

Designing Volunteer Roles



Designing volunteer roles is, oddly, often overlooked, or at least ‘undercooked’ in the development of a volunteer programme.

Volunteer role design is critical if organisations want to recruit and retain volunteers. A volunteer role has to be appealing, rewarding and something the volunteer looks forward to - better than a job.

The volunteer role can be regarded as a product: all the same marketing principles apply. And like many products, we want people to keep ‘buying’ them - we want volunteers to keep coming back. We want people to tell their friends about how good the product is, how high the quality is, so that they buy it, or at least know how great the organisation is. The volunteer role can be as attractive as a night out in the pub, as a meal in a restaurant, as a must-have diamond ring, or a big car. Well, perhaps not quite as attractive, but still pretty desirable.

What tasks need to be done?

Paid staff, existing volunteers, and management structures should all have a role in identifying tasks that need doing. This will ensure that the roles you offer volunteers are what your organisation really needs to be done. Ask colleagues the following questions:

- What activities and projects have you always wanted to do but have not had the time for?
- What would you like to see done that no-one has the skills for?
- What could be done to enhance the service we are offering?
- Are there specific tasks or projects that volunteers could take on?

Everyone in an organisation can feed in to the process of identifying volunteer tasks at all stages. This can be in the form of a ‘big ideas’ board which people can add to, or a suggestions box, or a file on the intranet. ‘Big Ideas’ isn’t just about volunteer roles, it’s about identifying strategies which can be about consolidating work done at present, improving standards, or taking on whole new projects. They all offer scope for volunteer involvement on a range of levels, from stuffing envelopes, to designing and implementing a marketing strategy, to delivering direct services to clients.

In identifying volunteer roles care should be taken not to make too many assumptions. Many of us find envelope stuffing hopelessly dull, for example, but for some it is a meditation, a relaxing process that is a change from a stressful, thought intensive job, or it is something that can be done on Saturday morning after a very late Friday night.

Task descriptions Having identified areas where volunteers could be involved it can be useful to take some time to develop task descriptions for each role. It might seem that written task descriptions are overly formal and bureaucratic and not suited to the flexible nature of volunteering, however they can allow you to work out what it is that a volunteer is needed to do and the skills that are needed to do it. They are also useful for volunteers to allow them to understand their role and responsibilities within the organisation and to see where the boundaries are. They can allow you to more accurately match the needs of your organisation with the needs and skills of the volunteer. When developing task descriptions consider including:-

The purpose of the role - do they know why the job needs doing? This might seem strange, but many volunteers, and sometimes staff in an organisation, have no real grasp of why they do what they do, beyond a vague impression that it supports the 'good work' of the organisation. Volunteers need to know in what ways they support the work of the organisation. For example: you have a volunteer who stuffs envelopes for you. Do they: - a) think they are helping the organisation achieve its objectives b) think they have to stuff envelopes to go to heaven c) think they are sending a nice newsletter to a long list of people d) understand that they are sending a newsletter to the community supported by the organisation, and that this small contact is just enough to reduce people's sense of isolation, making a real impact on their lives. Which of these understandings is going to motivate volunteers the most?

Suggested activities – break down the role into all the possible activities that may be involved. For example, a task description for a volunteer kitchen assistant might include: to serve customers, to clear tables, to take payment from customers, to work with other staff to maintain a clean working environment etc. Listing all the activities involved in the volunteer role will help both volunteers and other paid staff understand exactly what is, and what is not, expected of them.

Required skills, knowledge and experience – think about what a volunteer will need to know and be able to do in order to fulfill the role. If you need someone with specific skills, knowledge or experience, such as IT skills or previous experience of working with the client group, it is important to be clear about this as it will avoid wasting a potential volunteer's time if they do not have these. However, if the skills you are looking for are more to do with someone's personal qualities, such as able to get on with people, patience, a non-judgmental attitude, it is equally important to list these on a task description. If you don't include these some potential volunteers may feel that they are not adequately qualified for the role and may not bother getting in touch, but if you state that what you are looking for is actually someone just like them this may encourage them to make contact with you.

Where and when – state where the volunteering takes place and the expected time committed that is involved.

Support and training – it can be useful to briefly describe the support that will be provided to volunteers and give details of any training that is required or offered. This can help to reassure volunteers that they are not going to be thrown in at the deep end and expected to know everything straight away. You should also state what expenses will be paid to volunteers as this can help remove a potential barrier to someone being able to volunteer with you.

Any other requirements – give details of anything else that volunteers should know about the role, for example that they would need to be able to use their own transport.

Developing written task descriptions can have a number of benefits for both your organisation and volunteers. Firstly, by breaking down the role into the elements outlined above can help you to determine if you have the resources that will be needed to support and train volunteers appropriately. It can also help you to see whether the role you have developed is actually realistic as a volunteer role. Once you have your task description, look at it objectively and consider if you are asking too much of the volunteer. If this happens then review the task

description and see whether it could be broken down into a number of smaller roles that could be fulfilled by several volunteers.

Task descriptions can also be a useful tool for the recruitment of volunteers. Advertising a specific role can make it easier for people to see themselves doing it and a task description will help potential volunteers decide whether or not the role is right for them. If a volunteer is clear from the start about what they are going to be doing and what is expected from them you are more likely to keep them. For existing volunteers, task descriptions can be helpful in clarifying the boundaries and responsibilities of their role. For example, if a volunteer feels that they are being asked to do too much, revisiting their task description will help you and them to see if this is the case and may help to determine whether there is a need for more volunteers or if the role has changed and the task description needs reworking.

As with many areas of volunteer management it is important to maintain flexibility when developing volunteer roles and task descriptions. Just because someone cannot manage all the elements of a volunteer role does not necessarily mean that they wouldn't make an excellent volunteer. However, taking the time to carefully consider volunteer roles and develop task descriptions is an important part of volunteer involvement that will help to provide clarity about the expectations and responsibilities of both volunteers and the organisation.

In order to assist organisations with the formulation of volunteer task descriptions the following template is an excellent starting point:

Task description template



The project	Complete a description of the project the volunteer will be working on, making clear the contribution they will make
The role	State the title and purpose of the role
Skills/Experience/Knowledge/ Attributes	List those desired

Tasks	List the tasks to be undertaken
Contribution of time	Identify how long the role would be for and the contribution of time desired
Commencement	Insert when the role will start
Location of volunteering	State all the location(s) that the volunteer would be expected to operate from

Support and Supervision	Complete how this will be undertaken
Induction and training	State details of any induction and training requirements
Expense payments	List those suitable for the particular role

Further information

Advice, information and support on all aspects of volunteer management can be obtained from:

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