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Volunteer Interviews

Volunteer interviews are a key tool in a recruitment and selection process, so it's important to make sure both the interviewer and interviewee are getting the most from them. It can be easy to think of volunteer interviews as being similar to those for paid staff, but this is really the wrong model. Think of any job interview you have been to. Unless you are supremely confident you've probably found them highly stressful. Sitting behind a desk firing awkward questions at someone interested in volunteering is unlikely to give them a good impression of you, or really help you get a rounded picture of the interviewee.

The key things to bear in mind about volunteer interviews is that they should be informal, and a two way process. Part of the point of having them is to allow people to get the information they need to decide whether or not they would like to volunteer for you.

So, firstly, make the informal, mutual nature of the interview clear to the potential volunteer. Rather than use the term 'interview' some organisations prefer to simply say that they'll invite the person in for a chat. Find out if the person coming in has any support needs or accessibility requirements.

When the interviewee comes in, make sure that you're ready for them, and have arranged a quiet room where you will not be interrupted. Consider changing the seating arrangements to make them more friendly if appropriate. It may sound petty, but remember that the person coming in may be quite apprehensive, so little things like avoiding sitting behind a desk do matter, and do help put people at their ease. Make sure you have any information, forms or policies you need.

How the interview itself unfolds will depend partly on the particular role. If a volunteer is going to be working with vulnerable clients the information and feel for the volunteer that you get from the interview is much more important. In any case, although the interview is informal it should have some structure. There will be some information you need to tell to the volunteer, and some you need from them.

It's good to start by explaining the purpose of the interview, to put the person at their ease. Let them know that anything they say will remain confidential. You can also start with any form filling that needs to be done, checking personal details and so on.

Have a list of the information you want to give the volunteer, and that you want from them, but don't let it stifle natural conversation. So, for example, you might want to tell them about the aims of the organisation and how volunteers fit into this; discuss the task description for the

volunteer role; how they will be supported; your expectations regarding equal opportunities, health and safety and other volunteer conduct.

The information you would like from volunteers might include: what made them want to volunteer with you; what they know about your client group; what support needs they have; what skills or experience they have; what their expectations are from volunteering.

Ask open questions, that is, ones that demand more than a yes or no answer, and give as much space as you can for volunteers to ask their own.

The interview allows you to see whether or not the task description can be adapted to better suit the individual. Interviews for paid staff are competitive; you'll only be taking on someone who stands out amongst the others. With most volunteer roles the interviews work totally differently, as you'll be taking on people unless they are clearly unsuited to the role.

If you are making notes, let the volunteer know what you are doing and what sort of information you are recording. Make sure you keep this factual.

At the end of the interview you can discuss with the potential volunteer whether or not you're both happy for them to volunteer with you. If you really need time to decide whether or not the person is suitable or if for example there is scope to change the role to suit them, then give a clear deadline for your decision. It might help if you have a trial period for volunteers. Again, this is as much to allow volunteers to gain a taste of the role as to give you a chance to see how well they fit it.

If you are taking the volunteer on, make sure they leave knowing exactly what the next step will be - when you will contact them or when they are expected to start.

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