



Managing volunteers - the essentials

Factsheet 2 - Volunteer retention top 20 tips

1. Ensure that your whole organisation is committed to involving and working with volunteers

It's important that everyone understands why volunteers are involved and is committed to supporting them. If some staff feel resentful or fail to understand, this will become apparent to volunteers and make them feel unwelcome.

2. Have a clear Volunteer Policy

The process of developing a Volunteer Policy will involve people at all levels of your organisation and should engage them in the process of involving volunteers. The Volunteer Policy will also clarify to volunteers how they fit in to the organisation and what they can expect from you.

3. Re-examine your recruitment procedures

If your recruitment procedures are overly bureaucratic, e.g. lots of forms to complete, volunteers may decide to reject your organisation before they've even started. You've spent time and effort on advertising your volunteering opportunities, so it would be a shame to put people off so soon. Setting the right tone from the start will show that you are a responsible, professional organisation, that values its volunteers.

4. Ensure the volunteer's motivations and skills match your organisation's needs

If you don't ensure a reasonably good match, then volunteers are likely to be dissatisfied, and the organisation may feel that their contribution is pointless. A good match will ensure that all parties are happy and getting something they want from the process.

5. Offer a comprehensive induction programme

Most volunteers appreciate a good induction into the organisation. This will include showing them round the building (fire exits, toilets, tea-making facilities), introducing them to everyone, giving them copies of relevant policies and generally making them feel welcome as a new member of the team.

6. Give each volunteer a Task Description

A frequent complaint from volunteers is that they don't know what they are supposed to be doing. An equally common complaint from Volunteer Co-ordinators is that their volunteers keep asking them what to do. A well-written Task Description not only helps in the recruitment process, it also gives volunteers a point of reference when they're feeling a bit lost. Furthermore, it can help to outline any boundaries you need the volunteer to observe.



7. Ensure volunteers are given meaningful and varied tasks

Most volunteers want a variety of tasks to perform. Not many people want to spend 7 hours photocopying. Make sure that you mix up “boring but necessary” tasks with more interesting demanding jobs, especially if the volunteer appreciates a challenge. Try to explain how the task that they are performing fits into the bigger picture, so they can see their contribution.

8. Be flexible about volunteering times and roles

Volunteers’ lives change. Most volunteers are likely to want to change their commitments at some point in time. Try to be as flexible as you can, especially for volunteers with a proven track record. Don’t forget that most people get bored doing the same thing week in, week out. Always offer opportunities to change or to progress within your organisation, e.g. invite volunteers to take on more responsibility, such as mentoring new volunteers or joining your Management Committee.

9. Offer volunteers ongoing training and development opportunities

Just because they are volunteers, doesn’t mean they don’t have any ambition. Many people volunteer to get work experience and training, so will often really appreciate the offer of training after their initial induction. Think about developing volunteers in the same way as you would develop staff. Ensure they are offered good quality training and have a chance to attend meetings and conferences where appropriate.

10. Provide regular supervision and appraisals

One-to-one supervision is an ideal opportunity for 2-way feedback. You can find out what the volunteer likes doing, and what they are having difficulties with. Equally, if you are having any problems with the volunteer’s work, you can address them in supervision. Together, you can come up with constructive solutions that will make life easier for everyone. Annual appraisals are an ideal way of recording achievements and offering praise.

11. Be available to offer advice and help when needed

Try not to dump volunteers with a day’s work then disappear. If you can, have an “Open Door” policy so that volunteers can ask for help at any time. This can be particularly helpful when volunteers are new and are finding their feet. On the other hand, don’t stand over your volunteers permanently, as this will make them feel smothered and may make them think you don’t trust them. Find the right balance for each individual volunteer.

12. Reimburse expenses

Another common reason for volunteers leaving is failure to reimburse expenses. This can lead to volunteers feeling exploited. Try to ensure that your organisation has a budget to reimburse travel and meals as a minimum. Make sure that you regularly ask volunteers to claim their expenses (give them a claim form every time they volunteer) and reimburse their claims promptly, preferably with cash.



13. Develop a happy, welcoming atmosphere

It sounds so glaringly obvious, but sometimes it gets overlooked. Everyone is so busy getting the work done that they forget each other's feelings. Simple things like smiling when the volunteer comes in, greeting them by name, remembering things that are important to the volunteer, and asking their views can all help to create a welcoming, happy environment. Encourage all your volunteers to tell you if they are unhappy, so that you can address the problem quickly before things become unbearable.

14. Remember volunteers are coming in and plan work for them

Occasionally, we get so caught up in our own mountains of work, we forget that volunteers are coming in to help. Nothing is more disheartening than turning up to offer your time and skills for free than to be told there is nothing ready for you to do. Even if you can't plan a whole day's work ahead, at least have something ready for the volunteer to do when the volunteer arrives. Try keeping a folder of tasks during the week so that when the volunteer arrives they have plenty to do.

15. Consult volunteers about things that affect them and the organisation

Most people have opinions about most things. Volunteers generally appreciate being asked their views, especially if the matter affects them directly. Consulting about wider organisational issues can also help to make volunteers feel part of the bigger picture, or to feel that their opinions are just as important and valid as those of paid staff.

16. Include volunteers in team meetings

If you have regular staff meetings, don't exclude volunteers, unless there is a very good reason for doing so. If you do, they may feel like second-class citizens, or even that you are all talking about them behind their backs. Volunteers are part of your team and deserve to be treated equitably.

17. Organise regular group meetings or social events for volunteers

Remember, a common motivation for volunteering is making friends and meeting new people. Many volunteers, particularly those in isolated roles, appreciate the chance to get together with other volunteers from time to time. Parties, trips and regular group meetings are all excellent ways of supporting your volunteers. If you don't have time to organise them yourself, see if an experienced volunteer would like to take on this role.

18. Recognise and celebrate volunteers' contributions

Recognition comes in many forms. It could be a simple but heartfelt "thank you" after a day's volunteering or you could credit volunteers in your newsletter or Annual Report. You could organise parties or annual award ceremonies for your



volunteers, presenting them with certificates in front of their friends, families and other volunteers. Don't forget Volunteers Week (1-7 June each year) is an ideal chance to big up your volunteers.

19. Acknowledge when it's time for the volunteer and organisation to part company

Sometimes things really don't work out between volunteers and organisations. Once you feel you have explored every possible solution to a problem, it may be time to part company. You should aim to do this as sensitively as possible, but without giving mixed messages. Not every volunteer will be right for your organisation. Equally, volunteers may feel that they have chosen the wrong organisation for them or that they fancy a change, and should be allowed to bow out gracefully, without any bad feelings.

20. Conduct exit interviews and learn from experience

Exit interviews are a valuable tool in assessing a volunteer's positive and negative experiences with your organisation. They can be done face-to-face or in writing. If you want really forthright views, an anonymous questionnaire may be the best mechanism. Try to be objective and see things from the volunteer's point of view.