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## Background

This article has drawn together some existing research to provide both good practice guidance and a discussion of the issues involved in the recruitment and retention of volunteers.

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## Main Findings

- Gain support for volunteering from throughout your organisation
- Identify useful and satisfying tasks for volunteers to carry out
- Think about why volunteers would want to do these tasks and who you are trying to recruit
- Target your volunteers using innovative advertising in addition to word of mouth
- Describe the role and its benefits to society and the volunteer in your recruitment message
- Good preparation, support and recognition will increase retention of volunteers
- Support should be tailored to the needs of individual volunteers
- Manage volunteers efficiently and be well-prepared but make the volunteer experience flexible

## Findings

### 1. The First Steps

Being prepared for your volunteers is the key to a successful volunteer programme. Before rushing out to recruit volunteers it is essential to start some discussions within your organisation to think about why your organisation wants to involve volunteers, what tasks it needs volunteers to carry out and how the volunteers will be supported. By including paid staff and any existing volunteers in these discussions you will ensure that everyone in the organisation has an input and understands volunteer involvement. If Board members and senior management are also involved you will be ensuring that volunteer involvement has commitment at a strategic level.

Once these discussions have taken place, forming them into a Volunteer Policy for your organisation will form the basis of your volunteer programme and will ensure a consistency of approach to volunteer involvement. There is no set template for a Volunteer Policy and its size and content will very much depend upon the type and size of your organisation. More information and advice on volunteer policies can be obtained from the National Centre for Volunteering publication *Get it Right From the Start* (2002).

The volunteer management literature agrees that being able to recruit volunteers successfully is dependent upon your organisation identifying appropriate tasks for potential volunteers to carry out (McCurley and Lynch, 1998; Volunteering England, n.d.). There is evidence that potential volunteers are attracted to the type of tasks or the nature of the role when being recruited to an organisation (McCurley and Lynch, 1998) and that designing these roles prior to the recruitment of volunteers is essential. By involving staff (or other volunteers) in the design of satisfying volunteer roles that genuinely need to be carried out, you are much more likely to attract and retain motivated volunteers who are appreciated by staff and Board members.

### 2. Recruitment

Every potential volunteer will have a motivation for wanting to give time to your organisation. Identifying these motivations will allow you to match the needs of the volunteer with those of the organisation. Some examples of the motivations that potential volunteers might have are:

- commitment to the organisation / cause – so it is important to emphasise how their contribution will make a difference
  - meeting people – volunteering can be a very sociable activity!
  - gaining skills – when recruiting stress the skills and experience that volunteers can gain
  - utilising existing skills – some people want to put their skills to a good cause
  - keeping active – more and more older people are volunteering
- (Volunteering England, n.d.)

The recruitment process can be carried out in two different ways depending on the type of volunteer role:

1. When volunteers are being recruited to carry out a role for which no specialist skills are needed or for one-off events. For these type of tasks the recruitment message should be spread as widely as possible - posters and local media are good methods to use. For a one-off event it might be

appropriate to think about recruiting an existing group of people, for example a local community group, to provide the people-power and who will also have a sense of ownership and purpose over the work and the end result.

2. This type of recruitment targets a specific type of person whose motivations would be met by carrying out the role or who has specific skills to carry out the role. It is important to think about who would want to do that particular role, what their motivations are, and where to find them. The recruitment needs to be specific about what the role entails.

In order to know how to recruit volunteers some knowledge of where potential volunteers would look for volunteering opportunities is essential. Volunteer Development Scotland research (2006) shows that 69% of existing volunteers became involved in volunteering through 'being asked to help'. In the same research a mixture of existing volunteers and non-volunteers were asked where they would go to find out more about volunteering and in this case the most popular sources of volunteering information were: the library; the internet; direct to an organisation; a Volunteer Centre, and; friends and family. These findings indicate that potential volunteers' perceptions of how they might get involved in volunteering differ from how they did actually become involved. Although word of mouth is an important recruitment method, and in fact propensity to volunteer correlates with friends and family being involved in volunteering (Danson, 2003), there is a danger that those who don't have access to these networks will be excluded from volunteering; "However, the socially excluded... are the least well informed about volunteering and the least networked into existing volunteers" (Danson, 2003).

Research carried out by the Institute for Volunteering Research (Gaskin, 2003) with volunteers and non-volunteers suggests that recruitment messages can be targeted to particular groups of people through advertising such as:

- innovative media that present a modern image for volunteering and emphasise the benefits to the volunteer;
- outreach, for example talks, roadshows, presence at public events;
- active promotion of websites, and;
- maximising word of mouth recruitment by encouraging current volunteers to act as ambassadors for volunteering.

Non-volunteers in particular often have little knowledge of the activities undertaken by volunteers or the number of hours they would be required to give to volunteering. Research has also found that potential volunteers want to know how their time can make a difference to others or the environment and what they themselves could gain from volunteering (Baird, 2005). When designing your recruitment message it is therefore important to describe the volunteer role and the amount of time it will involve; to link the role description to the need for that role, and; to link the message to the possible motivations of potential volunteers.

### 3. Retention

The literature often cites negative experiences within organisations, rather than personal factors, as reasons why people leave volunteering, for example: a lack of relevant training; poor supervision; uninteresting duties (Alexander, 2000); a feeling of being overburdened and undervalued (Locke, Ellis & Davis-Smith, 2003).

An induction into the organisation is key to making volunteers feel comfortable and confident to carry out their role and should include:

- Induction to the organisation – an introduction to the ethos and work of the organisation and what volunteers contribute to this.
- Social induction – an introduction to the staff and current volunteers of the organisation.
- Induction to the role – providing volunteers with the ability to carry out a specific task
- Induction to health and safety – making volunteers aware of any risks associated with the role.

When planning how to support volunteers, it is important to recognise that the needs and motivations of volunteers change over their time volunteering for an organisation. Beugen (1985) proposes that volunteers progress through a motivation life cycle.

The first stage is an exploratory stage when the new volunteers are still exploring the possibilities of being a volunteer, trying out their role and, if all goes well, making a commitment to the organisation. At this stage it is important to give assurance to the volunteer, exploring expectations, any uncertainties they may have and their level of need for information.

In the second stage volunteers are developing themselves and their role by analysing what they are doing and improving on their performance. Although the volunteer will need less intensive support at this stage it is still important to maintain contact with, and encourage, the volunteer. Volunteers may need to develop further during Stage Two of their life cycle and it is therefore important to provide them with on-going training; this not only equips volunteers with skills, it contributes to high retention by encouraging a sense of commitment to the organisation. As volunteers start to mature in this stage it is an ideal time to involve them in decision making; volunteers who are consulted and informed will be more convinced protagonists for the organisation. It is also important to recognise volunteers' achievements and to acknowledge the value of their participation. Recognition can be formal (for example certificates, long service badges) or informal (birthday cards, coffee and cakes). Different volunteers will appreciate different types of recognition, so volunteers should be matched with different types.

The final stage is one of maturity where the volunteer is ready to share their skills and knowledge and to support and lead other volunteers. It is important to draw on the qualities and skills the volunteer can now give because otherwise they will begin to lose interest and motivation. The volunteer may also want their role to be expanded or may be ready to move into a new role altogether, particularly in leading other volunteers. It is also important to recognise that total retention isn't necessarily a good thing - having gained new skills and interests volunteers may be ready to move on to another organisation.

Most importantly, retaining volunteers is largely a matter of making them feel valued and important. McCurley and Lynch (1998) maintain that people with a high sense of self-esteem enjoy a sense of connectedness, a sense of uniqueness and a sense of effectiveness and managing volunteers must be about creating an environment where volunteers can experience these.

#### **4. Professionalisation of volunteer management**

The recruitment and retention procedures advocated by much of the volunteer management literature can appear over-formal and similar to the personnel practices for paid staff. In fact there is much debate about the introduction of a more structured and professional approach to volunteer management which has taken

place largely as a result of the 'contract culture' and the need to apply for external funding (Holmes, 2004). This model of volunteer management has clear advantages to both managers and volunteers in terms of a structured approach to training and support but research has found that volunteers often find this approach off-putting (Gaskin, 2003; Holmes, 2004). Volunteers, while wanting their voluntary work to be well-organised, also want a degree of flexibility and freedom. Research by Gay (2000) found that volunteer managers believed they could deliver a professional well-structured volunteer programme but protect the volunteers from this increased bureaucratisation by adopting a friendly and approachable style of management.

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