
Making the best of your opportunities/where do things go wrong?

You want a healthy long-term 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 that volunteer-involving organisations make, and gives suggestions for getting things right.

First Steps

It is important to look at the whole process of recruitment and processing volunteers in your organisation. There will be lots of good things that you do already – and it’s important to give yourself credit for these. There are also other factsheets on our website, and our training courses on recruiting and retaining volunteers, which you might find helpful. This factsheet gives ideas of what things might help if you feel that you could develop or change your volunteer involvement.

It is best to start by working your way through your whole recruitment process to check that the process is as helpful and efficient as it might be, at all stages. Just one missed opportunity could be the difference between a volunteer having a good, or a bad, experience with you – and a bad experience could send them to another organisation (or put them off volunteering altogether).

Things to think about:

- Is your volunteer role interesting? Have a look at the advert for your role. Would you apply for this position yourself? Does it set out what tasks you would like the volunteer to do, but also what the role will give them (happy team working environment, references, chance to learn new skills etc.)? Alongside the traditional “giving back” reason for volunteering, many people use volunteering experience to extend a C.V., or develop skills, so adverts need to recognise this. Some people may wish to volunteer by undertaking simple tasks (for example, washing up), but volunteers should not be used to cover the tasks that no-one else in the organisation wants to undertake. Neither should they replace paid staff. Volunteering should be a two-way positive experience. Do your roles meet these criteria? Do you make them exciting?
- Where do you advertise your roles? Are you advertising in places where potential volunteers will see the adverts (for example, websites – your own..., or the

Volunteer Centre, community notice boards, social media)? Do you take flyers with you when you go to events, maybe adverts on your car? Be creative. Remember, to engage a large and diverse pool of volunteers, you need to advertise in places, and in ways, that make yourself visible. But there is little point putting posters or leaflets into dozens of venues if they are unlikely to attract anyone's attention.

- Word of mouth is always a huge opportunity to draw new volunteers in. If existing volunteers are happy, they will tell people, but don't under-estimate the power of negative experiences being shared either. Your current and previous volunteers can be your best recruiters if they had a positive experience with you and continue to be ambassadors for your organisation.
- When volunteers apply to you, do you respond quickly, with a polite thank you for volunteering and an indication of the timescale for the recruitment process (an automated email can be helpful here)? We know that it is usually lack of time or capacity in the organisation that stops a fast response, but people applying will not know this and it can appear to them that an organisation doesn't want or need volunteers. In our experience, organisations that do best with recruitment are often those that respond quickly to applications as you may not be the only organisation that a volunteer has applied to. Worth a thought....
- Think about the words 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 reasonable idea of what to expect from it? But don't swamp with information at this point, you can provide more detail later.
- The information in the advert and role description are what will help a volunteer decide whether this is the best role for them, so think about the wording. The most effective adverts are those that add a personal touch and aren't overly formal. There are lots of examples on the internet of good volunteer adverts and role descriptions that you could look at for inspiration (but do remember copyright issues).
- 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 for suitable volunteers

Congratulations, You Have a Volunteer – What Next?

We've already thought about the importance of responding quickly and providing adequate information at the first stage. The second stage is also important.

- Keep the lines of communication open. If this is a role that requires a formal or informal interview, set the date. Sound friendly and thank the volunteer for applying.
- Organise references/ DBS (if appropriate) and any other checks. Provide background information as appropriate.
- Think about whether it works to “split” necessary information over a specific timeframe or whether the volunteer needs to have it all at once. Try not to “swamp” with information and processes (for example, if you have a long application form, is this necessary for the role in question?) Don’t over-complicate.
- What questions might the volunteer have? How and when will you answer them?
- Do you appear approachable (personally and as an organisation)?
- Take steps to let the volunteer 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.
- Ensure that enquiries receive a prompt response. Even an automated email lets people know that 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 for roughly 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.
- A key tool that is sometimes 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 how 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.

- Copies of long-term role descriptions could also be carried on the website.

In addition to the Volunteer Centre, you can also post volunteer opportunities to various websites: Team London, Charity Job, Do-It, are some of the main volunteer recruitment sites.

For more information see our information sheet on recruiting volunteers.

They're in! What Can You do to Keep Them and Make Sure They're Happy?

We know that volunteering should be a process that helps the volunteer, as well as the organisation. Key ways to ensure this happens might be:

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. Introduce your volunteers to paid staff and other volunteers. It is important that they are acknowledged and welcomed by senior managers as well as other members of the team. Show them around the building (where the kettle is!) and help to make sure they feel welcome every time they come in. “Thank you for helping” goes a long way to building a strong relationship within an organisation.
- An induction checklist – 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. However, make sure this doesn't just become something that has to get filled out, and instead 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?

Communication

Communication is key, both formal and informal. A lack of communication can have a massive impact on a volunteering programme. If you aren't aware what volunteers are thinking, then you can't take steps to improve things if they are unhappy, or pat yourself on

the back when things are going well. This applies both to individual volunteers and to your volunteers as a whole.

- Ensure your volunteer has copies of the Volunteer Handbook (if you don't have one yet, copies of key policies and expectations, and a role description will suffice).
- Set up supervision sessions (format and frequency will depend on your organisational needs) and explain what to do if any difficulties arise, as well as how these will be dealt with (you will probably have a formal problem solving policy for this – there is a factsheet on how to set one up on the Volunteer Centre website).
- It's important that there is someone the volunteer can turn to for help with questions, maybe a volunteer buddy as well as a supervisor?
- Make sure that general news reaches your volunteers. Some may only be around occasionally so their names should be added to newsletters and other groups. Think about which meetings they can be invited to. Finally, never forget the therapeutic power of a catch-up round the kettle (for you, and for them!).
- Volunteers need feedback – they should be told where they are doing well, as well as where they might be able to improve. They also need a voice (see below). 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.
- Find ways of giving/receiving individual and collective feedback. How you do this will need to fit your organisation – offering and asking for feedback from gardening volunteers who attend every few weeks is likely to be different to that with an admin volunteer who comes in twice a week.
- You should also 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.
- For collective feedback you could try volunteer meetings or surveys. Bulletins and noticeboards can help give volunteers news and information as well as WhatsApp and closed Facebook groups and similar. Other ideas include having volunteer representatives who gather views and raise issues on behalf of others.
- See our information sheet on Supporting Volunteers for further guidance on volunteer feedback.

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 line. Not tackling the problem means that the volunteer can assume that what they are doing is acceptable.

While it's natural to feel uneasy about facing 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, which can lead to problems.

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 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 will let volunteers know that they will be treated consistently. It is also important for the presentation of your organisation that you are seen to be fair and "above board".

Although volunteering is a different relationship to paid work, 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.

Further information:

Volunteer Centre Bexley information sheets: [bvscvolunteeringresources](https://www.bvscvolunteeringresources.co.uk/)

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