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Creating Volunteer Roles – overview

Thinking about volunteer roles

One of the keys to working with volunteers successfully is to plan for their involvement before recruitment even begins. If your organisation wants to set-up something new or improve its existing volunteering programme, one approach could be to brainstorm on why you want to involve volunteers and what you want volunteers to help your organisation achieve. Ideally the brainstorming session should include the volunteer co-ordinator and members of staff who will be working with and/or managing the volunteers.

Think practically about tasks which staff members currently don't have time to do or about what support they might need to add value to their work.

Think more adventurously about dream projects which your organisation doesn't have the resources to tackle.

Think realistically about what an individual volunteer or group of volunteers could achieve.

Alternatively, sometimes organisations prefer to design a role specifically for a volunteer. This might be a good approach to adopt if a willing volunteer or group of volunteers offer both their time and a specific set of skills. Volunteer managers could prepare for this by jotting down a wish list of tasks as they come up so that reactive creation of volunteer roles is a bit easier.

Elements of volunteer roles

In order to cater for a range of potential volunteers and promote diversity, organisations should try to design a variety of volunteer roles which suit people with varying motivations, skills and interests, as well as planning for the different amounts of time people are able to offer.

Mixing and matching these volunteer role characteristics will help to create a range:

One-off, short or longer-term project?

Individual, group/family or even job share?

Daytime, evening or weekend?

Variable patterns of commitment, e.g. weekly, fortnightly or monthly?

Onsite, off-site or e-volunteering?

Specific skill or experience needed?

Public or client-facing?

Manual work?

Higher or lower level of supervision?
Higher or lower level of training required/available?

Thinking about current volunteers, or volunteers you have previously worked with, will also help you to cater for a wide range of motivations. A volunteer wanting work-related experience will look for a different experience from a volunteer hoping to meet new people or find an activity which gives them a change from their daily routine.

While volunteers shouldn't feel over-committed or over-loaded in their work, it is also important that they are engaged in productive tasks and get a sense of achievement from their voluntary work. When creating volunteer roles, organisations can think about whether a particular role offers the volunteer a chance to plan their work or to measure their results. These factors won't appeal to all, but some volunteers might be motivated by a greater sense of ownership.

When creating new kinds of volunteer roles, think carefully about the position your volunteers will be placed in. Voluntary activity should complement the work of paid staff, rather than substitute work which staff currently do or recently did.

What are volunteer role descriptions?

A volunteer role description (also known as a volunteer task description) is a document which details the specific activities a particular volunteer is involved in. It is rather like a job description, although using separate terminology is recommended to avoid implying a contract of employment for volunteers.

Writing a volunteer role description

When writing a volunteer role description, you should try to make it detailed but concise.

Building the description around different headings is useful. Some suggested headings :

Title of role be specific, don't just call it a volunteer position

Purpose of role

Main activities/tasks

Qualities/experience/skills sought (where relevant)

Training provision

Availability

Location

Main point of contact/supervisor

Writing a volunteer role description will also help you to focus on the practical elements of your organisation's volunteering programme. It is important to make sure that all the necessary resources and procedures are in place before the volunteer arrives; for example, if they need any particular equipment or supervision for their work, make sure you know when these will be available.

Using volunteer role descriptions

Volunteer role descriptions form an important part of an organisation's recruitment process. They help to give the volunteer an accurate idea of the work they will be doing and also ensure that the volunteer is attracted by the tasks as well as the organisation's wider aims. They also help a volunteer manager to focus on what kind of volunteer they actually need and avoid mis-matching people and tasks. For example, by using a role description, a volunteer manager in a PDSA charity shop can be more confident of recruiting a volunteer who wants to work in a customer service role while giving their time to a cause which benefits animals.

A detailed volunteer role description is particularly useful if you are recruiting volunteers through a volunteer development agency or other third party. It saves time and disappointment on both sides if a potential volunteer knows as much as possible about the role before contacting the organisation. Advertising online through a service like www.do-it.org.uk or your organisations own website means that one-to-one contact with the volunteer begins later, but offering a full role description can help to make up for that.

It is important for volunteer managers to offer ongoing support to volunteers and a volunteer role description can help you to structure supervision sessions. Referring to role descriptions is also a good way of evaluating your organisations programme and demonstrating the breadth of what your volunteers do.

Resources used

The Volunteer Recruitment Book, Susan J Ellis, Energize Inc., 2002

Best of all, Linda L Graff, 2005

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The Good Practice Guide 2nd Edition, K Bowgett, K Dickie and M Restall, Volunteering England, 2002

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