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Retaining Volunteers - overview

Introduction

Volunteer managers often end up on a recruitment treadmill, constantly looking for more volunteers and better ways to recruit. Sometimes the other end of the process the fact that volunteers are leaving can be overlooked. But it makes sense to look at keeping volunteers for longer. Its not just the need for more recruitment, think of the effort that has gone into inducting and training each volunteer, and the experience they are taking with them when they go.

The nature of volunteering means that volunteers are free to come and go. Theyre not tied to you by a wage and the need to pay off a mortgage. This means thinking more creatively than you might if you were managing paid staff. There arent any magic solutions, but there are some steps you can take to make volunteering with you a valuable enough experience to stick around.

Creating rewarding volunteer roles

Thinking about retention starts even before volunteers are recruited. It pays off later if you put a lot of thought into designing rewarding volunteer roles. To put it plainly, very few people are going to stay long in volunteer roles where the tasks are boring or lack a challenge or a chance to develop. Its hard to complain about a high turnover of volunteers if all they are doing is stuffing envelopes and an occasional bit of photocopying.

Obviously not everything a volunteer will be doing is going to be fun, but when drawing up a volunteer role description look at the tasks you are pulling together. What is there in the role that would attract and keep volunteers? A chance to learn new skills? Meet new people? And what does the role have to offer a volunteer in the medium to long term?

Task descriptions should not be seen as being set in stone if possible they should be flexible enough to allow for some adaptation to suit individual volunteers. If a volunteer has some say over the role they are coming into then there is more chance that they are going to be happy in it.

Role descriptions should also be open for negotiation further down the road. Once volunteers are within the role they may be looking for new challenges, or find they really hate a task they thought they'd enjoy. Clearly though there are limits to flexibility your organisation has its own needs that need to be met.

Motivation

Looking at the reasons why people volunteer is extremely helpful when recruiting. But motivations are equally important when thinking about volunteer retention. Volunteering is a two-way relationship. Volunteers may not be paid, but there is always something that they are seeking from the experience. This is the hook that gets them into volunteering in the first place.

Such motivations can include:

- To learn new skills
- To use old skills
- To address a specific problem in the community
- To have fun
- Work experience
- Feeling useful
- To make friends

It helps a lot to be aware of a volunteer's particular motivation. It is one of the things to ask during an informal recruitment interview. If someone comes into the organisation because they want to feel ownership of a piece of work and end up doing bits and pieces of everything they are not going to be too happy.

Motivations can change, which makes communication with volunteers very important. Someone may have started volunteering because they wanted to get out of the house for a couple of afternoons a week, but later on it might be the opportunity to develop within the role that really keeps them coming in. Talking to volunteers, both informally and as part of supervision meetings again allows you to keep an eye on their motivations, and if possible shape their role to continue meeting them.

Proper supervision also helps you keep aware of how volunteers are feeling in general. Problems with their work, or with their colleagues may be making them unhappy. Or they may need to change their level of commitment to meet other needs. The earlier you know about such problems the easier it is to find an acceptable solution to them.

Recognition

Volunteers should feel that they are an important part of the organisation. They should be involved in decision making, and their achievements should be recognised.

There are many ways of making volunteers feel involved, welcome or recognised. Different people value different forms of recognition, so here are some suggestions for both formal and informal ways of showing how much you value volunteers. Feel free to invent your own!

Formal

Volunteer events a thank you event, as part of volunteers week, for example.

Certificates a once a year thank you, or after a fixed term

Accreditation NVQs etc

Invite volunteers to meetings include volunteers in staff meetings

Invite volunteers on to working groups etc. Again, if there are internal issues affecting volunteers, they should be involved in the process.

Informal

Saying thank you

Making sure they have enough to do every day.

Include in social events

Going out for lunch, to the pub etc.

Consult on informal matters where the new notice board should go.

Good practice

The better and more efficiently volunteers are treated, the better they feel about the organisation they are donating their time to. Key things to bare in mind are clarity and consistency. Volunteers should know where they stand. This means:

- Fully inducting volunteers
- Keeping volunteers advised of their rights and responsibilities
- Having a volunteer policy in place
- Having a named supervisor to go to with problems
- Clear discipline and grievance procedures
- Taking equal opportunities and diversity seriously

Exit interviews

If you are worried about a high turnover of volunteers one of the best ways of finding out if there is a specific problem is to talk to leaving volunteers. This could be through a questionnaire or an informal chat (its obviously better if it isn't an immediate supervisor doing this!). Even if you don't think there's a problem exit interviews are a useful tool for monitoring your use of volunteers. People leaving the organisation are likely to be more candid than they would otherwise be.

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