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## Careers in the Voluntary Sector

In the last 10 years the number of people working in the voluntary sector has increased by over a quarter, making it a viable option for both those embarking on their first job and those looking for a career change. The reason for this increase is largely due to local authorities contracting out more work to organisations that are better-placed to deliver public services. 'Charity', 'third sector', 'not-for-profit' and 'voluntary and community' are all ways of referring to the same sector, and the organisations within it range from huge international concerns handling multi-million-pound budgets to tiny local groups with few - or no - paid staff. The range of issues addressed by the sector is vast, and the range of employment opportunities within it is broad and varied.

### Pros and Cons

While pay rates may not always be as high as in the private sector, voluntary organisations often make up for it with innovative, flexible working practices and opportunities for personal development. The downside is that the sector is characterised by short-term contracts and project-based funding, so it is perhaps not the best option for people who place a high value on job security. However, for many the positive aspects outweigh the stressful ones, and the opportunity to undertake work that is socially meaningful can be the deciding factor for those who take the plunge.

### First steps

Having decided that you like what the voluntary sector has to offer, it's time to decide what you can offer in return. Although they are often perceived as cuddly and 'soft', in reality the skills and qualities required in voluntary organisations are no different from those sought elsewhere. Voluntary organisations need administrators, IT professionals, journalists, designers, caterers, receptionists, bricklaying instructors and recruitment specialists – the range is too wide to begin to describe. (You only have to take a look at the *Guardian's* job pages on a Wednesday to get some idea of the huge variety on offer.)

To find out what kind of skills organisations are looking for, you can study job advertisements in the newspapers, and if you have access to the internet you can look at online application packs. By looking at those criteria deemed 'essential' or 'desirable', you can gain a good idea of the skills, qualifications and personal qualities that are in demand. By comparing these with your existing skill base and experience you can identify your own training needs and go about filling any gaps.

### Applying

The key to finding a fulfilling role within a voluntary, or any other, organisation is knowing both what you want from a job and what you have to offer. Bear in mind, also, that it doesn't hurt to

apply for a job for which you don't appear to be 100% qualified if it's something you really want to do. You may still turn out to be the right person for the post – employers often advertise for an 'ideal' candidate when they would actually be happy to employ someone who has most of what they are looking for and who is prepared to train for or develop the remainder.

You may find that the paperwork involved in applying for a job in the voluntary sector rather excessive, but don't be tempted to send your CV instead or to miss out any sections of the application form. The sector prides itself on adhering strictly to equal opportunities procedures and in practice this means that no one is given the benefit of the doubt in this respect. All applications are judged on the basis of the same criteria, so if you have failed to follow instructions (for example to match your personal statement with the person specification), the selection panel will not try to work out what you have to offer from the information that you have provided. You need to be very clear and tell them everything you think they want to know. This can be a tedious and time-consuming process, but it saves time in the long run since it means that your applications are much more likely to reach the shortlist for interview, so you should have fewer of them to do.

Where to look for jobs in the field of volunteering

Volunteering England also has a Job Advertising Service, which lists paid posts within the sector that specialise in, or contain a significant element of, managing volunteers. Such roles include volunteer centre staff, volunteer co-ordinator posts, voluntary service managers and managers of employer supported volunteering schemes.

<http://www.volunteeringengland.info/jobs/>

### **Where to look for other voluntary sector jobs**

- The *Guardian* newspaper: Wednesday (Society), Saturday (General)
- Local newspapers
- Recruitment agencies that specialise in the third sector
- Charity Press: publications such as *Third Sector* have job advertisements – you may be able to access them through your local library. If you are already involved with a voluntary organisation they may well be on the mailing list for some of these publications. (*Third Force News* is the best one for Scottish jobs.)
- *The Big Issue* usually has quite a good selection of jobs in voluntary organisations
- If you are looking for work in a specific profession such as marketing or publicity, you could check the trade press and professional associations' magazines.
- Many voluntary organisations advertise vacancies on their own website. If there's an organisation you're particularly interested in working for, it's worth book-marking the page and looking at it frequently to make sure you don't miss jobs that come up.

Here are some useful websites that carry a range of voluntary sector vacancies:

<http://society.guardian.co.uk/jobs/>

<http://www.jobsincharities.co.uk/>

<http://www.voluntarysectorjobs.co.uk>

<http://www.wfac.org.uk/>

<http://www.charityjob.co.uk>

<http://www.charitypeople.co.uk>

NB: Due to the tendency within the voluntary sector to adhere to strict equal opportunities procedures, it is very unlikely that speculative applications and CVs will be welcome. You are much more likely to be advised to wait for vacancies to be advertised.

### **Volunteering as a step to paid employment**

Among the many reasons that people volunteer, its ability to act as a bridge to paid employment is one that many people find attractive. Some professions such as social work will not consider candidates who have not demonstrated their commitment to the field by undertaking some form of relevant voluntary activity. For others, voluntary work can provide training and experience without which they would be ill equipped to compete in the open employment market.

While it can happen that a paid post becomes available in the organisation with which you are volunteering, it would be unwise to join on the basis that you hope this will be the case. It would be more realistic to look upon your time as a volunteer as an opportunity to strengthen your existing skills and develop new ones, and to find out whether or not a particular kind of work is suited to you. Volunteering can also help you to prepare for paid employment by:

- providing good-quality training, some of which carries nationally recognised qualifications
- enabling you to maintain existing skills, acquire new ones and identify which ones are transferable between sectors
- building your confidence about being able to operate in a work context
- helping you to remain active and involved in something while seeking work (which can be isolating)
- allowing you to gain insight into how voluntary and community organisations operate
- providing you with a source of up-to-date, relevant references to offer to prospective employers.

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For more information, please contact

Volunteering England Information Service [Information@volunteeringengland.org](mailto:Information@volunteeringengland.org)  
Freephone/textphone: 0800 028 3304 (M-F, 9.30 – 5.30) [www.volunteering.org.uk/](http://www.volunteering.org.uk/)

All of Volunteering England's Information Sheets are available at:  
[www.volunteering.org.uk/information](http://www.volunteering.org.uk/information)

For more information on managing volunteers, please visit  
The Good Practice Bank at [www.volunteering.org.uk/goodpractice](http://www.volunteering.org.uk/goodpractice)

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