

NORTH OF TYNE VOLUNTEERING AREA OF EXCELLENCE

RETAINING YOUR VOLUNTEERS

The recruitment, selection, training and induction of volunteers can be an extremely time-consuming task. It is therefore a good idea to ensure that you do all you can to keep volunteers engaged.

ALIGNMENT WITH THE HEALTH CHECK FOR VOLUNTEER-INVOLVING ORGANISATIONS

The Health Check for Volunteer-Involving Organisations considers the extent to which you have a framework in place to provide support/feedback sessions for your volunteers.

INTRODUCTION

Volunteer managers often end up on a recruitment treadmill, constantly looking for more volunteers and better ways to recruit. Sometimes the other end of the process the fact that volunteers are leaving can be overlooked. But it makes sense to look at keeping volunteers for longer. Its not just the need for more recruitment, think of the effort that has gone into inducting and training each volunteer, and the experience they are taking with them when they go. The nature of volunteering means that volunteers are free to come and go. They're not tied to you by a wage and the need to pay off a mortgage. This means thinking more creatively than you might if you were managing paid staff. There aren't any magic solutions, but there are some steps you can take to make volunteering with you a valuable enough experience to stick around.

CREATING REWARDING VOLUNTEER ROLES

Thinking about retention starts even before volunteers are recruited. It pays off later if you put a lot of thought into the design of rewarding volunteer roles. To put it plainly, very few people are going to stay long in volunteer roles where the tasks are boring or lack a challenge or a chance to develop. It is hard to complain about a high turnover of volunteers if all they are doing is stuffing envelopes and an occasional bit of photocopying.

Obviously not everything a volunteer will be doing is going to be fun, but when drawing up a volunteer role description, look at the tasks you are pulling together. What is there in the role that would attract and keep volunteers? A chance to learn new skills? Meet new people? And what does the role have to offer a volunteer in the medium to long term?

Task descriptions should not be seen as being set in stone. If possible, they should be flexible enough to allow for some adaptation to suit individual volunteers. If a volunteer has some say over the role they are coming into, there is more chance that they are going to be happy in the role.

Role descriptions should also be open for negotiation further down the line. Once volunteers are settled within the role, they may be looking for new challenges, or find they really hate a task they thought they'd enjoy. Clearly though there are limits to flexibility. Your organisation has its own needs that need to be met.

MOTIVATION

Whilst looking at the reasons why people volunteer is extremely helpful when recruiting, motivation is equally important when thinking about volunteer retention. Volunteering is a two-way relationship. Volunteers may not be paid, but there is always something that they are seeking from the experience.



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This is the hook that gets them into volunteering in the first place.

Such motivations can include:

- To learn new skills
- To use existing or old skills
- To address a specific problem in the community
- To have fun
- To gain work experience
- To feel useful
- To make friends

It helps a lot to be aware of a volunteer's particular motivation. It is one of the things to ask during an informal recruitment interview. If someone comes into the organisation because they want to feel ownership of a piece of work and end up doing bits and pieces of everything, they are not going to be too happy.

Motivations can change, which makes communication with volunteers very important. Someone may have started volunteering because they wanted to get out of the house for a couple of afternoons a week, but later the motivation might be the opportunity to develop within the role. Talking to volunteers, both informally and as part of supervision meetings again allows you to keep an eye on their motivations and, if possible, shape their role to continue meeting their needs.

Proper supervision also helps you to be aware of how volunteers are feeling in general. Problems with their role or with their colleagues may be making them unhappy. Or they may need to change their level of commitment to meet other needs. The earlier you know about such problems the easier it is to find an acceptable solution to them.

RECOGNITION AND REWARD

Volunteers should feel that they are an important part of the organisation. They should be involved in decision making, and their achievements should be recognised. There are many ways of making volunteers feel involved, welcome or recognised. Different people value different forms of recognition, so here are some suggestions for both formal and informal ways of showing how much you value volunteers. Feel free to invent your own!

Formal

- Volunteer events - a thank you event, as part of volunteer's week, for example.
- Certificates - a once a year thank you, or after a fixed term
- Accreditation - NVQs etc
- Involvement of volunteers in staff meetings



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- Involvement of volunteers on to working groups etc. (Again, if there are internal issues affecting volunteers, they should be involved in the process.)

Informal

- Saying thank you
- Making sure they have enough to do every day.
- Inclusion in social events
- Going out for lunch, to the pub etc.
- Consulting volunteers on informal matters - where the new notice board should go.

Good practice

The better and more efficiently volunteers are treated, the better they feel about the organisation they are donating their time to. Key things to bear in mind are clarity and consistency. Volunteers should know where they stand. This means:

- An effective induction for volunteers with a clear role description
- Keeping volunteers advised of what they can expect and what your organisation expects
- Having a volunteer policy/volunteer agreement in place
- Having a named supervisor to go to with problems
- Clear problem-solving and complaints procedures
- Considering the use of a Volunteer Development Plan
- Taking equal opportunities and diversity seriously

Exit interviews

If you are worried about a high turnover of volunteers, one of the best ways of finding out if there is a specific problem is to talk to those volunteers who are leaving. This could be through a questionnaire or an informal chat (it is obviously better if it isn't an immediate supervisor doing this!). Even if you don't think there's a problem, exit interviews are a useful tool for monitoring your use of volunteers. People leaving the organisation are likely to be more candid than they might otherwise be.