



*Sydney Heritage Fleet
volunteers at work.*



Toolkit

DESIGNING VOLUNTEER ROLES AND POSITION DESCRIPTIONS

Everything managers of volunteers and not-for-profit organisations need to know to design volunteer roles and write position descriptions.



NVSC is a project of Volunteering Australia

Funded by the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs



Projectionists at
the Arts Margaret
River Cinema.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

Designing roles and position descriptions for volunteers can be a simple process and this toolkit has exercises and templates to help you. Examples are provided throughout to get you started and provide ideas.

Modifiable versions of all the templates and exercises in this toolkit are contained in a separate document which can be downloaded free of charge from Volunteering Australia's website. Look for the document *Designing volunteer roles and writing position descriptions – modifiable templates for managers of volunteers*.

While not all of the situations or solutions in this toolkit will apply directly to your particular situation, we hope you will find the ideas discussed in this resource, and the tips and templates useful for your circumstances.

To get started right away see *Writing position descriptions – tips and templates*.

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ABOUT VOLUNTEER POSITION DESCRIPTIONS

Defining and managing the work of volunteers is fundamental to good practice in volunteer involvement and a core part of Standard 4 of the *National Standards for involving volunteers in not for profit organisations*. Written position descriptions allow managers and volunteers to document the nature of the agreed work. Despite the advantages of written position descriptions, the *National Survey of Volunteers* conducted by Volunteering Australia in 2006 revealed that 42% of volunteers surveyed do not have a written position description for their role. The survey also found that...

Volunteers without job descriptions were more likely to report feeling unsupported in their work, inadequately trained and without opportunities to participate in decisions that affect them and their work. They were more likely to (experience) uncertainty, conflict or confusion between paid workers and volunteers in their organisation.¹

These kinds of experiences can lead to retention issues, as volunteers vote with their feet and seek better-defined roles in organisations that have the processes and systems to support, recognise and reward them. Increasingly, volunteers expect that the way they are managed as a volunteer will reflect their experiences in the paid workforce.



Tip! Consider scanning recruitment websites like seek.com.au for tips and information on writing position descriptions, role design and workplace best practice. Although these sites advertise paid roles, you're bound to find some advice to help you understand how components of work are typically clustered and the type of skills generally required to do various jobs. These hints may help you shape volunteer roles.

This toolkit has been designed to help you design volunteer roles and prepare effective position descriptions. With well-designed volunteer roles, your volunteer program will stand out from the crowd and be an exciting, attractive proposition to prospective volunteers.

What is a position description?

A good position description clarifies the responsibilities and support arrangements for a volunteer. It helps volunteers to be clear about what is expected of them and feel confident in their role. A position description also outlines how the role fits in with relation to the broader goals of the organisation.



Tip! A good position description is not simply a list of tasks that the volunteer will undertake, and does not need to contain reams of information about your organisation.

¹ Volunteering Australia, *National Survey of Volunteering Issues, 2006*, www.volunteeringaustralia.org

By focussing on responsibilities rather than tasks in the PD, you will be leaving room for creative solutions. You can always offer guidance or more detail about individual tasks.

Instead of listing tasks, try to define the volunteer role in terms of what the volunteer is responsible for achieving. It is far more empowering, and will give both the volunteer and the organisation far more freedom, flexibility and room to grow the role if the areas of responsibility and objectives of the position are outlined, rather than a list of tasks.

As a manager or coordinator of volunteers, you can always offer guidance or more detail about individual tasks. By focusing on responsibilities, you will also be leaving room for creative solutions.

Tasks define how and what sort of work should be carried out and are disconnected from any broader, more meaningful purpose.

Responsibilities leave the 'how' up to the volunteer and define what really matters – what the work actually achieves. This will be particularly appealing for those volunteers who are also seeking paid employment, as it will help them to conceptualise and demonstrate the responsibilities they carry out in a workplace setting.

The above terminology also reinforces the notion that volunteers can and often do occupy positions of significant responsibility, and that they are entrusted with roles that really matter to the organisation. Consider the following example:

Task: Desk-top charts and graphs, type set text, create templates.

Responsibility: Support the organisation to generate income by creating a professional look for tender submissions.

The following will help you clarify the sort of information to include in a position description, and what to leave out:

- A position description is only one of several planning and management documents that your organisation may use. Project plans, key performance indicators, manuals, procedures, and even verbal instruction will contain detail about various tasks and how the work is to be done.

- Information that is relevant to *all* volunteers in the organisation should be included in an induction manual and a policies and procedures manual, and not the position description. Examples might be organisational charts, a grievance procedure, information about how the organisation is governed and funded and who its key stakeholders are, and the organisation's volunteer policy. Try to restrict the information in a position description to what is relevant to that particular position.



Lifeline Central West volunteer.

Why do you need position descriptions for your volunteers?

In order to write a position description you first need to go through the process of role design, so you will be able to determine the responsibilities of a particular role and the range of skills, knowledge, personal qualities and time commitment required by a volunteer to successfully undertake the role. By clarifying the parameters which the volunteer is expected to work within, it also delineates the distinction between volunteer and paid roles.

The position description is the basis from which recruitment can begin, but it can also be the outcome of a process of negotiation with a volunteer. Consider the document as a flexible work in progress that evolves over time to match the skills and interests of an individual volunteer, but that stays within the parameters of a role that plays an integral part in the organisation's mission.

Benefits for the volunteer

- Understanding their responsibilities, the time commitment and the skills that are required will assist with self-selection and prepare prospective volunteers for an interview.

- Formal documentation validates a volunteer's position and gives it status within the organisation. It also helps the volunteer understand the parameters in which they operate and lowers risk to the volunteer by clarifying the scope of their work and helping to protect them from litigation.

- Outlining the benefits a volunteer may receive from the role may be a motivating force.

- It helps a volunteer (especially those who are also seeking paid employment) to conceptualise the skills they use as a volunteer in employment terms.

- It forms the basis from which an evaluation process can begin, giving the volunteer the opportunity to review the role over time.

- It gives a volunteer the basis from which to review their role if it deviates substantially from what is documented in the position description.

Benefits of position descriptions for the organisation

- It helps to conceptualise or define a volunteer role (see the section Designing Volunteer Roles). If you have a complex project in mind that you think a volunteer could help you with, the discipline of writing a position description will help you to consider all the aspects of the project, so that the prospective volunteer is clear about what they will need to achieve, and whether they are the right person for the role.

- It assists in managing relationships between volunteers and staff, minimising confusion over their responsibilities.

- As you document duties in a position description you can simultaneously check that it is shaping into a role that meets the needs of the organisation in terms of staff support, client needs and the overall mission. An ill-defined role not only fails to make a link between the organisation's objectives, it can be frustrating for the volunteer as the possibility of turning up with nothing to do for the day is increased.



Volunteer Tracey helping out at the Pregnancy, Babies & Children's Expo 2006.

- It increases the likelihood of appointing suitable candidates, leading to better job outcomes and longer-term retention. Once you determine what skills, abilities and qualities are required you have a much clearer idea of the most suitable volunteer before you begin recruiting. It also helps you select from multiple job applications and forms a basis for your interview questions.

- It gives you a point of recourse should you receive queries or complaints from candidates who were unsuccessful in applying for a volunteer position.

- Position descriptions facilitate feedback – they provide you with an agreed and documented basis from which you can provide guidance, advice and support, and is something that you can fall back on if you find yourself needing to 'performance manage' a volunteer.

- Position descriptions provide continuity and help with knowledge management. At some point, volunteers will leave an organisation, and many are required only for a short time each year (such as event volunteers). Ensuring that all roles have position descriptions which are kept on file helps to find replacements more quickly.

- Managers of volunteers also leave organisations and there is the risk of losing information about a role's requirements if they have not documented it. Having a centralised file of position descriptions gives you an overview of how your volunteers are collectively contributing to your organisation and the range of skills they have.

- It conveys to potential volunteers that your organisation is serious about its management of volunteers, that they are an integral part of the organisation and possess the same legitimacy and status as paid employees.

- Position descriptions are useful risk management tools that protect the organisation and the volunteer. For more information, see *Using the position description as a planning and management tool*, over the page.

Writing a position description gives you the opportunity to tailor a role to maximise the skills and interests for a particular volunteer while meeting the needs of your organisation.

Using the position description as a planning and management tool

From the organisation's perspective, position descriptions are a vital planning and management tool.

1. Preparing position descriptions helps you assess all of your current volunteer roles and review how each of them fits into your current mission.

How do the roles inter-relate and fit into the hierarchy or structure? Can they be grouped into key functions of the organisation such as fundraising roles or client support roles? Is there a natural line of progression within functions so you can offer volunteers a pathway to roles with more responsibility (which could encourage long-term retention)?

2. Position descriptions help manage the expectations of volunteers.

Position descriptions feed into a systematic process of appraisal and review, and clarify who the volunteer takes instruction from and can look to for support. Explain the benefits to your volunteers of documenting all their responsibilities in a position description. If you have an appraisal process for volunteers, explain that this will give them the opportunity to have a say in how their role fits into the bigger picture and to request training which develops their skills, and can help them to expand or further develop their role. In this way, position descriptions assist with the professional development of a volunteer (refer to Volunteering Australia's resource on how to create a professional development plan for volunteers, which will be available on our website early in 2007).

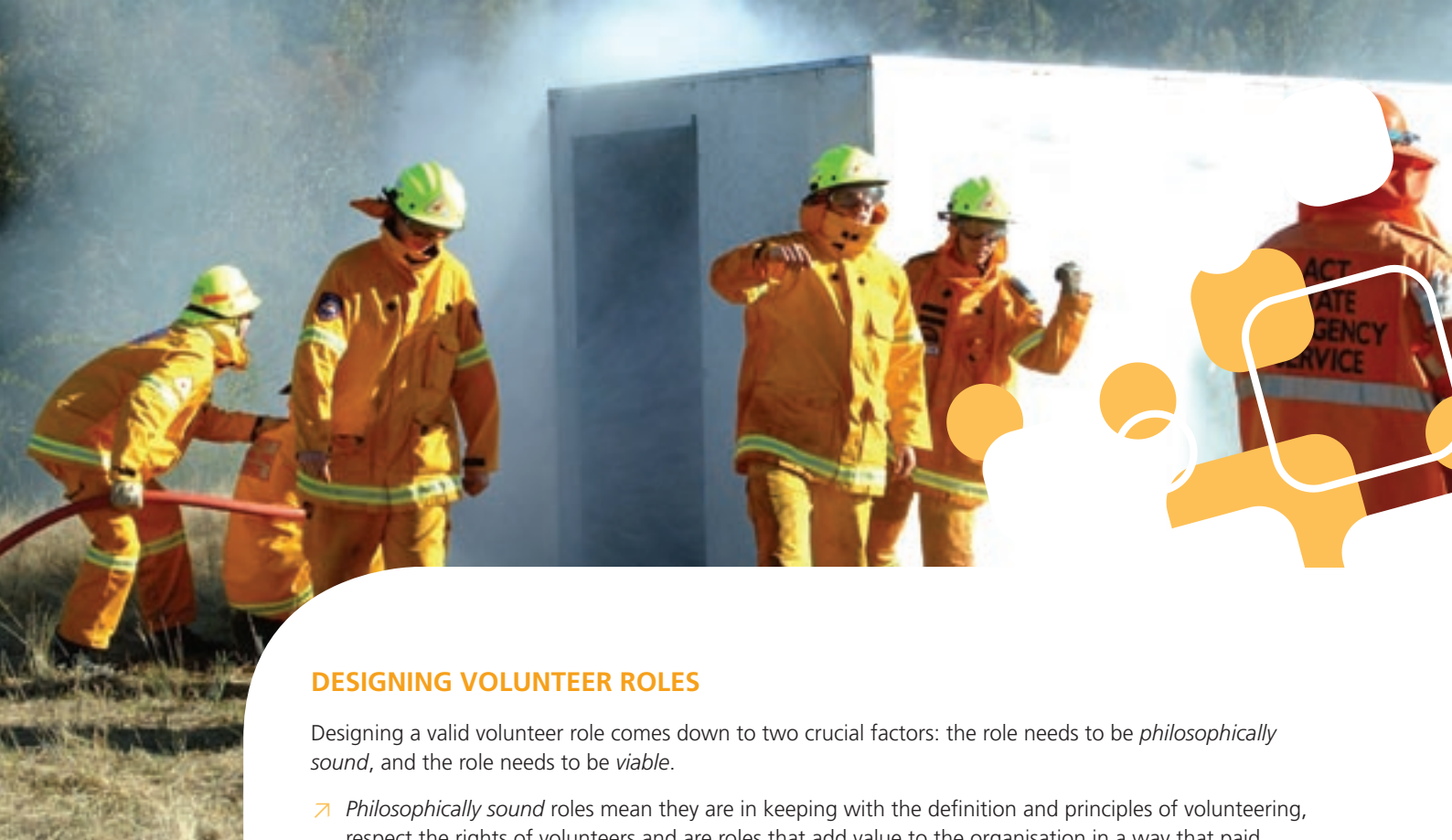
3. Position descriptions assist in your volunteer recruitment strategy, and help you respond to opportunities that arise when individuals or groups want to volunteer with your organisation.

The process of writing position descriptions gives you the opportunity to re-evaluate or break down the components of a role so that your organisation can accommodate volunteers with time pressures, or tailor a role to maximise the skills and interests of a particular volunteer. This flexibility will make your volunteer roles more appealing and help you recruit new volunteers.

Which components of a role might appeal to the type of volunteer you are trying to attract?

4. Position descriptions are useful risk management tools that protect the organisation and the volunteer.

Each state and territory in Australia has volunteer protection legislation which protects volunteers acting in good faith from the risk of being sued for damages while doing community work. However a volunteer is not protected from personal civil liability if they are acting outside the scope of their community work or contrary to instruction (refer to Volunteering Australia's resource Insurance & Risk Management for Corporate Volunteers). A position description documents what is in the scope of their duties.



Members of the ACT RFS and SES participate in a structural fire protection scenario.

DESIGNING VOLUNTEER ROLES

Designing a valid volunteer role comes down to two crucial factors: the role needs to be *philosophically sound*, and the role needs to be *viable*.

- *Philosophically sound* roles mean they are in keeping with the definition and principles of volunteering, respect the rights of volunteers and are roles that add value to the organisation in a way that paid roles do not.
- *Viable roles* are roles that are designed with participation trends in mind, and meet the needs of the organisation and the volunteer. It is important to keep up with changing trends so that our expectations of prospective volunteers are realistic. In other words, that someone will *want* to take on the role, and can take on the role while still carrying out their family, work, leisure and other activities.

This section of the resource will assist you to design roles that are both philosophically sound and viable.

Making sure the role is philosophically sound

How are volunteer roles different to paid roles?

To design roles that are in keeping with what volunteering is all about, the first thing to consider is how volunteer roles differ to paid roles.

The *Definition and Principles of Volunteering*¹ is a document that describes what volunteering is, and the principles that underpin volunteering. You can download the full document for free at <http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org> > publications.

Essentially, the main things to remember about volunteering which differentiate it from paid work can be summed up as follows:

- Volunteering is always a matter of choice
- It only takes place in or through not-for-profit projects or organisations
- It is unpaid
- It creates positive change for the volunteer, the organisation and the community.

Determining whether a role is an appropriate volunteer role is one of the most difficult and challenging issues that volunteer-involving organisations and their paid staff and volunteers face. Sometimes there is very little, perhaps no visible difference between paid and volunteer roles, as may be the case with emergency services workers, for example.

¹ Volunteering Australia, 2005, *Definition and principles of volunteering*, www.volunteeringaustralia.org

Designing volunteer roles that are complementary to paid roles brings out the best in all workers and enhance the work and the credibility of the organisation.

It is a skill that requires both logical thinking and imagination.

There are also many organisations which have no paid staff and are entirely volunteer-run. This may be due to resource constraints, it may be the result of a philosophical decision, or the organisation may have grown organically in this way. The volunteering spectrum is very broad, and volunteer-involving organisations are diverse and operate in different contexts. This means that there are no hard and fast rules when it comes to determining whether a role should be paid, or is a volunteer role. A role that is a valid volunteer role in one organisation, may more properly be a paid role in another organisation. Consider, for example, a small refugee support centre that is entirely volunteer-operated compared to a larger, well-resourced international development and volunteer-sending organisation. An accounts receivable and payable volunteer position may be entirely appropriate for the refugee support centre, but may be less so for the international volunteer-sending organisation that has a large volume of accounts work, is well funded to cover this type of head office cost, and where the timely payment of volunteers' living allowances is critical (and potentially a risk to the volunteers and the organisation).

Organisations that involve a mixture of paid and volunteer workers and have to decide which roles are and are not appropriate for volunteers arguably face the toughest challenge when it comes to role design. Designing volunteer roles that are complementary to paid roles, bring out the best in all workers and enhance the work and the credibility of the organisation is a skill that requires both logical thinking and imagination.

When determining if a role within your organisation is suitable for volunteer involvement there are a number of things you may want to consider. The following criteria and tables may help you clarify whether the role is for a paid or volunteer worker, and help you come to a decision that ensures the role is non-exploitative of volunteers, not more properly a paid position, and your organisation and its clients are protected.

If your answers are mostly yes in *Table 1* then the role is almost certainly one for a paid worker. If you answer no to *any* question in *Table 2* you may need to seriously consider whether this is a suitable role for volunteers.



Tip! It is recommended that you use both tables together – this will enable you to more accurately determine the suitability of the role for a volunteer.

Table 1

| Is this, or should this be, a paid role? | Yes | No |
|--|-----|----|
| 1. Is this role critical to the overall successful functioning of the organisation? | | |
| 2. Is the role closely aligned to an industrial award? | | |
| 3. Is the role full-time and ideally filled by one person? | | |
| 4. Is this a role that must be filled by a paid worker for regulatory, legal or industrial relation reasons? | | |
| 5. Does the non-effective performance of the role have any legal ramifications for the organisation? | | |
| 6. Does the non-effective performance of the role have any negative implications on the work of paid staff? | | |
| 7. Is this a position for which funding has been obtained, sought or is available? | | |
| 8. Has this role ever been filled by a paid worker? | | |
| 9. Is this role normally a paid position in other not-for-profits? | | |
| 10. Would a person reasonably expect remuneration for this work? | | |

Table 2

| Is this role suitable for a volunteer? | Yes | No |
|--|-----|----|
| 1. Does the role have intrinsic value to the volunteer and the organisation, taking into account motivation, perceived benefits and skill level needed to perform the job? | | |
| 2. Are there adequate and effective management supports for this role? | | |
| 3. Do the paid staff, board and clients of the organisation accept this as volunteer role? | | |
| 4. Did the paid staff, board and clients of the organisation have a role in determining the status of the position? | | |
| 5. Does the role add value to and not replace the work of paid staff in the organisation? | | |
| 6. Can the organisation adequately indemnify a volunteer in this role? | | |
| 7. Can this role, in its entirety, be performed in less than 16 hours per week? | | |
| 8. Is this role significantly different to the role of paid workers? | | |
| 9. Will the client, organisation, and volunteer benefit from the role? | | |

Worksheet 1 has been created to help you determine what will add value to your organisation, and can be found in the section *How do we design roles that 'add value'?*



Hunter Wetlands volunteers.

The volunteer role design process

One of the most significant distinctions between role design for volunteers and role design for paid workers is the *process* of designing the role.

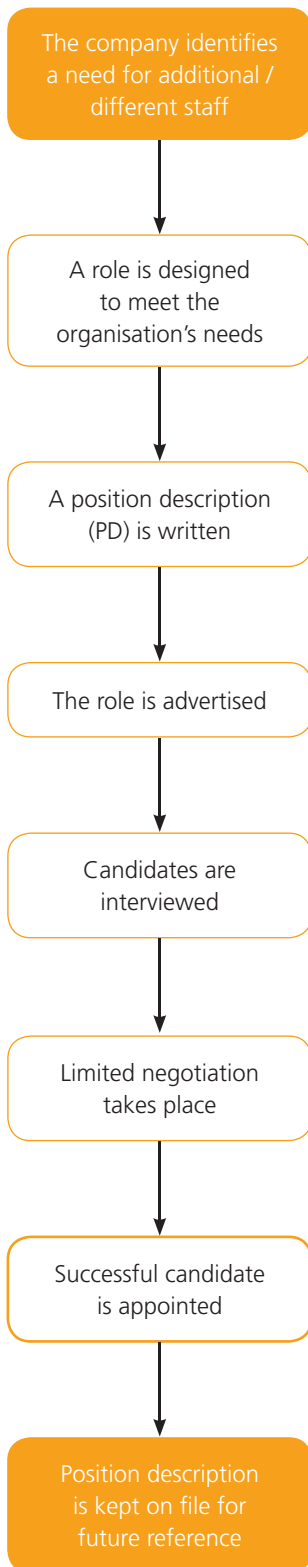
Where paid roles are concerned, usually an organisation will design the role that suits their purpose, advertise that role and the conditions attached to it, and then take its pick from a range of candidates. Although this scenario is a generalisation, it points to a vital difference between the process of designing roles for volunteers, and designing roles for paid workers.

Volunteer-involving organisations may also design roles that suit their needs and follow an advertising process similar to one they would use for a paid worker. However, often volunteers do not respond to advertised roles, but approach an organisation that interests them. Many volunteers will go to an organisation with ideas about what they have to offer, and what sort of volunteer work they would like to do.

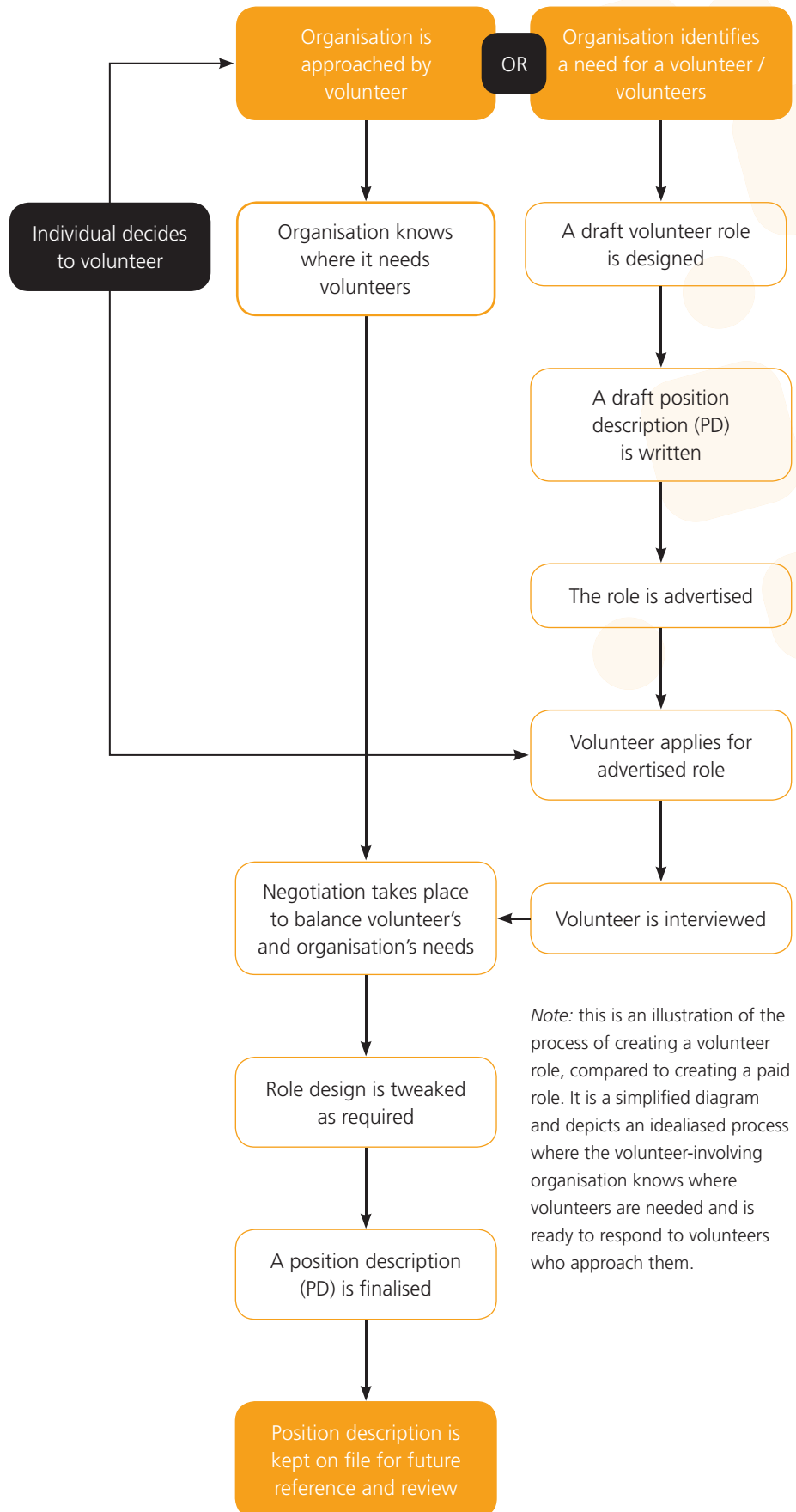
Because of the nature of their work, some volunteer-involving organisations will have less flexibility in the design of some of their roles. In general, however, there is an increasing pressure on volunteer-involving organisations to be more flexible and responsive to volunteers' needs. This adds a different dimension to the process of role design.

The diagram on page 13 illustrates the process of how a volunteer role is created, compared to how a paid role is created. Note that this depicts an idealised process where the volunteer-involving organisation knows where volunteers are needed and is ready to respond to volunteers who approach them. Worksheets 2 and 3 in the section *Making sure the role is viable* will help you to think through the work that your organisation does, and loosely design potential roles that will benefit your organisation and can be adapted and tightened up to suit the particular skills and needs of volunteers who offer their services.

How a paid role is created



How a volunteer role is created



Note: this is an illustration of the process of creating a volunteer role, compared to creating a paid role. It is a simplified diagram and depicts an idealised process where the volunteer-involving organisation knows where volunteers are needed and is ready to respond to volunteers who approach them.

How do we design roles that 'add value'?

Volunteer roles are developed according to the principle that they add value to an organisation in a way that paid roles do not. The challenge for volunteer-involving organisations is conceptualising what 'added value' really means for your organisation, and then creating positions that do this.

Volunteers *add value* to your organisation by bringing skills, knowledge and a willingness to make a positive contribution that opens up new possibilities for your organisation. They take on responsibilities and contribute in a way that assists your organisation to carry out its objectives, and they also provide your organisation with resources that it wouldn't otherwise have access to.

The following worksheet will help you determine where volunteers can add value in your organisation. Consider the questions on the left and fill in your answers on the right.



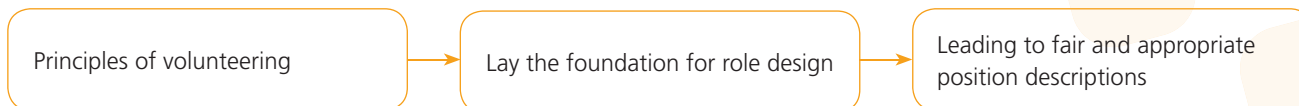
Tip! Once you have completed this worksheet you are half way to designing valid volunteer roles. Save your answers to these questions – you will use them to complete Worksheets 2 and 3, which ensure that your volunteer roles fit in with your organisation's objectives.

Worksheet 1

| What sort of activities, skills and knowledge would 'add value' to the organisation and its services? | Your answers |
|---|--------------|
| What needs does your organisation have that are currently not being met? | |
| What else would you do if you had the time or resources? | |
| What else would you do if you had the right skills available to you? | |
| How could the core functions of your organisation be improved? | |
| What other organisational competencies does your organisation need to build? | |
| Which skills or new approaches would your staff and organisation benefit from learning most? | |
| How could you improve the quality of your internal activities and processes? | |
| How could you improve the quality of your services? | |
| What additional services would your clients value most? | |

How the principles of volunteering can help you design roles

We mentioned earlier that philosophically sound roles are in keeping with the principles of volunteering. If we examine some of the principles of volunteering, they provide us with clues for designing volunteer roles and writing position descriptions.



Following are examples of how you can incorporate some of the principles of volunteering into your volunteer role design and write sound position descriptions.

| PRINCIPLES: Volunteering benefits the community and the volunteer Volunteer work is unpaid | |
|--|--|
| What does this mean for role design? | Tips for creating position descriptions |
| <p>Focus for a moment on what motivates someone to volunteer, and the benefits they get from volunteering (we will focus on the community benefits in a moment). Obviously, people volunteer for reasons other than financial remuneration. It might be to extend their social networks, to learn new skills, to contribute to a cause they feel strongly about, to experience something different, or to gain work experience. This has implications for role design.</p> <p>People interested in social interaction may prefer roles that are at the coal-face of service delivery, or are an integral part of a team. People interested in learning new skills or gaining work experience may welcome a challenge. People wanting to contribute to a cause may be looking for something that has a visible, immediate impact (such as on-the-ground activities like re-forestation degraded land), or a medium to long-term impact (such as running a media or publicity campaign, developing an organisation's policies, or helping an organisation with its strategic planning process).</p> <p>Do your volunteer roles satisfy any of the above motivations? What are the benefits that volunteers will get out of your roles?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Often, roles for volunteers need to be designed in consultation with the volunteer to ensure that the volunteer derives benefits from the role that are meaningful to them. This means sitting down with the volunteer and asking them what they want to get out of volunteering, then finding or creating a suitable role rather than presenting them with a role that doesn't fit what they're looking for. It also means making sure that the position description reflects your discussion and agreement with the volunteer. ➤ Position descriptions for paid workers often outline the benefits for employees – usually in the form of a salary, superannuation and attractive work conditions. Position descriptions for volunteers should also clearly outline the anticipated benefits the volunteer will get from the role, including reimbursements for out-of-pocket expenses, free training etc. ➤ Outline the skills that are essential, but also list those that you can support the volunteer to develop on the job, either through training or experience. |

PRINCIPLES:

Volunteering benefits the community and the volunteer

Volunteering is a way for **individuals or groups** to **address human, environmental and social needs**

| What does this mean for role design? | Tips for creating position descriptions |
|---|---|
| <p>As a not-for-profit organisation, your organisation will be one which exists to meet specific social purposes unrelated to profit, such as addressing human, environmental and social needs, as the principle above suggests. Often, people volunteer with an organisation because they believe in that organisation's purpose and objectives and want to express social concern and make a social contribution</p> <p>Reflect on the purpose of your organisation. Consider how the proposed volunteer role connects with and contributes to the achievement of organisational objectives, which in turn helps your organisation achieve its purpose. There should be a clear connection to make between the volunteer role and the outcomes the organisation achieves.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Include a description of your organisation's mission in the position description to affirm the social contribution the organisation makes to the community.➤ Make sure the position description clearly articulates how the role contributes to the organisation's strategic objectives and mission. |

PRINCIPLES:

Volunteering is always **a matter of choice**

| What does this mean for role design? | Tips for creating position descriptions |
|--|---|
| <p>Freedom of choice is the essence of volunteering. It distinguishes volunteering from the duties of citizenship and other types of unpaid work. People make choices about volunteer work in the same way that they make choices about paid work. Volunteering has to fit into their lifestyle and satisfy their individual motivations. The fact that people's motivations often change over time also needs to be taken into account. If your organisation cannot satisfy these things, there will be another organisation that can.</p> <p>There are several things you can do to increase your chances of satisfying volunteers' motivations and needs and make your organisation a 'star recruiter':</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Build a degree of flexibility into roles or be flexible in the actual creation of roles (i.e. tailor roles with your volunteers so that they meet their needs). If flexibility is not possible, or if the nature of the role demands that the volunteer be flexible in terms of their availability (such as emergency services work), make sure this is clear in the position description.➤ Create roles that offer pathways to increased responsibility.➤ Create a series of short-term roles that allow volunteers to master skills and move on to something different or more challenging. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Consult with the volunteer so that you have an understanding of the sort of work they do and do not want to do, and the type of conditions (hours, for example) that will make the role possible. If this can be accommodated, reflect this agreement in the position description.➤ Alternatively, remember that sometimes regular hours are not required for some roles. Consider expressing the role in terms of responsibilities and outcomes, rather than a number of shifts to be fulfilled (although this may not always be possible).➤ If offering flexible volunteering conditions is one of the attractions of your organisation, be sure to outline this in the position description.➤ Because people's motivations can change over time, set regular review dates so that you and the volunteer have opportunities to discuss the suitability of the role. Document these review dates on the position description. |

PRINCIPLES:

Volunteers do not replace paid workers nor constitute a threat to the job security of paid workers

| What does this mean for role design? | Tips for creating position descriptions |
|---|--|
| <p>Some volunteer roles may be similar to those of paid staff, and there will not always be substantial differences. Role design is strongly influenced by the context in which the organisation operates.</p> <p>Volunteer positions are designed to provide people who want to volunteer with an opportunity to offer their skills and time in a way that suits them, while benefiting the wider community in clear and immediate ways. Paid positions may be created so that organisations can acquire particular expertise, skills and experience in order to achieve specific outcomes, often within a set timeframe. A position in an organisation that is a permanent full time role or a paid job in other organisations or subject to an Award is generally not a volunteer role.</p> <p>This principle often raises the question of how many hours per week it is reasonable or right to expect a volunteer to contribute. There are no firm rules around this, with some volunteering roles requiring short-term periods of more intense commitment (for example, emergency services volunteers) and other roles requiring more regular volunteering hours and set shifts on set days of the week.</p> <p>However, in terms of setting upper limits, as a general guideline a commitment of up to 16 hours per week:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ observes the principles of volunteering;➤ upholds volunteers' rights and discourages exploitation;➤ is sustainable for both the volunteer and the organisation; and➤ encourages a healthy balance between all spheres of life. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Again, take care to show in the position description how the role contributes to the organisation's objectives, thereby benefiting the community.➤ Remember that well-designed volunteer roles should add value to an organisation in a way that paid roles do not. They harness the skills and goodwill of a volunteer and enable both the organisation and the volunteer to achieve their goals. The questions in Worksheet 1 in the section, <i>How do we design roles that 'add value'?</i> will help you design roles that add value to your organisation.➤ Volunteering hours should be determined when a volunteer first inquires about a position. If the hours or time required for a particular role do not suit the volunteer's needs then it is best to identify this early so that the organisation and the volunteer can work out together whether there are alternatives. Make sure the position description reflects the agreed time commitment. |



Sydney Heritage Fleet volunteer.

Making sure the role is viable

Understanding trends

Designing viable volunteer roles requires an understanding of the motivations and expectations of the volunteers you are trying to attract, and is helped by a knowledge of the evolving trends in volunteering.

Many volunteers also work in paid roles, either on a part time or full time basis, and many also have responsibilities caring for others. Time pressures and the need for flexible volunteer roles are entrenched challenges that volunteer managers now face. These factors mean that there is a trend away from *traditional organisational volunteering* roles (duties which are part of the ongoing day-to-day work of the organisation) and towards *finite* roles (projects with a beginning, middle and end).

Volunteers are becoming more selective when it comes to choosing roles, taking into account the skills demanded by the role, the cause of the organisation and whether the role has the flexibility to fit busy schedules. They are also becoming more informed about their rights and what they can expect of the organisation they volunteer with. Another interesting trend concerns training and skills development. The National Survey found that 81% of volunteers 'would personally appreciate' having their volunteer work recognised in the form of opportunities to develop their skills.

Corporate and team volunteering

Corporate volunteers are supported and encouraged by their employers to participate in community volunteering activities. It is a growing trend amongst Australian companies and enables people to incorporate volunteering into their working week. Volunteering Australia's *Corporate Volunteering Survey* found that over 60% of companies surveyed are offering one or more day's leave per year. A large number also reported their intention to maintain or expand their programs.

This trend has created a new volunteer profile. Demands for team projects, projects which can be 'done in a day' and roles which exploit and enhance the skills of corporate volunteers present both opportunities and challenges for not-for-profit organisations.

Position descriptions written with corporate volunteers in mind should contain a section outlining the benefits which the employer may receive when their employees volunteer, such as the enhancement of skills relevant to their paid roles, team-building and increased community awareness.

Virtual volunteering is a great solution for people whose employers allow them to volunteer from their desk or for those with limited mobility or travel time, or for people who want to volunteer with an organisation that is not based locally.

Adding diversity to your volunteer roles

Consider whether a job can be broken down into two or more roles which more than one volunteer can undertake. *Virtual volunteering* is a great solution for volunteers whose employers allow them to volunteer from their desk, for those with limited mobility or travel time, or for people who want to volunteer with an organisation that is not based locally.

Consider all the experiences and skills an individual can bring to a role. There is a growing emphasis amongst the not-for-profit sector to develop strategies to increase the participation of volunteers from *culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD)* backgrounds. It is worth investing training and support for CALD volunteers, and others already working and volunteering in organisations, to overcome any barriers which inhibit their participation.

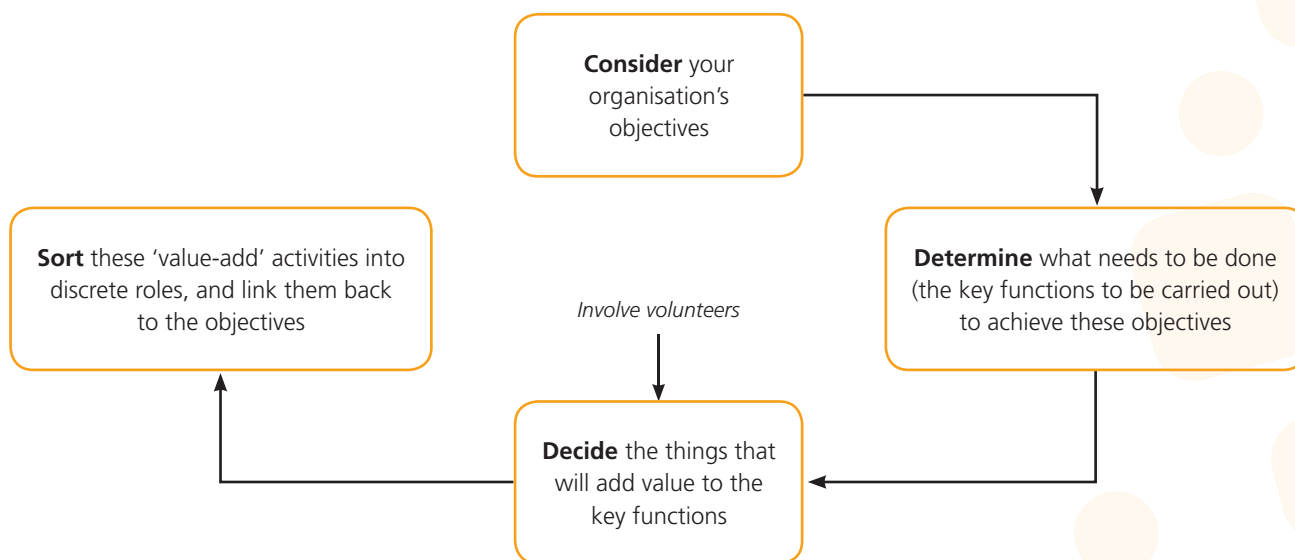
Try to incorporate CALD volunteers into regular roles rather than marginalising them into CALD-specific roles such as client-support activities which connect them only with clients from the same language background.

For more information about how to diversify your volunteer base, refer to the resources produced by Volunteering Australia which are listed in the Further Reading section at the end of this resource.

Designing roles that meet the needs of your organisation

The diagram below is a simplification of the process of designing roles that meet your organisation's needs.

A range of worksheets follow to assist you to create volunteer roles which meet your organisation's objectives, and add value to the organisation's activities and services. Completing these templates is a useful exercise to undertake even if you do not usually advertise particular volunteer roles, as it will mean that should a volunteer approach your organisation you will have an excellent starting point from which you can shape a role to suit your needs, and the volunteer's needs.



Worksheet 2

| Questions to consider | Your answers |
|--|---|
| What is the mission/purpose of your organisation? | Example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ To provide safe, enjoyable sport and recreation opportunities for all members of the local community. |
| What are the objectives of your organisation? | Example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Improve and expand the facilities so that there are activities to offer people of all ages and abilities. ➤ Diversify the organisation's funding streams. |
| What are the key functions that your organisation carries out, or needs to carry out, to achieve its objectives? | Example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fundraising. ➤ Business development. |
| What are the main components of these functions? | Example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Managing events. ➤ Creating partnerships with local business. ➤ Seeking sponsorship. ➤ Identifying funding pools and writing submissions. ➤ Creating a bequest program. ➤ Campaigning for support. |

We will now focus on this second strategic objective, *Diversify the organisation's funding streams*

Worksheet 3

Use a separate template for each strategic objective.

If you completed Worksheet 1, *How do we design roles that add value?* you will already have the answers to this question. Allocate your answers against the appropriate work component. This shows the relevance of the volunteer role to the organisation's key functions, and strategic objectives.

Consider the activities and nature of the role. How could it be designed to meet emerging volunteering trends? Who might you target for recruitment?

| Objective: | | | |
|--|---|--|---|
| Key function: <i>Example: Fundraising</i> | | | |
| Main work components | 'Value-add' role possibilities | Design features of the role | Skills and personal attributes required, or to be learned |
| <p>Example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Identifying funding pools and writing submissions. | <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Create volunteer research role to explore funding environment, chart all relevant funding streams, funding bodies and trusts, including submission timelines, and subscribe to relevant newsletters or websites. ➤ Create volunteer mentor/coaching role for experienced tender strategist and writer to build submission-writing skills of relevant staff. ➤ Create volunteer proof-reading and editing role to check and improve tender submissions. ➤ Create volunteer designer role to design and produce corporate brochures outlining the organisation and its services, to include in funding submissions. | <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Could be undertaken from home – no travel time required. ➤ Good virtual volunteering opportunity – volunteer's location and hours available not critical. ➤ Doesn't require commitment to regular shifts. ➤ Has non-critical time-frames – can be chipped away at when it suits the volunteer. ➤ Involves exploration of new territory and ideas – requires an independent thinker and worker. ➤ High level of complexity; requires professional skills. | |

A position description may need to be refined over time as a volunteer's strengths and interests develop.

Some roles will lend themselves well to being broken down into smaller, more specialised components. Depending on the pool of potential volunteers you have access to, it might be necessary to create discrete roles that accommodate different sets of skills (such as research as distinct from writing, or developing training sessions as distinct from delivering training sessions) and also accommodate volunteers' different work-style preferences and availability.



Tip! Being able to demonstrate how your volunteer program adds value to your organisation and helps it to achieve its objectives will strengthen internal support for your volunteer program. It may even help you make a strong case for additional resources to maintain and develop the volunteer program. Make sure your organisation is aware of the strategic value of the roles your volunteers fulfil.

Other things to consider

Minimise the sense of isolation for off-site roles

If your role could be undertaken from the volunteer's home or office (virtual volunteering roles), consider ways to minimise the sense of isolation the volunteer may experience. This would include providing them with adequate training and induction, regular feedback and acknowledgement, introducing them to colleagues and inviting them to relevant meetings and celebrations (if it is possible for them to attend), and ensuring they have access to all the information they need to complete their responsibilities.

When writing position descriptions, choose language carefully

You may be concerned that some people will be discouraged from applying for roles which have been documented in sophisticated language, such as older volunteers, those who have not spent long periods of time in the workforce, or those whose first language is not English. Use language that is professional and in plain English so you can speak to your target audience. Anticipate who your role might appeal to. Take care not to exclude certain groups, such as those from CALD backgrounds, with the language you use (refer to Volunteering Australia's resource *Involving Volunteers from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds*). Think about other ways you might express the skills required for a role, especially when advertising for a role. For example, you may be seeking a volunteer to 'socially engage with clients to empower and promote self-sufficiency'. This quality might be more simply expressed in a phrase such as 'we are looking for warm and friendly volunteers to spend time with our elderly residents.'

Refining position descriptions over time

A position description may need to be refined over time as a volunteer's strengths and interests become more apparent or change and develop. Roles will also evolve with the organisation. It is good practice to review your position descriptions even if you currently have volunteers in the positions. It ensures that the roles stay relevant and reminds the volunteer that their skills and contribution are valued by the organisation.



Murdoch Community Hospice volunteer.

Professional skills roles

If you are designing a complex role that requires a high level of professional expertise, you will need to consider the project requirements in detail:

- What is the overall objective of the assignment?
- What outcomes do you expect the volunteer to achieve?
- Who will oversee this project and provide the volunteer with all the information they need?
- How many hours will be needed to finish the project and do you need it to be finished by a certain time?
- Is it necessary for them to be onsite at your office to fulfil the role?

Planning for hand-over of volunteer roles

Some roles can be broken down into smaller components to attract volunteers with specific skills or limited time. The position description should make it clear that the role is part of a larger project. Remember that these roles will require handover procedures – this makes documentation of the work very important. Handover procedures also serve as a safety net if your volunteer leaves a complex assignment before it's completed. A formal agreement or project plan could supplement the position description by detailing various aspects of the role, including:

- Expected outcomes;
- How their work fits into the overall project;
- Timelines and milestones for when tasks are to be completed;
- Lines of approval (so the volunteer understands who is making the ultimate decisions);
- Division of responsibilities – who will be responsible for other relevant elements of the project?
- Handover procedures and project documentation.

Defining position descriptions for committees

Writing a position description for a volunteer committee position should be distinct from the committee's terms of reference in that you need to consider the skills for specific roles on the committee and individuals' areas of focus and responsibility, if it is a working committee. For example a fundraising advisory committee may have the objective of identifying and sourcing funding, but this could be broken down into roles such as sponsorship and event management roles. Consider how each member will work in relationship to other members of the group.

Most volunteers are highly motivated and keen to help out whenever they see a need to. However – due to training or screening requirements, for example – it's advisable that the volunteer be informed of the limitations of their role.

Determining the limitations of a role

Most volunteers are highly motivated and keen to help out whenever they see a need to. However if there are aspects of the role that are inappropriate or risky for volunteers to do – due to training or screening requirements, for example – it's advisable that the volunteer be informed of the limitations of their role. Consider what might be likely to happen in the circumstances of a volunteer undertaking their duties while working with other volunteers and paid staff. What sort of duties would it be inappropriate or risky for them to do? Here are some examples:

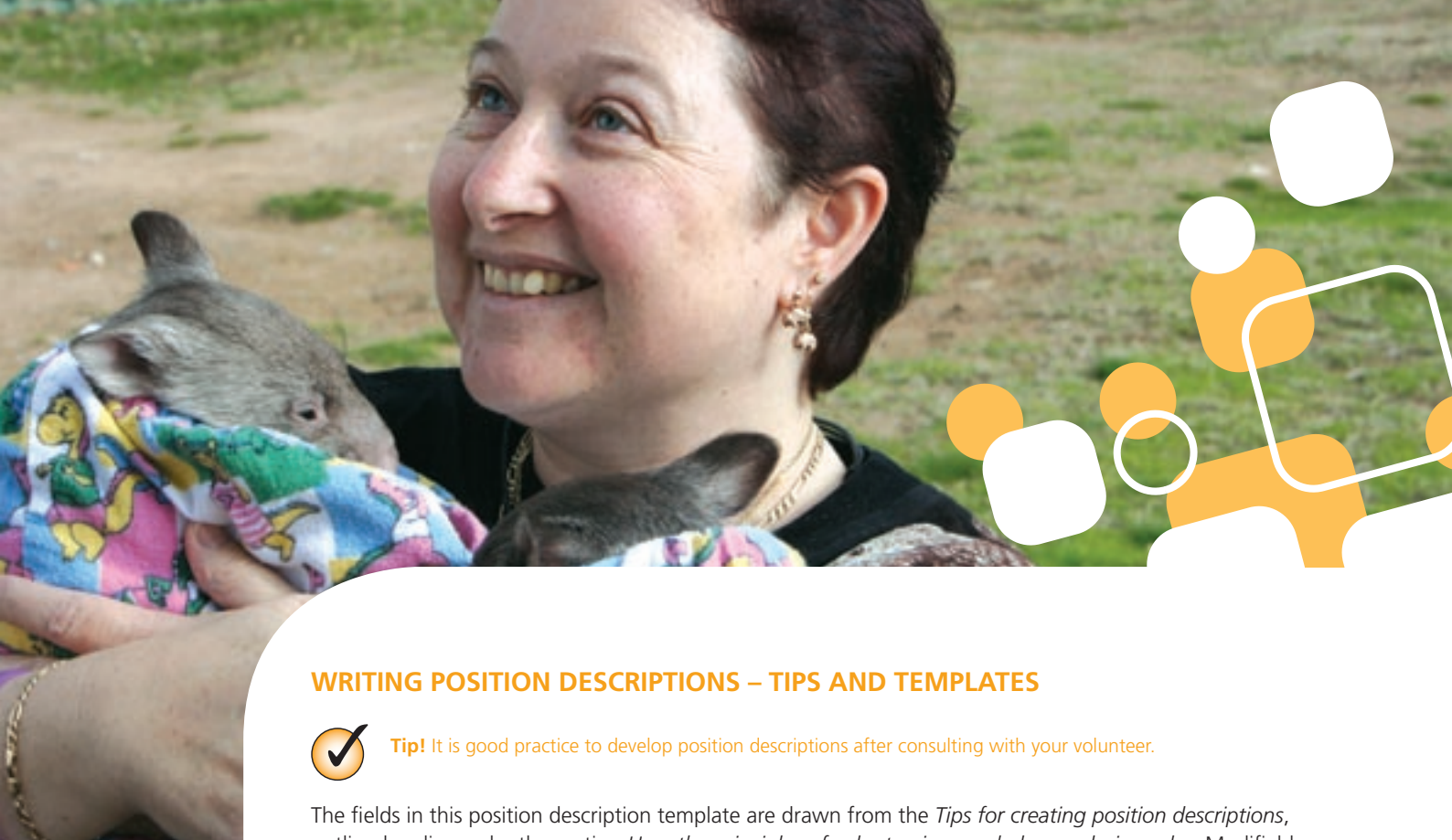
- Volunteer speakers who represent and promote your organisation at various events. Is it likely that such events could attract media, sponsors or community leaders and government officials? Consider limiting public comment to volunteers who have received appropriate training.

- Volunteers being recruited into roles (such as short-term projects) with organisations which have children or vulnerable clients. If their role does not directly involve working with clients, they may not receive the same screening or training procedures – they will need to be aware of the boundaries set by your organisation.

- Corporate volunteers who help deliver meals to the elderly but have not received adequate food-handling training and are legally limited to delivering the meals.

- Volunteers helping at a major event such as a festival. Their role may be to serve on a stall but they are tempted to help other volunteers who they see setting up. However stallholder volunteers may not have received adequate OH&S training to do these duties.

Some organisations choose to explain the limitations of the role in the position description. However, because presumably the same rules apply to everyone working or volunteering in an organisation it is probably easier and safer for the organisation to codify work conditions in organisational policies, such as a policy for working with children, and then provide your volunteers with copies of these policies.



RSPCA ACT wildlife carer Michelle Hynson with two wombats.

WRITING POSITION DESCRIPTIONS – TIPS AND TEMPLATES



Tip! It is good practice to develop position descriptions after consulting with your volunteer.

The fields in this position description template are drawn from the *Tips for creating position descriptions*, outlined earlier under the section *How the principles of volunteering can help you design roles*. Modifiable versions of these templates can also be downloaded for free from Volunteering Australia’s website.

This section explains the concepts behind some of the main components of a position description and things for you to consider when writing the description. Having generic position description templates which can be applied to each department or function in your organisation will save time and reduce duplication. They can then be adapted to accommodate individual roles.

Use a formal yet friendly tone for most position descriptions. Complex language may deter some volunteers from applying.

| | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| <p>Position title</p> | <p>Role titles help to shape the volunteer’s understanding of their role. King³, suggests that managerial or generic titles be avoided in preference for job titles which connect the role to a specific program or mission of the organisation. A good job title should not only capture the purpose of the role, it should also inspire the imagination of a prospective volunteer. For example, Business Plan Writer could be renamed Business Plan Writer – <i>Childhood Literacy Program</i>.</p> |
| <p>Key responsibilities</p> | <p>Remember to express the work components in terms of responsibilities, and use outcome-focused language. Consider the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What is it that the volunteer is expected to achieve in their role – the overall objective and on a day-to-day basis? ➤ What degree of responsibility will they assume? Will they be expected to guide or manage others? ➤ Describe how they will be working with other volunteers and paid staff. Which roles will they be interacting with most? |

³ King, S., 28 November 2006, *Hand on the tiller*, presented in Adelaide in November at the Australian & New Zealand Third Sector Research conference.

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Skills, experience and attributes</p> | <p>What skills, knowledge and attributes will be needed to undertake the responsibilities? What qualities did previous incumbents bring to the role which enhanced their ability to do the job well? Are there any qualifications or certificates that the volunteer needs?</p> <p>While knowledge and skills are acquired from experience, training can compensate for a lack of skills in certain areas. What training are you willing to provide? Can other volunteers or paid staff pass on training and knowledge?</p> <p>Try not to overstate the skills required for a role and distinguish the skills that are essential from ones that are desirable (and are likely to be acquired over time as the volunteer undertakes the role, or from training). Through the interview process ascertain a volunteer’s willingness to learn or be trained on the job.</p> <p>If you are looking to recruit someone for a specialised project such as designing a website research similar roles on job-seeking websites to see how they define the necessary skills and knowledge.</p> |
| <p>Supervision and support (Reports to)</p> | <p>Who will be responsible for supervising the volunteer? What is their role? If it is a volunteer role as well, can you identify a paid staff member who has ultimate responsibility for them? How closely will they be supervised?</p> <p>Will they be expected to supervise other volunteers? If so, what will be the limits of their responsibilities and accountability? Will they be responsible for training, disciplining or dismissing those they supervise?</p> |
| <p>Benefits for the volunteer</p> | <p>Benefits may be tangible (such as free accredited training) or intangible such as helping a particular cause, the development of certain skills, opportunity for social interaction, or increased community awareness. If you are trying to target a specific type of volunteer, think of what their motivations might be for volunteering.</p> <p>Anticipate any barriers to volunteer involvement such as language difficulties, accessibility issues, time restraints and location. What can you offer prospective volunteers which helps overcome these barriers?</p> <p>Targeting corporate volunteers:</p> <p>Add a section titled <i>Benefits to the company</i>. A prospective volunteer will usually need to gain their manager’s approval for the role. Can the approval of additional volunteering time be justified by the company on the basis that it will significantly enhance an employee’s skills? If so, which skills?</p> |
| <p>Date of position description review</p> | <p>Consider your review processes. When will the position description be reviewed? Who is involved? What is the objective of this process? What input will the volunteer have into this process?</p> |

Sample Position Description

| | |
|---|--|
| Name of volunteer | |
| Position title | |
| Organisation name | |
| Name of department or unit | |
| Location of position | |
| Start date | |
| End date (if short term assignment) | |
| Hours and days required per week (if applicable) | |
| Reports to | |
| Role or project overview and purpose, and how it relates to the organisation's mission and other projects | |
| Key responsibilities | |
| Skills, experience and attributes | |
| Training requirements | |
| Benefits for the volunteer | |
| Benefits to volunteer's employer (if applicable) | |
| Other requirements of the role <input type="checkbox"/> Induction training <input type="checkbox"/> Police check <input type="checkbox"/> Medical check <input type="checkbox"/> Any other training required (please describe) <input type="checkbox"/> Any other special conditions (please describe) | |
| Volunteer manager signature | |
| Volunteer signature | |
| Date | |
| Date of PD review | |



Volunteer Colleen helps client Cheryl to work on her latch hook flower in a craft session at Devonfield's Day.

GLOSSARY

Add value

Volunteers *add value* to your organisation by bringing skills, knowledge and a willingness to make a positive contribution that opens up new possibilities for your organisation. They also provide your organisation with resources that it wouldn't otherwise have access to.

Corporate volunteers

Corporate volunteers are supported and encouraged by their employers to participate in community volunteering activities.

Finite volunteering

Finite volunteering roles are projects which have a definite beginning, middle and end.

Formal agreements

Formal agreements supplement a position description by detailing the terms and conditions of the volunteering role, including expected outcomes, timelines, lines of approval and the division of responsibilities.

Philosophically sound volunteer roles

Philosophically sound roles mean they are in keeping with the definition and principles of volunteering, respect the rights of volunteers and are roles that add value to the organisation in a way that paid roles do not.

Traditional organisational volunteering

Traditional organisational volunteering are those duties which are part of the ongoing day-to-day work of the organisation.

Viable volunteer roles

Viable roles are roles that are designed with participation trends in mind, and meet the needs of the organisation and the volunteer. It is important to keep up with changing trends so that your expectations of prospective volunteers are realistic. In other words, that someone will *want* to take on the role, and *can* take on the role while still carrying out their family, work, leisure and other activities.

Virtual volunteering

Virtual volunteering roles are those that can be undertaken from the volunteer's home or office with the help of technology such as telephones and computers.



FURTHER READING

We hope you found this resource a useful tool for designing roles and writing position descriptions for your volunteers.

Volunteering Australia is always keen to improve the resources we develop and we encourage you to send us feedback. If you have any suggestions or comments which will help us improve this toolkit, please email us at: volaus@volunteeringaustralia.org

If you want to read more about involving volunteers the following is a small sample of free resources currently available on our website at <http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org>, or due to be released in 2007.

- [*Volunteering – what's it all about?* \(a toolkit for people giving information sessions to prospective volunteers\)](#)
- [*Involving Volunteers from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds*](#)
- [*Event Volunteering*](#)
- [*Corporate Shares, Community Profits: A guide for not-for-profit organisations*](#)
- [*Involving People with Disabilities in Volunteering*](#)
- [*Involving Young People in Volunteering*](#)
- [*Indigenous Australians and Volunteering*](#)

*Save Our Waterways
Now (SOWN)*

Each Wednesday this group of volunteers meets at SOWN's nursery at The Gap to aid in propagating more than 40,000 plants used annually to help revegetate Enoggera, Ithaca and Fish creeks in Brisbane's inner west.

L-R (back) Kevin Kyte, Howard Harker (front) Beth Kyte, Ray Sinkinson, Lynn Swan, Clif Bell, Lillian Camphausen, Cheryl Andrews, Kon Michnowsky, Darryl Taylor, Geraldine Trivett, Colleen Farrell (Nursery Coordinator) and Bill Dean.