

Tips for Involving Volunteers

6.3 million people in Australia are active volunteers¹. Working for a range of organisations and industries, their motivations range from supporting political beliefs and lifestyle choices to putting their skills to use. Volunteers can be of enormous value to your organisation if you get the match right.

Why do you want to involve volunteers?

You will need to convince potential volunteers that your reasons are valid and consistent with your mission or aims. Saving money or doing the hackwork will probably not be strong motivators for them to get involved.

Tips:

- Involve all relevant organisation stakeholders.
- Thoroughly investigate the positive and negative aspects of involving volunteers.
- Reach consensus.

Determine how you want to involve volunteers in the organisation

Organisations invariably have a variety of jobs that volunteers could undertake. The skill is to ensure that jobs have some intrinsic value and collectively make up a meaningful volunteer role. A collection of odd jobs is less likely to arouse the enthusiasm of a potential volunteer than is an identified role in the organisation.

When you have developed the role, test it against the criteria - necessary skills, experience and time needed to undertake the work, does it look too much like a paid position and health and safety implications.

¹ Australian Council of Social Service (2005) *Giving Australia: Research on Philanthropy in Australia*

Can you afford to involve volunteers?

Identify the costs to your organisation. Volunteer work conditions and the nature of the work will greatly influence the volunteer program budget. Staff supervision, travel allowances, out of pocket expenses, rent, additional equipment, insurance and utilities are elements to include in your budget.

Tips:

- Establish a small team to examine the feasibility of involving volunteers.
- Develop a budget.
- Research and consider funding options.

Decide who will supervise, support and manage the volunteer program

The best way of ensuring that volunteers remain keen and committed to the organisation is to appoint a manager, coordinator or team leader responsible for their management. Through this position it is possible to monitor the volunteer program and make adjustments as necessary.

Some organisations can afford to employ a manager of volunteers while others rely on existing staff members to incorporate volunteer coordination into an existing role. For small organisations neither is possible. These need to identify other models to coordinate the volunteer program, such as collective decision making or a structured program with a volunteer team leader.

Regardless of the model you choose your appointed leader needs the support of the organisation to undertake the work. This leadership position is pivotal to the success of the program - the volunteer management style, opportunity to participate in organisational decisions, level of consultation and recognition of their work, are the critical success factors to the volunteer. It is against these criteria that the organisation will be judged by the volunteer and against which they make a decision to stay.

Tips:

- Choose your management model carefully.
- Support the position.
- Give the position some authority.
- Formalise ways in which volunteers are involved in decisions, consulted and recognised.

Develop policy to guide the involvement of volunteers in the organisation

Well researched and articulated policy is the most useful tool for any organisation wishing to involve volunteers. Although time consuming to develop, it is a necessary framework for involving volunteers. Policy does not have to be a lengthy document but it should contain enough detail to protect the volunteer and the organisation.

The policy development process is critical to its success and should reflect the agreed policy of the organisation. Suggested elements for volunteer policy are:

- statements on how volunteers are to be managed;
- conditions of their employment;
- statements ensuring the rights of volunteers;
- travel allowance;
- reimbursements for out of pocket expenses;
- occupational health and safety conditions;
- insurance coverage;
- equal opportunity, grievance and disciplinary policy;
- training requirements or commitments;
- support and supervision; and
- personal details and privacy, security and confidentiality.

Tips:

- Include all internal stakeholders in the development of the policy
- Get agreement around the policy statements
- Write the policy in reader friendly language
- Ensure that it is available and accessible.

Prepare your organisation for volunteer involvement

Once your organisation is ready to make both the financial and policy commitment to volunteers, planning must begin for their recruitment. This will involve drafting job descriptions, developing a budget, organising insurance and planning the recruitment campaign.

You also need to operationalise all the policy statements you agonised over. If you are intending to reimburse travel, for example, you will need an expense form. If you made statements about grievance and disciplinary action, you will need to develop the procedures and supporting paper work.

If you employ paid staff in the organisation, you may already have many of the procedures documented and the required forms. Many organisations take this opportunity to get all of their human resources material updated and into a format that can be used by all staff, paid and unpaid alike. If you are a new or small volunteer group this work can be done by a working party and need not be sophisticated, just thought through. There are many organisations around who can help you discover the wheel.

Tips:

- Streamline and simplify procedures Include all internal stakeholders in the development of the policy.
- Use the same procedures for paid and volunteer staff wherever possible. Get agreement around the policy statements.
- Produce materials in an accessible format. Write the policy in reader friendly language.
- If you are a small or new volunteer group cover the basics first.
- Ask your local volunteer centre for help.

Writing the job description

Volunteer job descriptions need the same level of detail as paid job descriptions and most organisations use similar formats for both. If however, you are setting up a new program and do not have paid workers or job descriptions, here are some things you could include:

- enough detail for the new volunteer to understand what the job is, without overwhelming them with a task list that leaves little room for innovation or creativity;
- the hours/days required; and
- the lines of accountability and the objectives of the position

The job description is an important document. It guides the expectations of the volunteer and the organisation, and serves as the protection for both in its outline of the agreed position activities.

Tips:

- Make the job description snappy
- Leave room for negotiation.
- Build in evaluation of the position.

Planning for the interviews

Interviewing for volunteers involves identifying the skills you require and developing selection criteria. This is your opportunity to match applicants to the volunteer positions.

Important considerations include where and who you will interview and how you will notify successful and unsuccessful applicants. Good communication is paramount to this process. Be clear in your objectives and knowledgeable of the selection criteria.

Tips:

- Plan the interview and questions.
- Develop the selection criteria..
- Decide on key questions.
- Identify the kind of answers you want.
- Use an interview panel.
- Stick to the questions.
- Keep notes on each interview.
- Get back to applicants when promised.

Recruitment of volunteer staff

Organisations use many kinds of volunteer recruitment, ranging from personal contact through to a large media campaign. Obviously the method for recruiting large numbers of people for a one-off event is going to be different to the method used to recruit a small number of permanent volunteer staff.

A one-off campaign may use the mass media, radio and newspapers. Recruiting for a small number of volunteers however, may involve personal contact, advertising the specific role in papers or magazines, or using flyers at events.

Certain principles remain constant throughout a recruitment campaign - keep the message simple, use several mediums, make the campaign professional and be prepared for the result. ABS statistics show that most volunteers have been personally asked to join the organisation they work for and this still appears to be the most successful way of attracting people.

Tips:

- Brainstorm the campaign
- Use your personal networks
- Plan for at least three discrete messages to reach your target audience
- Work out where the people you want to reach are, what they read and what they do.
- Recruit for specific job types.

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Orientation of new volunteer staff

Orientation is very important to new staff - it indicates how the organisation will treat its volunteers now and in the future. Disorganisation at this early stage may negatively influence a volunteer's perception of the organisation forever.

Tips:

- Develop an orientation check list.
- Use it!

Training for new volunteers

The challenge for training is to make it desirable and relevant. Using internal facilitators or external training providers, your organisation will benefit from having training as part of the volunteer staff's contractual arrangement.

Tips:

- Plan for training
- Develop an orientation check list.
- Use training as an introduction to the organisation.
- Make training obligatory if the position demands training.
- Make training desirable by keeping it interesting and relevant.

Final step

First impressions count. What will prospective volunteers feel when they first come into contact with your organisation? Ask yourselves questions like:

- Is our message clear?
- Are we all in agreement about involving volunteers?
- Have we got information about the organisation prepared to send out in response to enquiries
- Are the people answering the phones briefed well enough to field questions or refer correctly?
- Do we look as if we know what we are doing?
- Can we predict some of the questions potential volunteers may ask before or during the interview and prepare answers for them?
- Do our systems ensure that potential volunteers feel confident their information will not be lost?
- Will volunteers feel they are being treated seriously and with respect?
- Do we have strategies to ensure the process does not humiliate volunteers who are not invited to join the organisation?
- Can we ensure that volunteer hours are acknowledged and important to the organisation?
- Are the volunteer roles constructed to protect the volunteer from exploitation while using their skill to the maximum?
- Have we agreement that volunteers are part of the organisation and therefore included in decisions, consulted, briefed and supported in their work?

Tips:

- In Australia there are volunteer centres in every capital city and many regional areas. All the centres have libraries and enthusiastic, knowledgeable staff who can provide you with extra support and information if you need it. Check our contact list for the centre nearest to you.

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