

Thirty ways to find great volunteers, and keep them

In order to find great volunteers, we need to first understand why people choose to give their time for free.

A lot has been written over the years about wanting to ‘make a difference’, ‘give back to society’ or ‘learn new skills’ – all very laudable concepts, but also very broad and woolly. For voluntary and community organisations to even start to target their meagre resources, we need something far more specific.

But before looking further into the ‘whys’, let’s first look at what volunteering actually is!

The [National Council for Voluntary Organisations \(NCVO\) defines volunteering as](#): “Any activity that involves spending unpaid time doing something that aims to benefit the environment or someone (individuals or groups) other than, or in addition to, close relatives. Central to this definition is the fact that volunteering must be a choice freely made by each individual.”

So, what would motivate a person to make such a choice? Well, according to Volunteer Power, [most people generally respond to three levels of motivation](#):

- The Basic Level is the **Self-serving drive**. This requires that the potential volunteer personally gets something out of it.
- The Secondary Level is the **Relational drive**. Many people join an organization as volunteers because they were recruited by a friend.
- The Highest Level is the **Belief drive**, whereby true believers are already passionate about the cause.

What’s in it for them?

So, if we assume that the latter two levels require some recruitment but not a lot, it makes a lot of common sense for organisations in need of volunteers to focus their recruitment efforts towards the Basic Level of Motivation.

But how can we do that? How can we motivate volunteers to take that first step towards applying for our own opportunities if their passion level for our cause is nowhere near fever pitch and they’re not being chivvied to our doors by friends or family members? As Volunteer Power put it, [“what are the external stimuli we can use to arouse that inner motivation?”](#)

Easy! We need to **let them know what’s in it for them**, and that process needs to start long before we even get to meet any prospective volunteers:

1: Be specific when writing your role descriptions

Rather than just making a generic ‘volunteers needed’ appeal, offer a variety of roles – some more or less challenging than others. Prospective volunteers are far less likely to apply for a role if the description is so vague they don’t know what they’re letting themselves in for.

2: Don’t fudge the requirements

If the role requires specific skills, or strengths, or even simply a certain level of fortitude and this is not made clear in the role description, the confidence of any new volunteer is sure to be shattered if they turn up on their first day only to discover that their given tasks demand

a degree level knowledge of IT they don't have, that they'll be expected to clean up unsavoury messes, or that they'll need to be able to perform tasks that are far more physically demanding than they anticipated. Be honest right from the start. If you find just one perfect volunteer who revels in taking on such challenges, that would be far better than losing several disgruntled volunteers.

3: Keep the time that's required as flexible as possible

These days, everyone seems to feel as if there simply aren't enough hours in the day, and that applies to volunteers too; it's not many who'd be sitting idly at home twiddling their thumbs if not for the time they give to your cause. So if you can build time flexibility into your volunteering opportunities, your volunteers will feel comfortable with their commitment and are more likely to enjoy, and continue, their volunteering experience. Obviously, this isn't for organisations for which certain duties can only be done at certain times of the day or activities needing to be manned to a given level at specific times. But if you can offer at least some flexibility you could attract a host of would-be volunteers from often under-tapped target groups like full-time workers, students or disabled people.

4: Make clear the physical, emotional or psychological benefits to be had from the work

Volunteering is good for your health – [it's a proven fact](#). Studies have shown that volunteering not only helps people feel more socially connected, thus warding off loneliness and depression, but can also improve physical health by lowering blood pressure and increasing lifespan. What's not to love about that? So make sure you capitalise on this in your role descriptions by referring to the feel-good aspect of volunteering.

5: Emphasise the skills a volunteer can develop

Volunteering is also a well-recognised route to employment, so when writing your role descriptions, remember, it's not only the hard, industry- or sector-related skills that volunteers have the opportunity to learn. There are many soft skills to be developed through volunteering that are also highly desirable to employers: the ability to work as part of a team, leadership, problem solving and adaptability, communicating with clients and stakeholders, the ability to plan and prioritise work, time management, report writing and improved interpersonal skills to name just a few. So do expand on how the experience will equip a volunteer in future employment. Be sure to list all the skills that apply so you don't miss out on any ultra-keen would-be volunteers who create an inventory of their existing skills, look at what's missing and then seek out a volunteering role that will help plug the gaps.

6: Highlight how important a volunteer's key transferable skills are to your organisation

For some people, volunteering is more about being able to exercise their existing skills to help an organisation rather than learning new skills, so they search for opportunities on the basis of the skills they already possess. Let them know just how vital those skills are to you and how you can use them in the work of your organisation.

7: Show how their volunteering will help the local community or society as a whole

It's important that a volunteer is able to see the big picture – to know exactly how their contribution makes a difference – so explain how the role you're advertising will link to your organisation's strategic aims and contribute towards achieving the overall mission, thereby making the local community, wider society, or even the whole world a much better place.

8: Emphasise the social aspect of the volunteering experience

Volunteering is a great way to combat loneliness while also making a difference in the world, and the opportunity to meet new people and make new friends is a common motivating

factor for many potential volunteers. Make sure your role descriptions let interested people know they'll become a valued part of a team of individuals who care about the same social issues that have doubtless caught their own eye. Just like your volunteers-to-be, they want to make the world a better place – and that's a great place to start a friendship

9: Offer to cover costs (i.e. travel expenses)

The reimbursement of out of pocket expenses is a vital motivating factor. No volunteer should be out of pocket for volunteering and by ensuring – and stating in your role description – that reimbursement of expenses is available, an organisation will encourage more people to consider volunteering with them. This will help to recruit a volunteer team that is diverse and reflective of the community in which an organisation or group operates. Non-payment of expenses can be a significant barrier both to people on low incomes and to individuals who are happy to give their time for free but don't believe it should impact on them financially.

10: Emphasise opportunities to escape

While many people want to make a difference in their own local community or simply don't want to have to travel far to volunteer, others yearn for something more exotic, far removed from their usual humdrum life, and if you can offer opportunities that appeal to these itchy-footed, intrepid adventurers you can tap into a rich seam of volunteering willingness. The danger of course is that they'll soon spot an adventure even more alluring and be off again.

Make your new recruits feel welcome and valued

Okay, so you've created and advertised some juicy volunteer opportunities and you now have some keen new recruits. From their very first day you need to **make them feel welcome and valued**. It may well have taken some courage to get to your front door, so how well day's one, two and three go will have a lasting impact on a volunteer's long-term commitment.

11: Always think of the volunteers' perspective

Think about how a volunteer must feel as they walk into a strange new situation full of people they don't yet know, with no idea what to do, where to hang their coat or even where the toilet is. Welcome them with a smile as you would hope to be welcomed yourself in that position. Give them a tour and show them where everything is so they can get their bearings.

12: Provide a thorough induction process

Inductions are not just for paid workers. Explain the history, ethos and structure of the organisation, set some 'ground rules' and discuss the big picture so volunteers can get a feel of how their role will contribute to the overall work. Other issues such as policies and procedures, health and safety, data protection and safeguarding should also be part of this process.

13: Introduce the team

Take the volunteer round to meet each member of the team individually to help them feel part of things. It's important to allow a little bit of time for a chat with each one so the volunteer isn't just presented with a sea of faces they're never going to be able to connect with a name as soon as their first shift has ended. If they can get to know a little about each person's role they can start to make a mental map of how every aspect of your organisation fits together, and it will help if you can include in the induction a document that explains the team structure with photos of each member.

14: Appoint a mentor/point of contact

Ensure each volunteer knows who they can go to with any concerns in an informal way so that little molehill issues don't have the opportunity to turn into huge unconquerable mountains. Volunteers also need to have regular catch-ups with the volunteer manager/co-ordinator for mutual feedback.

15: Make clear your expectations

From the very first day, make sure that your volunteers are clear about the standards expected and what you're looking to achieve. That way everyone will benefit from the experience. Failing to do so is simply setting volunteers up to fail and is sure to knock their confidence.

16: Provide opportunities for new volunteers to shadow old hands

During their first couple of shifts, new volunteers may find it easiest to learn about their new role and the culture of the organisation by shadowing a current volunteer, and it can also help to ease new recruits in as part of the team.

17: Offer training opportunities

Not only will ongoing training help a volunteer in their current role, it's a good idea to also include volunteers in any training opportunities that will allow them to gain additional skills that they can add to their CV – even better if the training allows them to gain an accredited qualification as a reward for their contribution to your cause. And it's not just those with employment as their goal who will appreciate the opportunity to learn; anyone who has taken that step into volunteering is likely to have a healthy curiosity and willingness to try new things.

18: Ensure they have access to the resources they need

If you don't have a computer available for a new office volunteer, or your volunteer gardeners don't have enough tools to go around, then you're not going to maintain their enthusiasm for long. Even with limited funds, there are ways for organisations to find the equipment needed for the roles you have created, but this needs to happen before recruitment. So why not make an appeal for community donations of equipment or submit a funding application.

19: Let your volunteers know exactly how they are making a difference

Share success stories. Keep volunteers up-to-date on progress toward your organisation's goals. Let them see your work in action through tours, presentations about project achievements, and by inviting them to provide suggestions about how your work can be done even better.

20: Thank your volunteers

Be around when the volunteer's shift is over to thank them for their work. Have a chat about how they've found it and give some feedback. If there have been issues, remind the volunteer that she or he is still in training and that improvement will come with practice. Confirm the next time they'll be coming in and tell them how lovely it is to have a new member on the team. Such courtesies are not just for show; they are part of the process of making the volunteer want to return again and again.

Express your gratitude

This last point may seem like a no-brainer but sometimes, however much the intention is there to express your thanks when the volunteer is actually present, workloads can have a habit of getting in the way. This means the volunteer may have reached the end of their shift and gone home feeling very unappreciated and underwhelmed by their experience, simply because no-one found the time to tell them just how much their help has been appreciated. So if you really can't be around at the end of their shift, particularly for the first few, then you really do need to find a multitude of other ways of **expressing your gratitude**. Here are a few suggestions:

21: Remember Christmas and birthdays

Post a hand written card or drop your volunteer a little note at Christmastime or when it's their birthday. We're all so wrapped up in the electronic age of e-mails and texting and social media that nowadays a hand written letter, note or card on special occasions is far more personal. And don't forget to put a real stamp on it – nothing will spoil the effect of your handwritten note more than franked postage on the envelope.

22: Send handwritten notes of appreciation

Don't just wait for birthdays and Christmas. Handwritten notes sent through the mail at any time have become rare, so when they do arrive they're noticed and appreciated. You might want to send one after a volunteer has done something especially nice or completed a specific piece of work, but anytime is good. Keep a pack of really nice notelets or thank you cards handy or have some postcards printed with your logo and your most iconic photos on them. Have several versions of the postcard made up so that you won't be sending the same ones over and over to the same people, and make them large enough that you can write a reasonable message, and so they'll stand out when arriving in the mail.

23: Send a letter of thanks and recognition to the volunteer's employer

If you have people who are being supported to volunteer by their employer, this is an excellent way to say thank you, especially when some of the donated time has been during regular business hours. It also speaks volumes to the employer about the volunteer's integrity and work ethic.

24: Recognize milestones

Celebrate the longevity of a volunteers' support. Having long-serving volunteers gives an organisation a reliable base of people they can rely on, so let them know how essential their work is by highlighting organisational achievements during your time together and applaud your volunteers' milestones with a personalized email, social media post postcard or phone call.

24: Capture the moment

Take photos of volunteers 'on the job', imprint them with a 'thank you' message and frame them – then give them to each volunteer. If you have a notice board inside your reception, consider turning it into a volunteer appreciation board and add photographs of your volunteers in action.

25: Create a scrapbook

Have staff and clients write comments and quotes about the difference volunteers make and organise them in a scrapbook, have them printed in a booklet and mailed out, or share them at a recognition event. Include photos and brief descriptions of the projects they relate to and the volunteers involved.

26: Host a "Volunteer Appreciation Event"

This could be a coffee morning, a lunch, dinner, barbecue or even a picnic that features testimonials to the volunteers from recipients of services. Make it an awards ceremony within your organisation and provide certificates of appreciation to your volunteers, or present them with coins that add up to the amount of hours contributed placed in a container and tied with a ribbon. [Volunteers' Week](#) is a wonderful opportunity to host this kind of event.

27: Nominate your volunteers for national recognition awards

The [Beacon Awards](#) or [National Citizen Awards](#) are examples of national recognition awards for the work of volunteers. Keep informed of what is going on and how to make nominations so you don't miss the opportunity to celebrate your volunteers.

28: Give your volunteers appropriate job titles

Don't just use the label "Volunteer". Each volunteer should have a defined role within your organisation. Acknowledging this in a specific role title which reflects the work they do helps to make your volunteers feel a valued part of the team.

29: Allow volunteers to take on more challenging responsibilities

Enable volunteers to 'grow' on the job. Let them put their names to, and take credit for, something they have helped to produce or to make happen and provide progression routes to more advanced work. Ask for volunteer participation in planning that affects their work and encourage them to sit on committees and attend meetings

30: All of the above, and more

Don't rest on your laurels. Continue to create opportunities to thank your volunteers in as many different ways as you can. After all, where on earth would you be without them?

Whether you are an organisation already working with volunteers or are just setting up your volunteer programme, Northumberland CVA can offer support and advice on recruiting and supporting your volunteers.

Our website contains a collection of useful factsheets and other resources that cover every aspect of involving volunteers: www.northumberlandcva.org.uk/resources.

Our Volunteer Connect database provides vastly improved search options for prospective volunteers and allows volunteer involving organisations to manage their own online profile, to add, update or remove their own opportunity details directly on-line and be alerted to suitable volunteer matches. For more information about Volunteer Connect or to register and advertise your opportunities, please visit www.northumberlandcva.org.uk/volunteering/organisations, ring us on 01670 858688 or email volunteering@northumberlandcva.org.uk.

If you'd like to find out about the support Northumberland CVA can offer to organisations that involve volunteers, contact Michelle Cadby, our Development Officer for Volunteering: michelle.cadby@northumberlandcva.org.uk.

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