

Handle with Care: Using Volunteers Effectively

Volunteers can be among an organization's most valuable assets, especially at a time when many not-for-profits are being forced to tighten their belts and cut more costly resources. But volunteers need to be properly managed to make the most of their experiences, both for them and for the organization.

Selecting Volunteers

An organization doesn't have to take every volunteer who offers his or her services. In many ways, a volunteer is essentially an unpaid employee, and no organization would hire just anyone who applied for a paying job. And volunteers are often an organization's public face, making careful screening even more critical.

Screening benefits the volunteers, too. Matching the right person with the right job means volunteers are placed in positions where they can make their greatest contributions.

Interviews can help a not-for-profit determine if volunteers will actually be able to help the organization. These interviews convey the high value the organization puts on volunteer work. The interviewer should be upfront about time commitments and workloads, and allow candidates to take themselves out of consideration for inappropriate volunteer opportunities, whether because of an unwillingness to make necessary commitments or because of clashing goals and visions.

Note that interviewers are legally prohibited from asking certain questions, including those related to race, gender, and religion.

Designing Volunteer Work

To reduce attrition among volunteers, not-for-profits should put some serious thought into the jobs they will be assigned. It may be tempting to give volunteers grunt work that paid staff would like to avoid, but that approach can alienate volunteers who want to perform real work with measurable results.

When possible, volunteer assignments should take advantage of volunteers' areas of professional expertise, particularly where an organization can't afford to employ a full-time worker despite periodic needs.

Volunteer workers have other characteristics that should be considered in making assignments:

- Volunteers are usually available outside regular working hours, so they can staff projects that require evening or weekend hours.
- Volunteers can focus on narrow tasks — unlike employees, they're not being pulled in multiple directions while trying to accomplish their work for the organization.
- Volunteers may be able to work at home (although some may look forward to working among others at the not-for-profit's offices).

When volunteers will be working on-site, the environment should be pleasant and all necessary supplies, including light snacks and beverages, should be available.

Recognition

The need for genuine recognition of volunteers' contributions shouldn't be overlooked. Even paid employees report in surveys that recognition is one of their primary motivators. Volunteers are no different, and cheap trinkets aren't going to get the job done.

Recognition can take many forms — updates on the progress of the volunteer program and its accomplishments via a newsletter or listserv; letters of recognition to volunteers' employers or local papers; opportunities for skills enhancement; or volunteer forums, where volunteers can interact and brainstorm with other volunteers and staff.

Making the Most of One-Time Volunteers

Perhaps the most common kind of volunteer is the one-time volunteer. How can an organization get the most out of these short-timers?

- Physical labor — One-time volunteers may well be more willing to take on physical tasks; they may even prefer it.
- Outings — Ask them to accompany group outings of clients.
- Reconnaissance — One-timers can check out sites for the organization's activities, file observations, and pick up literature and materials.
- Expertise — Staff, volunteers, or clients might benefit from presentations or demonstrations on customer service, Internet research, or public speaking.
- Public relations — When possible, volunteers can coordinate one-day events with other community events, set up a display with materials on the organization, and promote, promote, promote. And don't forget to take lots of photos.



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