

Creating a fair and welcoming application process for Volunteers

The application process for volunteers will depend on your organisation and the work that volunteers undertake. However all organisations need to develop a system that suits their needs but does not put off potential volunteers or place barriers in peoples way. Many groups have just adapted application forms and interview techniques from the way that they recruit paid staff. However this is rarely appropriate and overly formal application processes discourages a lot of people who may well be interested in volunteering. The application process is about the volunteer deciding whether they like the organisation and the organisation deciding to take on the volunteer. An ideal application process will reflect both.

Initial Enquiries

Most potential volunteers will make initial contact via the phone so it is important that their enquiry is dealt with in a positive way. Whoever is answering the phone needs to know what to do and who to pass the call on to. If possible avoid asking people to call back, the chances are they wont, if no one is available it is better to take a contact number and get back to them.

Potential volunteers won't necessarily call within office hours so include instructions for people interested in volunteering in your answerphone message so that they know they have got through to the right place. If you say that you are going to call back make sure that you do.



Avoid asking potential volunteers too many questions over the phone. They will not be expecting to be interviewed so it is not really fair. Many people find communicating on the phone quite difficult. However you may want to check that they know about anything essential.

It is a good idea to have an information pack available to send to people interested in volunteering. The pack could contain information about the organisation, the volunteer role, practical information and training and maybe information from existing volunteers about what they get out of volunteering for your organisation. Avoid putting in formal policies it is better to deal with these in the volunteer's induction.

If you have the resources it can be helpful to invite potential volunteers to come and visit your organisation and talk to existing volunteers before deciding. Not everybody wants to but for some people an informal visit with no strings attached is a good first step. Remember that for many people who have never volunteered applying to an organisation is a nerve-wracking business and they do not know quite what to expect. Anything that you can do to put them at their ease will be much appreciated.

Application Forms

Most volunteer application forms are based on forms used for paid staff and many ask for more information than is needed or is appropriate. A logical first step when dealing with potential volunteers is to get them to fill out an application form. This is a good way of recording basic information like name, address etc. but in most cases it is not the best way of assessing a volunteers suitability for a role.

Most organisations find that it is possible to get the information they need when they meet the volunteer in person rather than getting them to fill out a form themselves. Remember that the overall aim of any fair selection process is to allow all potential volunteers to give the best of themselves, application forms do not allow everybody to do this. You may find that people are much more forthcoming about why they want to volunteer and their skills and experience when chatting to you than on paper.

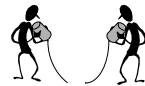
If you are going to use a form to take details be clear about what information you need and why. For example many organisations ask for a volunteer's date of birth when all they actually need to know is if someone is above or below a minimum or maximum age.

Information you need for equal opportunities monitoring purposes should be asked on a separate form kept separately from other personal details and the reasons for asking should be clearly stated.

Interviews

Any interview with a volunteer is a two way process, an opportunity for both parties to find out more. In most instances it will differ from interviews for paid posts in that you will not be selecting from a number of people to fill one vacancy. This needs to be clear to potential volunteers. If it is clearly a selection process and not all volunteers will be taken on by the organisation, people should be made aware of this at the outset.

The word interview can be very off-putting, asking potential volunteers to come in to talk to you, or for a chat makes the process sound much friendlier. Remind them that this is their chance to interview you and find out if the organisation is right for them. Make sure that you have set aside enough time and are not going to be interrupted. Also make sure that you have everything that you will need for the interview including any forms, reports or policies that you may need to give the potential volunteer.



The interview can be structured and organised without being unnecessarily formal. The interview can be used to remind people of the purpose of the meeting, check that you have peoples personal details correctly recorded. You will need to tell the potential volunteer about your organisation and answer any of their questions so that they can decide if they are interested in

you. You will also need to ask the volunteer about themselves and what they have to offer so you can decide if you are interested in taking them on.

You may want to tell them about:



- The organisation and the role of volunteers
- The user group
- Training and support offered
- Your expectations of volunteers
- Time commitment (frequency and duration)
- Resources available to volunteers

You may want them to tell you:

- What they like about the idea of volunteering
- What they hope to gain from volunteering
- Relevant skills, interests and experience
- Understanding of relevant issues or user groups
- Time availability
- Resources they will need (induction loop, reimbursement of care costs, support from outside the organisation)
- Names of potential referees

If recording information from the interview it is important that you record only factual information and not opinion and that you assure the interviewee that what they say will remain confidential.

At the end of the discussion both you and the volunteer together should be in a position to agree whether you want to proceed further. If you are not certain that the volunteer has the skills or experience to carry out the role you will need to explain this, making it clear that your assessment is based on the requirements of the role description and person specification (do think carefully about whether the role description can be adapted if the volunteer has some of the necessary attributes). Occasionally you may feel that you want to talk to a colleague or trustee, or feel that it may be useful for the volunteer to meet an established volunteer before proceeding. A trial period may also be useful for both parties. This is perfectly reasonable but it is important to be open with potential volunteers about what you are suggesting and why.

At the end of the interview you should be in a position to:

- Check whether the volunteer has any further questions or information to give you
- Check that they have the necessary information to take away
- Agree what will happen next and when you expect to be in touch again

References

Obtaining references does give you, and your clients, added security. References can add to your picture of a volunteer, helping you to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and occasionally alerting you to serious problems. They also help to confirm the volunteer is who they say they are. However you should bear in mind that a lot of potential volunteers may not have been employed, or may have been out of employment for some time. In order to avoid creating barriers you will need to be flexible about who you will accept a reference from. As well as previous employers you could think about suggesting social workers, probation officers, religious ministers, tutors, people working in day centres etc. that the volunteer attends or anyone else that they have an official relationship with. Some organisations actually decide that they want at least one reference to be a personal reference from a friend because these are the people who know the volunteer best.

Bear in mind that if you have never had to provide a reference before it can be quite scary and seem very formal and off-putting. Explain why you take references, what you ask and what you do with them. Application forms that just ask for two referees and don't explain why or who would be suitable may well result in some people not taking their application any further.

Occasionally someone will want to volunteer for you who is completely unable to provide a reference (i.e. an asylum seeker who has not been in the country very long). You will need to make a balanced assessment of the risks involved and decide whether there is a safe way of involving them. You may be able to adapt some of your procedures. For example, involving them only in group activities for the first few months while you get to know them better. If you do this you will have to explain to the volunteer why they are being treated differently so that they do not feel singled out.