



Volunteer Engagement: Recruiting and Retaining Volunteers

Volunteers are essential for almost every not-for-profit organization, NGO, and community support association including most educational institutions. The volunteer is someone who cares enough to devote personal time and often money to advance your organization's mission. Volunteers are often the best candidates to perform important tasks, spread the word about your mission, and connect your organization with the larger body of people you want to reach even if you have an unlimited budget. A good and committed volunteer will enthusiastically and capably take on work that you cannot afford to pay anyone else to do.

Volunteers expand the capacity of professional staff and the organization to fulfill its mission. They can be your best ambassadors, telling others about your organization and encouraging additional support of all kinds. They know people you don't know. They also provide insight about the preferences and evolving culture of the larger community. A university uses its volunteers to do some very different things than does a social service organization. Identify the right opportunities for volunteers in your organization and welcome them into participating in your important work.

Why would someone volunteer to support your organization with time and energy? Volunteers have to understand and care about your mission. A person will volunteer when passionate about what your organization stands for and does. While they may receive social benefits, volunteers help because they believe that the organization and the work they do for the organization are important and meaningful.

Recruiting volunteers: Recruiting volunteers requires thought, planning and coordination. Volunteers need to know what is expected of them: what they will do, how much time it will take and what impact their efforts will have. Organized volunteers are happy volunteers. Some volunteers will prefer to take on certain types of responsibilities and may be uncomfortable if asked to perform others.

- Recruit volunteers enthusiastically. Be prepared to tell potential volunteers how much they will enjoy participating with your wonderful organization, what they will help accomplish and why they will find it meaningful. Encourage volunteers to share their passion and recruit their friends.
- Know what you need them to do. When people ask, you should be able to tell them what is needed and what the responsibilities will be – will they be advising on an existing effort or creating a new one? Will they be asked to work on social media or to write articles? Organize the activity so volunteers are not wasting their time.
- Anticipate who is likely to offer to help. Students? Retired people? Families? Do your best to match individuals and their preferred tasks so as to keep them engaged and happy. For example, a terrific event organizer might be a poor fundraiser.

Managing volunteers: Volunteers are there because they want to be, and generally they will stay as long as the work and the environment are satisfying. And some volunteers will leave the organization no matter what you do. That is why any organization that uses volunteers needs to allocate significant professional time to managing volunteers. In a purely volunteer organization, the (volunteer) leadership needs to manage recruitment and cultivation of new volunteers and new leadership. Good volunteer management can facilitate effective long term engagement and reduce the number of volunteers who lose interest and then leave.

- Plan professional time to oversee volunteer activity. Volunteers need to be engaged with the professionals in the organization and feel that they are an integral part of the organization's work. Also, the organization should arrange for volunteers to socialize with each other. Making new friends reinforces their loyalty.
- Manage them to do what is asked. This is similar to managing an employee. A volunteer role is a responsibility like a job. Be sure to give them tasks they can do well and find rewarding.
- Watch for potential leaders. If you are looking for volunteer leaders, be prepared to ask individuals who show competence to take on a larger role with more responsibility.
- Thank them. Then thank them again. And again. About 25% of volunteer management is thanking people. Volunteers who work at a distance or only part time are easy to take for granted. Acknowledging them repeatedly works wonders in keeping them engaged.