

Screening and the volunteer recruitment process

See also Volunteering Australia information sheets:

- *Police checks and volunteers*
- *100 point identification check*

Screening volunteers is an important step in the recruitment process. It enables organisations to establish the suitability of potential volunteers for the roles and tasks they are expected to carry out.

As well as assessing the general suitability of an applicant for a volunteer position, screening assists in **risk management**. Effective risk management helps protect organisations against financial loss, the risk of criminal or civil legal action and/or damage to their reputations.

The great majority of volunteers perform their roles without incident and with commitment to the wellbeing of their client/consumer groups. However, volunteer roles that require a degree of trust call for vigilant screening. Organisations that place volunteers in work with vulnerable populations such as children, people with disabilities and elderly people should employ especially rigorous screening procedures to minimize the risk of harm to these people.

What is risk management?

Risk management is a process of devising practical strategies for identifying, avoiding and minimizing risks that exist in the work of an organisation. These processes give managers, paid staff and volunteer staff the confidence to pursue their mission without the fear of legal action or harm.

Recruitment is a key step in the process of risk management.

Risk management begins with identifying all the problems that could arise as a result of the organisation conducting its activities. When considered in the context of recruiting volunteers, it begins with a consideration of the opportunities for volunteers in your organisation to abuse the trust placed in them.

A 'best practice' approach to risk management demands that as many of these risks as possible are eliminated through planning volunteer activities. It also requires the implementation of recruitment processes that test the suitability of applicants to perform the volunteer role, and provide a solid basis for screening out applicants who pose a risk.

Example

Organisation X places volunteers in work with people who have disabilities. The risk to these clients is reduced because the organisation implements a policy that volunteers must work in groups of two or more, and never alone. By planning activities in this way, the risk of a volunteer harming a client is reduced.

Organisation X further reduces this risk by implementing a comprehensive screening process requiring applicants to provide references and undergo face to face interviews and police checks. These measures all create opportunities to get to know applicants and assess their suitability for volunteer roles. Regular training sessions for volunteers provide an opportunity to monitor the ongoing suitability of volunteers.

Recruitment processes

It should be clear to prospective volunteers from the outset that they will be required to undergo a screening process and that a volunteer role will not be automatically offered. When conducted openly, screening procedures send a positive message to potential volunteers – that the organisation is professional in its approach to volunteer management. The screening process may also act as a deterrent to some applicants who pose a risk to organisations.

Police checks are sometimes a useful tool to support other screening measures, but should never be used as the sole means of screening applicants because of the limitations of the information they provide (see Volunteering Australia information sheet 'Police checks and volunteers'). Police checks should always be conducted where the volunteer is to work with vulnerable people such as children, disabled people or elderly people.

Police checks should not be used to discriminate against volunteers with convictions that will not affect their suitability for the work (for example a traffic conviction for a person who wants to volunteer in a position where he/she will not be driving).

The screening process should begin with consideration of what duties volunteers will be asked to perform, and the level of trust required to perform them satisfactorily. Consider:

- What are the specific duties the volunteer will be required to perform?
 - *What are the inherent risks to clients, volunteers, paid staff and the organisation in performing these duties?*
- To what extent are volunteers placed in positions of trust?
 - *What opportunities exist for volunteers to abuse this trust?*

The degree of risk and the trust required of volunteers will determine what level of screening should be used to adequately assess the suitability for the role.

Depending on the level of risk, organisations might consider implementing some or all of the following steps:

- Create comprehensive job descriptions for volunteer roles. These should accurately reflect the tasks, responsibility and level of trust inherent in the position.
- Decide on what the steps in the recruitment process will be, including screening measures.
- Determine in advance what the screening process might reveal that would make an applicant unsuitable for a volunteer role.
 - *Have a process in place to notify unsuitable applicants.*
- When advertising for volunteers it should be made clear that applicants will need to undergo a screening process and that they will not be automatically accepted.

- Use application forms including requests for character references.
 - *Check character references by telephone (not just in writing when these are supplied by applicants).*
 - *Have questions prepared to ask the referees.*
 - *Be prepared to have open and frank conversations with referees.*

Example

Organisation Y works with children and is conducting referee checks as part of their volunteer recruitment procedure. They ask the referees if they have ever engaged the applicant in work with children or other vulnerable people. If the answer is yes, Organisation Y asks if any relevant and substantial complaints were received in relation to the applicant's dealings with these people.

Organisation Z is taking on volunteers to raise funds. They ask the applicants referees if they have ever entrusted the applicant with money. If they have, Organisation Z goes on to ask if they have ever encountered problems with the applicant handling money.

- Conduct interviews with applicants in person.
 - *Have questions prepared that will elicit information that helps you to assess suitability.*
- If required, conduct police checks.
 - *Use 100 point identification check to ensure the identity of the volunteer. (See Volunteering Australia information sheet 100 point identification check).*

Volunteer screening can be conducted on an ongoing basis. Keeping in touch with volunteers is invaluable in assessing ongoing suitability for volunteer roles. This might be achieved through peer supervision, ongoing training sessions or simply through working alongside volunteers. It is important to consider additional screening if a volunteer moves into a position where a greater level of trust is required than previously.

References

- 100 point identification check*, Volunteering Australia information sheet, 2005
- National standards for involving volunteers in not for profit organisations* (2nd Ed) Volunteering Australia, 2001
- Our duty to care: principles of good practice for the protection of children and young people* (3rd edition, resource kit) Volunteer Development Agency, Belfast, Ireland, 2001
- Police checks and volunteers*, Volunteering Australia information sheet, 2005
- Running the risk? Risk management tool for volunteer involving organisations*, Volunteering Australia, 2003