and disciplinary procedures and unfair dismissal does not apply to volunteers. This of course does not mean that organisations should treat volunteers unfairly. Having a 'problem-solving procedure' or something similar will both help staff know what to do when something goes wrong, and let volunteers know that they will be treated consistently.

On the second point: volunteering is a different relationship to paid work, but this doesn't mean that you shouldn't have certain expectations of volunteer behaviour. Volunteers being disruptive or rude or failing to do agreed tasks mean that the work of your organisation is being hindered.

What can you do?

The first stage is to act informally where appropriate. By having a quiet word with a volunteer you can nip things in the bud before they develop into major issues.

You should also put formal procedures in place to ensure that problems are dealt with fairly and consistently – and that volunteers know exactly what is going on.

See our information sheet on [dealing with problems](#) for further information.

Not giving volunteers an adequate induction

The first few days are crucial for a volunteer. As well as being the time that the volunteer learns their role, it is also their welcome into the organisation. Organisations can fail on both these counts.

If a volunteer is unclear about what they are meant to be doing, what to do if they have any questions or who other people in the organisation are, this can impact on the rest of their time as a volunteer – for example, they may not stay for very long, or carry out their tasks well.

The welcome is important too – how would you feel if you joined a new sports or social club, only to find that you didn't really know what was going on, no one really knew who you were or devoted time to ensuring you knew the ropes?

What can you do?

An induction checklist – basically a list of those things you want every volunteer to know – will help ensure that all volunteers receive the information you want them to have. The one danger of the checklist is that induction can then become a rote procedure, so do think of the induction process as an introduction to the organisation. This could mean introducing volunteers to other volunteers and members of staff, giving informal information ('we provide tea and coffee in the kitchen, we tend to take turns making drinks in our team'), or asking an experienced volunteer to buddy up with the new person.

It's always worth asking current volunteers about their induction – is there anything they weren't told that would have made their lives easier?

Further information:

Volunteer Centre Bexley information sheets:

bvsc.co.uk/volunteer/policy-updates-good-practice

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Last updated: April 2017