6 tips to help you recruit and maintain great volunteers

by Dan Prince
The Center for Nonprofit Communication at Drury University
danprince@drury.edu

Volunteers are the lifeblood of many nonprofits. Their passion and dedication strengthen organizations and help them survive on shoestring budgets.

Getting and keeping a corps of loyal volunteers requires hard work and planning.

Here are six tips to help your organization find and keep the best volunteers.

1. Provide clear job descriptions

People who are interested in volunteering for your group often don’t have a complete picture of your organization’s work. So one of the first tasks in bringing in new help is to be very clear about what you do, why you do it, and how you accomplish that work. A volunteer job description will help clarify the role for newcomers. It should explain how many hours volunteers are required to serve, what they do (and don’t do), and how and when they do it.

Other benefits of a well-written volunteer job description:
- It will help weed out those who don’t have the proper skills for the tasks or aren’t willing to make the time commitment.
- It will provide a clear path for success. People on both sides — staff and volunteers — will have a mutual understanding of what success looks like. Without this clarification, neither side can be sure if the job is done well.
- It will demonstrate to the volunteer a level of professionalism and expectation. A clear job description tells volunteers that their work is important enough that it warrants a written policy.

2. Offer a variety of opportunities

Some nonprofits use volunteers as their main source of program delivery. Groups like Big Brothers Big Sisters and CASA rely on volunteers to carry out their missions. These roles are highly rewarding, but can be highly demanding.

It’s important to create alternative opportunities for those who want to help your organization but don’t have the time or desire to do program work. Consider using volunteers in the office, greeting visitors or answering the phones. Find a place for retired folks who want to help, but have limited skills. They are great for assisting with large mailings or special events.

For people who want to volunteer but don’t have the time to come to your office or live far away, consider using virtual volunteers. Many tasks can be accomplished remotely, sending and receiving files through the Internet and using cloud storage. As an example, graphic design work and writing are both easily done remotely.

Providing opportunities for people of varying age and educational levels will result in a diverse support system for your organization.

3. Screen with care

Let’s be honest - not everyone is a good fit for your organization. That’s why it is crucial to conduct a face-to-face interview with every person who wants to be associated with your work – even if it just as a volunteer. People volunteer for various reasons. Most likely, they really believe in your organization’s mission. Others hope for new friendships and enjoy the social interaction with likeminded individuals. People are also interested in personal and career growth, and enjoy meaningful work that gives them new skills and knowledge.

People are frequently attracted to nonprofit work because of personal experiences. That’s not necessarily negative, but it must be carefully considered. As an example, if a victim of domestic violence wants to be a volunteer at the local shelter for women, it will be important to find out if she has any unresolved issues from her experience that might hinder her ability to help other women. The same goes for a person who had been abused as a child, and now wants to work inside the social service system.

Their experiences could make them strong, effective volunteers. But if they are still struggling with emotional and psychological trauma from that event, they may not be ready to help others.

4. Check their background

This one is simple — do background checks with law enforcement on all volunteers, especially those that come in contact with children or vulnerable population groups. The checks can be time-consuming and costly, but are a small price to pay to protect your organization if a volunteer does something illegal or harmful.

Ask for personal references and follow up on each one.

5. Train and train some more

All volunteers, especially new ones, need a lot of training. Start new volunteers on the right foot by requiring them to attend an orientation class. At this session, give each person a packet that has info on the organization (history, organizational chart, important policies, staff/board members’ names, etc.). Invite board members and other staff to attend the session to welcome the new volunteers.

Beyond the initial training course, volunteers need ongoing training to keep them updated on current trends and issues relating to their field. Many organizations require volunteers to complete a set amount of training hours each year in order to maintain their status.

6. Encourage and support

Volunteers need a designated support person to contact when they have questions or need help. Without this contact, they may feel a lack of support and become discouraged.

Finally, one of the best ways to keep volunteers engaged in the work is to provide them with proper recognition. Have socials where volunteers come together for fun and can talk about their volunteer experiences. Host an annual event with a nice meal and give each volunteer a small gift.

Thank them every chance you get – at meetings, at their workplace, on their birthdays, etc. Do it in person, with cards and letters, electronically, and in front of other people.

These six simple steps will go a long way in helping you recruit and retain volunteers. In turn, these wonderful people will strengthen your organization and help you succeed in accomplishing your important mission.