



Guide for first time volunteers

What is a volunteer?

A volunteer is someone who chooses to give their time, skills and energy to benefit other people or for the common good, without being paid for it.

Why volunteer?

Skilled volunteering offers enormous scope and personal satisfaction to those with a little spare time and the desire to use their experience to the benefit of others. It can also be a personally rewarding and even a life-changing experience. The range of volunteering opportunities available is truly amazing, from mentoring charity Chief Executives to organising fund-raising events, designing websites and dressing shop windows. If you have a professional skill to offer, there is a very good chance that a voluntary organisation out there somewhere could benefit from your time and expertise.

Skilled volunteering also allows you to support a cause which appeals to you in a very tangible and personally satisfying manner. There can be few more rewarding pursuits than being involved in and advancing the work of something that you believe to be worthwhile. And there's the added bonus of learning more about something in which you are interested, meeting new people, embarking on new challenges and using your expertise and energy to the positive benefit of others... a win /win situation in fact. At the very least you will develop existing skills by deploying them in a different context. It is also likely that you will discover new ones

So there are many different reasons to volunteer; choosing the right opportunity for you is key to ensuring that your personal motivation is satisfied.

What kind of skills are needed?

Just about any and every professional skill from accounting and legal advice to marketing and personnel management to website designers and beyond. Reach has placed qualified surveyors, ornithologists, art experts, psychologists, change managers... the list is as varied as it is long. So whatever your professional background and expertise, if you have a skill that might be of use to the voluntary sector, there is every chance that we will be able to find you a fulfilling role?

What sort of difference do volunteers make?

Voluntary organisations often start life as little more than an idea and a desire to do something specific to help others or make something happen. Until they grow to sufficient size to justify employing paid staff, they will usually have to rely on volunteers. Other longer established ones such as Samaritans and many charity shops remain volunteer-led even after the organisation has grown to a considerable size.

As smaller organisations expand, there are always roles which they cannot accommodate on the payroll but which would add enormous value to their development. It might be someone who designs and implements a performance review system, or a marketing plan, or a strategic review – or it might be just a few hours' help to untangle a new piece of software, undertake a piece of research, or develop a specific project to the point of being able to take



it forward on their own. Such volunteer input can make the difference between an organisation being unable to make progress towards its goals, and the healthy achievement of its development plan.

The rights and responsibilities of volunteers

Volunteering differs from paid employment in that no contract exists between the parties, but at the same time it is sensible to have an understanding of and agreement to the basic points of the relationship. Volunteers should be reimbursed for out-of-pocket expenses and should enjoy the same welcome, facilities, induction, support and on the job training (if necessary) as salaried staff. In exchange they should honour their part of the bargain in delivering the work they have agreed to undertake to the expected standard. It is, though important to understand that volunteering is a negotiated arrangement, that one of the main attractions is that volunteers enjoy what they do and that organisations' demands should be reasonable and commensurate with the concept of volunteering. In short, volunteering should not be seen a means to cut staff costs.

How do I decide what volunteer role is right for me?

In many ways choosing the right volunteer role is similar to choosing a paid job. Our research suggests that sympathy with the aims and objectives of the organisation is usually an important factor, as is having the right mix of skills and experience for the role and sufficient time available to do it properly.

However it can also be helpful to keep an open mind about the kind of work you might be prepared to undertake, and consider roles which seem to fall outside your normal professional remit. For example, a retired teacher might be the ideal person to design a fundraising project for young people. The variety of roles available often comes as a surprise to many first-time volunteers.

In addition to the nature of the work you would be engaged on, there are many personal and practical considerations to take into account. Importantly, will you find the work interesting? If you are not motivated by what you are being asked to do, the chances are that however inspired you are by the organisation, you will not find it an easy assignment. Must the job be office based, or could you do it from home? If working from home, do you have the necessary equipment? To whom should you refer with any concerns or queries you might have?

There is always room for discussion and negotiation so never assume that if the specification does not suit you in every detail it will not be possible to find a compromise. You should feel free to explore the role and contribute your own thoughts, while being sensitive to the organisation's needs and not pushing too hard for something that would work for you, but not for them. And while the organisation you are talking to may be prepared to compromise, think about ways in which you yourself might also be able to be flexible.

It is important to reality check any work that you are invited to undertake. If you feel you are being asked to make too heavy a commitment, then suggest that you might start by undertaking certain parts of the work depending on what skills or time you are able to offer. Many very successful volunteer assignments start small and as the volunteer and the organisation get to know each other, larger pieces of work can evolve. But volunteers should be wary of taking on more than they can handle out of enthusiasm for the cause or guilt that

they might not be able to fulfil all aspects of the brief. The worst possible outcome for both sides is that having invested time and energy in getting a piece of work started, the volunteer then drops out.

The Expert Volunteer

If you have a specialist skill that is currently needed by the organisation for which you volunteer, there are a number of important additional factors to consider. An example might be a Human Resources specialist who is asked to help a voluntary organisation design a performance review and reward scheme for their staff.

In these cases, it is quite possible that the volunteer will know more about their specialism than the organisation, and as a result he or she will be given a great deal of autonomy in developing their work. This can be immensely valuable but there are also potential pitfalls, so it is crucial that the volunteer checks regularly with the organisation to make sure that the direction they are taking is consistent with organisational objectives. It is also critical that when the work is completed, the organisation has the capability of managing it, implementing it and updating or upgrading it as and when necessary. As a volunteer it is very much in your own interests to make sure the product of all your time and effort is not left to gather dust on a shelf.

Making the relationship work

Voluntary sector organisations have certain distinguishing characteristics that people from the public or private sectors may find very different to their own experience of working environments. If you are accustomed to luxurious offices, unlimited free coffee and biscuits, personal secretarial support and a dedicated chauffeur you will certainly find the voluntary sector a very different kettle of fish!

It is important that volunteers take time to understand the culture and the norms of the organisation with which they will be working, and not pre-judge it purely on the basis of their own experience. However, just as the private sector can be very heterogeneous, so too can the voluntary sector. Occasionally, it might appear that some organisations are so passionate about their beneficiaries that they are seemingly unconcerned about day to day management disciplines, and pay scant attention to bread-and-butter issues such as book-keeping or stock control. In such cases, professional volunteers can act as useful catalysts to facilitate the development of sensible management practice. But equally, volunteers must understand and remain sensitive to the values-led culture of their partners, and not seek to undermine or belittle it. Increasingly organisations, large and small, are thoroughly professional and that there has been a move towards professionalism in the voluntary sector for many years. Size is not a reliable guide to the level of professionalism of an organisation.

Many voluntary sector organisations will have a defined mission and values which they use to inform their work and a new volunteer should take time to become familiar with these, and to understand what they mean in practice.

Above all, while skilled volunteers can bring a new perspective and fresh thoughts to an organisation, they are there to support it and not vice versa. Equally the organisation with which they are working should welcome their input, recognise their contribution and make full use of the additional benefits that skilled and well motivated volunteers can offer.



What support you can get and where to find it

However good your research and however comprehensive your induction, there will always be things you need to know as your role progresses. So if your organisation does not nominate someone for you to contact to resolve such matters, ask for it. You should also know any deadlines or timescales that apply to your work, any limitations on what you can and cannot do, and if you are working from home, what to do about claiming out of pocket expenses etc.

What Reach can do for you

Reach is a registered charity that has been placing skilled volunteers with suitable organisations in the voluntary sector for over 30 years, and works with over 10,000 voluntary organisations across the UK. There are over 6,000 skilled volunteers working on any given day. Each year Reach volunteers contribute £31 million of expertise to the organisations they assist.

Reach is in a unique position to help anyone wishing to donate their skills to a voluntary organisation. With its database of skilled volunteering roles, our personalised matching service sends information on local and national roles out to thousands of volunteers every year.

Through its TrusteeWorks programme Reach also assists voluntary organisations to find the right balance of skills and experience in their Trustee boards, by targeting and introducing suitable Trustees to take on the important role of setting standards, developing strategy and monitoring performance.