

# Guide for first time volunteers



For those new to skills-based volunteering find out what to expect and how to get started.

## What is a volunteer?

A volunteer is someone who chooses to give their time, skills and energy to benefit other people or for the common good, without being paid for it. Over 12 million people do some kind of volunteering every month and they do so in a huge variety of settings - from local community groups to national museums - and in a huge variety of ways - from being an extra pair of hands at an event to providing leadership to an organisation as a trustee.

## What is skills based volunteering?

Skills based volunteering is using your professional experience to the benefit of others. Also called 'high impact' or 'strategic' volunteering, it can make a big contribution to the work of a charity, and be very rewarding for the volunteer. The range of volunteering opportunities available is truly amazing, from mentoring senior staff to organising other volunteers, designing websites and dressing shop windows. If you have a professional skill to offer, there is a very good chance that a voluntary organisation out there somewhere could benefit from your time and expertise.

## Why volunteer your skills?

Skills based volunteering allows you to support a cause which appeals to you in a very tangible and personally satisfying manner. There can be few more rewarding pursuits than being involved in and advancing the work of something that you believe to be worthwhile. You can see, first-hand, the difference you are making, and the experience can be life enhancing. People who volunteer their skills say that they personally gain in many ways: learning more about an area of interest, meeting new people, embarking on new challenges, developing a fresh perspective or experiencing a new situation which takes them out of their comfort zone, feeling a sense of purpose, the satisfaction of using their skills and expertise to the positive benefit of others... a win /win situation in fact. At the very least you will develop existing skills by deploying them in a different context. It is also likely that you will discover new ones.

There are many different reasons to volunteer; choosing the right opportunity for you is key to ensuring that your personal motivation is satisfied.

## What kind of skills are needed?

Just about any and every professional skill from accounting and legal advice to marketing and personnel management to website design and beyond. Reach has placed qualified surveyors, ornithologists, art experts, psychologists, change managers... the list is as varied as it is long. So whatever your professional background and expertise, you are likely to have skills that are valuable to a voluntary organisation, even if they may need a little translation.

## What sort of difference do volunteers make?

Voluntary organisations often start life as little more than an idea and a desire to do something specific to help others or make something happen. Until they grow to sufficient size to justify employing paid staff, they will usually

have to rely on volunteers. Other longer established ones such as Samaritans remain volunteer-led even after the organisation has grown to a considerable size.

As smaller organisations expand, there are always roles which they cannot accommodate on the payroll but which would add enormous value to their development. It might be someone who designs and implements a performance review system, or a marketing plan, or a strategic review – or it might be just a few hours' help to untangle a new piece of software, undertake a piece of research, or develop a specific project to the point of being able to take it forward on their own. Such volunteer input can make the difference between an organisation being unable to make progress towards its goals, and the healthy achievement of its development plan.

Being a trustee is a great way to contribute to an organisation: you work as a team with the rest of the board to develop the strategic direction of the organisation and ensure its long term sustainability. It's a crucial role for the organisation, but also one which you can do even if you have a full time job. Plus it's great for professional development. We have an introduction to being a trustee and other resources in the Knowledge Centre section of our website.

## **The rights and responsibilities of volunteers**

Volunteering differs from paid employment in that no contract exists between the parties, but at the same time it is sensible to have an understanding of and agreement to the basic points of the relationship. It can be helpful to have this spelt at the outset in a written document to avoid misunderstandings down the line. You should be reimbursed for out-of-pocket expenses and enjoy the same welcome, facilities, induction, support and on the job training (if necessary) as salaried staff.

In exchange you should honour your part of the bargain in delivering the work you have agreed to undertake, to the expected standard. However, ultimately volunteering is a negotiated arrangement: the organisation should aim to shape the role to suit your particular skills, needs and interests, whilst ensuring that the role will still make a net contribution to the organisation.

## **How do I decide what volunteer role is right for me?**

In many ways choosing the right volunteer role is similar to choosing a paid job. Sympathy with the aims and objectives of the organisation is an important factor, as is having the right mix of skills and experience for the role and sufficient time available to do it properly. The size of the organisation and its culture are also key to your experience. For example, if you volunteer with a small organisation, you are likely to have limited resources at your disposal, but plenty of autonomy, and the reward of seeing the direct impact of your work.

It is helpful to keep an open mind about the kind of work you might do, and consider roles which might seem to fall outside your normal professional remit. For example, someone from a marketing background might be able to write persuasive funding proposals. The variety of roles available often comes as a surprise to many first-time volunteers.

There are also many personal and practical considerations to take into account. Importantly, will you find the work interesting? If you are not motivated by what you are being asked to do, the chances are that however inspired you are by the organisation, you will not find it an easy assignment. Must the job be office based, or could you do it from home? If working from home, do you have the necessary equipment? To whom should you refer with any concerns or queries you might have?

There is always room for discussion and negotiation so never assume that if the specification does not suit you in every detail it will not be possible to find a compromise. You should feel free to explore the role and contribute your own thoughts, while being sensitive to the organisation's needs and not pushing too hard for something that would work for you, but not for them. And while the organisation you are talking to may be prepared to compromise, think about ways in which you yourself might also be able to be flexible.

It is important to reality check any work that you are invited to undertake. If you feel you are being asked to make too heavy a commitment, then suggest that you might start by undertaking certain parts of the work depending on what skills or time you are able to offer. Many very successful volunteer assignments start small and as the volunteer and the organisation get to know each other, larger pieces of work can evolve. But volunteers should be wary of taking on more than they can handle out of enthusiasm for the cause or guilt that they might not be able to fulfil all aspects of the brief. The worst possible outcome for both sides is that having invested time and energy in getting a piece of work started, the volunteer then drops out.

## The Expert Volunteer

If you have a specialist skill that is currently needed by the organisation for which you volunteer, there are a number of important additional factors to consider. An example might be a Human Resources specialist who is asked to help a voluntary organisation design a performance review and reward scheme for their staff.

In these cases, it is quite possible that the volunteer will know more about their specialism than the organisation, and as a result he or she will be given a great deal of autonomy in developing their work. This can be immensely valuable but there are also potential pitfalls, so it is crucial that the volunteer checks regularly with the organisation to make sure that the direction they are taking is consistent with organisational objectives. It is also critical that when the work is completed, the organisation has the capability of managing it, implementing it and updating or upgrading it as and when necessary. As a volunteer it is very much in your own interests to make sure the product of all your time and effort is not left to gather dust on a shelf.

## Making the relationship work

Voluntary sector organisations have some distinguishing characteristics that people from the public or private sectors may find very different to their own experience of working environments. If you are accustomed to luxurious offices, unlimited free coffee and biscuits and personal secretarial support, you will certainly find the voluntary sector a very different kettle of fish!

It is important that you take time to understand the culture and the norms of the organisation with which you will be working, and not pre-judge it through the lens of your own experience. Just as the private sector is very heterogeneous, so too is the voluntary sector. Occasionally, it might appear that some organisations are so passionate about their beneficiaries that they are seemingly unconcerned about day to day management disciplines, and pay scant attention to bread-and-butter issues such as book-keeping or stock control. In such cases, professional volunteers can act as useful catalysts to facilitate the development of sensible management practice. But equally, volunteers must understand and remain sensitive to the values-led culture of their partners, and not seek to undermine or belittle it. For many years, there has been a move towards greater professionalism in the voluntary sector, by organisations both large and small. Note that size is not a reliable guide to the level of professionalism of an organisation.

Many voluntary sector organisations will have a defined mission and values which they use to inform their work and a new volunteer should take time to become familiar with these, and to understand what they mean in practice.

Above all, while skilled volunteers can bring a new perspective and fresh thoughts to an organisation, they are there to support it and not vice versa. Equally the organisation with which they are working should welcome their input, recognise their contribution and make full use of the additional benefits that skilled and well motivated volunteers can offer.

## **What support you can get and where to find it**

However good your research and however comprehensive your induction, there will always be things you need to know as your role progresses. So if your organisation does not nominate someone for you to contact to resolve such matters, ask for it. You should also know any deadlines or timescales that apply to your work, any limitations on what you can and cannot do, and if you are working from home, what to do about claiming out of pocket expenses etc.

## **What Reach can do for you**

Reach is a registered charity that has been connecting skilled volunteers with voluntary organisations for over 35 years.

We are the leading source of trustees and skilled volunteers for charities throughout the UK. With our new online service, we register hundreds of interesting volunteering opportunities and talented professionals every month. Prospective volunteers can search our database, subscribe to email digests of new opportunities, and create public profiles so that charities can find them.

You can find out more and sign up at our website [www.reachskills.org.uk](http://www.reachskills.org.uk)