



Managing volunteers - the essentials

Factsheet 4 - Training volunteers

1. The training offer

Once your new volunteers have completed their induction programme, and perhaps had an opportunity to get some hands-on experience, they will be ready for further training.

The training that individual organisations need to offer will vary enormously. The type of generic training programme you provide will depend very much on the sort of work the volunteers will be doing, the values and issues that are important to your organisation, and the numbers of volunteers you involve. You will also need to consider individuals' training needs.

There are 3 types of training which organisations commonly offer:

- training to improve abilities or teach new skills that will enable volunteers to carry out tasks more effectively
- training to enable volunteers to understand and feel committed to the organisation's values, policies and work
- personal development training that enables individuals to grow

As well as induction and initial training, you will probably need to provide ongoing or refresher training for your established volunteers. This will enable volunteers to develop their skills, and keep abreast of changes in your organisation's work and policies. Some organisations develop a Volunteer Training Policy, outlining their commitment to providing training for volunteers, and describing what optional training is on offer, and any "compulsory" training volunteers must complete before they can conduct certain tasks.

2. Training methods and techniques

There are a number of different training techniques that can be used. You should choose the methods that best suit your objectives. Using different training methods and techniques helps to ensure that the learning experience is a more productive one, as people learn in different ways. Studies have shown that training participants tend to remember 99% of what they do, about 70% of what they see, and only about 50% of what they hear. Try to keep these figures in mind when developing your training programme.

A combination of methods that involve listening, discussing, observing and practising is likely to be a winning formula. Over time, you could try teaching the same information using a variety of different training techniques, and then evaluating which format is most successful.



3. Commonly used training methods

3.1. On the job training

On the job training involves a staff member or experienced volunteer demonstrating a task to the trainee, and then supervising them as they practise the task. It is most suitable when the task is straightforward, and you are training one volunteer at a time. Advantages are that it is economical, as there is no need to pay for an external trainer, and the training can be conducted at the individual volunteer's pace. The main disadvantage is that it will take a considerable amount of your time, if you have several volunteers to train. You will also need to allow time for questions, for the volunteer to keep practising, and perhaps a set of back-up notes for reference.

3.2. Self-study learning

Self-study packages involve the volunteer being provided with a pack of written notes or an on-line computerised programme to work through, with minimal input from a trainer. Once they have been created, self-study materials save you time and money, as they can be used repeatedly. Volunteers can also work at a pace that suits them. However, you will need to make a considerable initial investment in developing the package, and remember to update it regularly as things change in your organisation. Self-study does not suit everyone, as it requires some self-discipline and a predisposition towards academic learning.

3.3. Mentoring and coaching

Some training can best be delivered through mentoring or coaching individuals or small groups. It's often appropriate to get an experienced volunteer to mentor or coach a new volunteer. This kind of training is particularly useful when the volunteering role is quite demanding or emotionally draining, as it gives the trainee volunteer the chance to seek help and advice from someone more experienced in the role. It is an ongoing process that allows an individual to learn at their own pace, and you can monitor their development over a period of time.

If you have large numbers of trainee volunteers, you will need significant numbers of mentors or coaches. However, established volunteers will often relish a new challenge, and a chance to increase their involvement with your organisation, and they may feel flattered that they have been asked to help. Just be careful not to assume that everyone will want to be a mentor or coach. Some volunteers will prefer to just continue providing the service they first volunteered to offer.

3.4. Facilitated training courses

Many organisations choose to provide training courses for their volunteers. Experiential training, where the volunteer actively participates and learns from the individual or group experience, can be very effective. Typically it includes group activities such as role-plays, discussions, problem-solving exercises and case studies. When running training courses, you should also mix in some more



passive training techniques such as lectures, demonstrations, presentations and videos. The trick is to mix and match your training methods to ensure that everyone learns, and the course does not get boring.

Training courses are particularly useful when you are covering issues such as confidentiality or boundaries when working with vulnerable clients. They allow for open discussion of real life examples or potentially difficult situations that volunteers may encounter. Training courses cost time and money to develop and you will need the skills to facilitate them effectively.

If you don't feel confident running training, you could book yourself on a "training the trainers" course. Alternatively, you could use an external trainer – ask Volunteer Centre Tower Hamlets to recommend individual trainers or training providers. If you are training small numbers of volunteers, it may be more economical to book them on an external course, or to approach another volunteer-involving organisation to share the costs of running a joint in-house training course.

4. Common obstacles to training

In Tower Hamlets, most volunteers are keen to receive training. In fact, many of the people we see at Volunteer Centre Tower Hamlets specifically ask our advisors what training they will get. However, you may encounter volunteers that are resistant to training. Training can never be compulsory, as volunteers can choose to walk away rather than attend training, but you can make the completion of some training a requirement before volunteers are allowed to undertake certain tasks, especially working with children or vulnerable adults. As a volunteer manager, you would be within your rights to question the commitment and motivation of a volunteer who persistently rejects all offers of training.

5. Time and money

Some volunteers may worry about the amount of time training will take, especially if they have busy lives, or the training takes place outside their usual volunteering hours. It is always best to clarify what commitment to training you expect from volunteers during the selection stage. This is particularly important if training must be completed prior to a volunteer undertaking any hands-on voluntary work. Try to ensure that training is delivered at an appropriate time, and don't expect volunteers to give up several successive evenings or weekends without complaining. Be prepared to reimburse out of pocket expenses in line with your Volunteer Policy.



6. Lack of understanding or willingness to learn

Sometimes people don't understand why training is important. Maybe it hasn't been explained to them properly. If it is a condition of your funding, or part of your risk management strategy, then let volunteers know. However, don't give them the impression that you are going through the motions, or apologise for your training – you need to believe in it, so that volunteers will see its value. Explaining the aims and objectives and learning outcomes of your training can be helpful in demonstrating how beneficial it will be. You could have an established volunteer, enthusiastic about training, to act as an advocate, encouraging new volunteers to attend.

Some volunteers might feel that they have nothing new to learn. For example, they may think they know everything there is to know about befriending older people, having looked after an elderly relative. But your training course could involve new information about managing illnesses such as dementia or Alzheimer's.

If the volunteer believes that they have more to offer your organisation than you have to offer them, acknowledge their skills and experience, and give them an opportunity to share them with other trainees. They may be interested in co-facilitating future training events, or you can negotiate training content, so that they can skip elements of training they have already completed. Remember that most adults have a wealth of life experience and skills that are transferable to their volunteering.

7. Fear of failure

Many volunteers will not have been in a formal learning or training environment for years, so may be apprehensive about failing, or not coping with training. They may have had a bad experience at school, and be worried that your training will bring up those negative feelings again. For some people, the pressure of having to "pass" a training course can detract from the learning process. Good practice suggests that separating training from selection can help to remove any such anxieties, and encourage a more open, positive learning environment.

8. Developing a training event

8.1. Planning the content and practicalities

When planning a training event, you will need to:

- establish the aims and learning outcomes of your training (ie what you want the volunteers to have learned by the end of the programme)
- plan a timetable and programme
- determine the level at which the training should be pitched
- work out the ideal number of participants you can train (somewhere between 8 and 16 is best, erring towards the lower end if the content of the programme is complicated or contentious)
- find and book a good facilitator, if you are not running the training yourself.



Volunteer Centre Tower Hamlets can help you find suitable and experienced trainers

- agree a date for the training – think about when most volunteers will be free, avoiding times such as school runs, prayer times or religious festivals
- arrange a suitable, accessible venue with appropriate facilities and transport links
- organise culturally sensitive refreshments, including a proper meal if the training runs all day
- develop training sessions and materials that meet your learning outcomes, and produce sufficient copies of relevant handouts
- remember to check in advance if any of your volunteers have extra support needs. You may need to book a signer, a hearing loop, translated materials or an interpreter

9. Encouraging participation

If you want trainees to participate in your training event, it is always a good idea to include some icebreaker exercises at the beginning of your training programme. Often games involving moving around, icebreakers are designed to put people at ease, to lighten the atmosphere, or to revive flagging participants. It is also helpful to split trainees into pairs or small groups early on in the training. This will encourage the quieter participants to talk, so that they will hopefully feel able to contribute in later plenary (larger group) sessions. Remember to mix people up, so that volunteers work in different groups. That way, the volunteers will all get to know each other.

Most people's attention spans are relatively short (about 45 minutes at a time). Scheduling regular short breaks into your training programme is essential to keep participants fresh and focused, and the breaks will enable trainees to participate more energetically. Tell people when they can expect breaks and stick to these times. Provide nice refreshments, such as tea, coffee and lunch to help people concentrate and feel valued.

The environment of the room can increase participation. Good layouts include full circles, with the trainer sitting alongside the trainees, or a horseshoe layout, where the visual aid (projector or flipchart) is at the front. Try out different chairs beforehand to make sure that everyone can see your visual aids. Obviously, you should ensure that there are sufficient seats for all your trainees, and it helps to remove any spare chairs from the circle if any expected participants don't turn up. Make sure that the temperature and lighting is comfortable for everyone, and that external noise and interruptions are kept to an absolute minimum.

The facilitator's role is key in encouraging participation. S/he should aim to keep a low personal profile, as the training is not about the facilitator being the centre of attention. S/he should encourage contributions from all participants, but this does not mean forcing people to talk if they don't want to. As a trainer, you may find that



some participants dominate discussions so much that others feel excluded. You may need to reduce their contributions. You could ask the group to make a contract at the beginning of the day, where everyone agrees to monitor their own contributions and respect other people's views. Another option is to ask people who haven't yet spoken to say something. It is also the trainer's role to take a lead in dealing with any unacceptable behaviour, seeking assistance from other participants in challenging this, if appropriate.

Finally, make sure you arrive on time, and keep to timetable, as keeping people waiting can annoy them and make them unreceptive to training. Ensure that all the equipment is working and the refreshments you ordered are available. Remember all your materials and handouts. All of these common-sense rules should ensure a productive, participative training event.

10. Accreditation, certification and qualifications

Increasingly, volunteers are keen to gain recognition for training they complete. You may be able to offer a recognised qualification, such as an NVQ (National Vocational Qualification), or a qualification specific to your field (eg counselling). Alternatively, you could produce in-house certificates for training you provide. Think about holding awards ceremonies to recognise any learning achievements.

If you have any queries about training please contact **Volunteer Centre Tower Hamlets** on 020 7377 0956 or e-mail info@vcth.org.uk