



Using Skilled Volunteers – A guide for voluntary organisations

What can volunteers do for your organisation?

Volunteers can make a real difference by providing the skills and experience voluntary organisations need but on which they are unable to spend donors' money. This could involve undertaking a specific project, a one-off consultancy assignment, or a longer-term arrangement. Activities that might be considered a “luxury” which the organisation could not ordinarily afford, but which might make a significant difference could include professional website design, a software re-vamp, the creation of personnel procedures or the introduction of new accounting system – the list is almost endless. Skills that an organisation needs at a particular stage of its development but for which it will not have a longer term need can often be provided by finding the right volunteer.

Volunteers should never be seen as a cheap alternative to salaried staff, see below.

What should you **not** ask a volunteer to do?

It is neither good nor safe practice to ask a volunteer to undertake a full time role, to manage paid staff, or to act effectively as the Chief Executive or other senior executive. The only exception to this is where an individual or group of individuals decide to set up an organisation from scratch. In the first instance the founder or founders will probably fulfil all the necessary functions themselves until they have grown to a size where they can safely hand over responsibility to a paid employee.

If a role you have defined is too large for a volunteer, it may be possible to break it down into components one or more of which might be suitable. But bear in mind that no contract exists between voluntary organisations and volunteers and an organisation may be vulnerable if it entrusts critical responsibilities to someone over whom it has no formal measure of control.

Planning volunteer roles.

It is tempting for hard pressed voluntary organisations to jump at the offer of unpaid help without really thinking through the work that needs to be done, or the implications of managing a voluntary resource. And while many volunteers say that they do not wish to be submerged by endless bureaucracy and red tape, nonetheless a mutual understanding of what needs to be done and the broad parameters governing it is important for both sides to gain the maximum satisfaction from the arrangement.

When an opportunity that might be suitable for a volunteer is identified, you should firstly make sure that the need is a real one. Volunteers get frustrated by undertaking work which is then ignored, aborted or perceived as being of low importance.

The written role description

Although no formal contract exists between a voluntary organisation and a volunteer, it makes sense to have some kind of written role description so that both parties clearly understand what is involved in the voluntary assignment. This should quantify as far as possible the desired outputs, the timescale and any other arrangements which impact on the agreement, such as refund of expenses, IT support, reporting structure, etc.



This should not be a lengthy document but it must be clear. Misunderstandings can and do arise where a volunteer is unclear about exactly what they are expected to do, or where a voluntary organisation has one idea about what needs to be done, and the volunteer has another. This does not mean that flexibility cannot be built in to the arrangement, indeed once a volunteer starts work he or she may well have constructive inputs to make which result in a better outcome all round. But the basic parameters do need to be set down. It is good practice to regularly review the role description with the volunteer.

It may help to think about what, if any, parts of the role could be negotiable or broken down into separate parts. If you are looking for a volunteer to undertake a large piece of work, bear in mind that they may prefer to start with one element of this rather than commit to the whole project at the outset. This can be a valuable learning experience for both parties – the volunteer will learn more about your organisation and you will get a sense of what else they might be interested in. However be careful that the needs of your organisation do not get neglected in the interests of meeting those of the volunteer.

Support and resources

Volunteers cannot operate effectively in isolation from the organisation and the support necessary to ensure a satisfactory outcome all round can all too easily be easily overlooked. Your volunteer will need on-going management support, a desk and the customary facilities if they are to work from your office, out-of-pocket expenses and – depending on the role they are undertaking – may also need secretarial, IT or other support to enable them effectively to perform their role. It is far better to have these matters sorted out in advance rather than to cause embarrassment or potential misunderstandings later on.

Induction

Your volunteer will most likely have some idea about what your organisation does before they actually start working for you, but to get the most out of their assignment they will benefit from the same level of basic understanding as a salaried member of staff. Volunteers can also be powerful ambassadors for your organisation just by talking to friends and family about their day, so it's best if they have accurate information. If volunteers are to work from your offices they need to know about the customary health and safety procedures as well as the all important coffee machine, stationery, photocopier, security passes and passwords, expenses procedures, who is supervising their project etc.

Remember that volunteers may be used to a very different working environment so take time to explain the culture of your organisation to them. This doesn't have to be a complicated process – it might be as simple as saying, "We're all on first name terms here and there's no dress code. However we would like you to come along to our monthly meeting which takes place on the last Friday of every month. Is that OK for you?" If there are any unwritten rules, such as not using someone else's coffee cup, then do make sure your volunteer is aware of them. Such things will be second nature to your own team, and are banal in the extreme, but they can create unhelpful upsets if everyone is not aware of them.

Ongoing support



If your volunteer was a permanent member of staff, what support would they need? Volunteers do not arrive knowing everything, and you will need to think through the resource implications of their assignment as you would for a permanent member of staff. Do you have the time available to allocate someone as their manager / main point of contact? If they are working from your office, do you have a desk, a chair, a telephone, a computer for them? If they are working from home, is your technology compatible?

Common pitfalls

The first and biggest mistake that many organisations make is not to contact volunteers as soon as we refer them. Volunteers may feel rejected when their offers of help are not taken up immediately. It is important to respond to volunteers as soon as possible. They may well lose their enthusiasm if they have to wait too long to get back to you.

On the other hand, voluntary organisations can sometimes be so happy at the offer of unpaid help that they will invent a need or tailor-make a new project to match the skills of the volunteer on offer. In some circumstances this can be effective, but it is much more likely to end in something that the volunteer works hard to produce but which then gets put on a shelf to gather dust. This is a waste of resource on both sides and very demotivating for the volunteer.

Remember too that one of the fundamental skills of good volunteer management is learning to say no to unsuitable volunteers. Bringing the wrong volunteer into an organisation is worse than having no volunteer at all.