

Involving Volunteers: the Principles

All volunteer programs benefit from a written design outlining how the program will run, what it will deliver and expectations of both the organisation and volunteers.

As a first step, make sure you can articulate the value volunteers will bring and their status within the organisation.

What is volunteering?

First, consider what we mean by volunteering. Consultation with volunteering stakeholders across Australia resulted in development of a broadly-accepted definition of volunteering in 1996.

“Volunteering is an activity which always takes place through a not for profit organisation or project and is:

- of benefit to the community and the volunteer
- undertaken of the volunteer's own free will and without coercion
- done for no financial gain
- in a position not designated as paid
- underpinned by the ‘Principles of Volunteering’”

Principles of volunteering

- Volunteering benefits the community and the volunteer
- Volunteering is always a matter of choice
- Volunteering is an activity that is unpaid and not undertaken for the receipt of salary, pension, government allowance or honorarium
- Volunteering is a legitimate way in which citizens can participate in the activities of their community
- Volunteering is a vehicle for individuals or groups to address human, environmental and social needs
- Volunteering is an activity performed in the not for profit sector only (Note: Although those in the business sector and corporate organisations now also engage in volunteering for the benefit of not for profit organisations and communities.)
- Volunteers do not replace paid workers nor constitute a threat to the job security of paid workers
- Volunteering respects the rights, dignity and culture of others
- Volunteering promotes human rights and equality.

Volunteer with rights

Volunteering practice is not regulated by law like paid employment. But the standards below are accepted as best practice in Australia.

According to these standards, a volunteer has the right to:

- information about the organisation you are volunteering with
- a clearly written job description
- know to whom you are accountable and to whom you should report
- be recognised for your contribution and as a valuable member of the team you are part of
- be supported and supervised in your role
- a safe and healthy workplace and be covered by insurance
- say ‘no’ if you are being exploited
- be reimbursed for any out-of-pocket expenses you incur
- be advised of all relevant organisational policies that affect you in your role as a volunteer
- be informed and consulted on all matters affecting your work
- be made aware of the organisation's grievance procedure
- access to orientation and training.

“We’ll just get volunteers to do it”

Given the definition of volunteering on page 1, what is your rationale for involving volunteers in your work?

If you are clear about why you want to engage volunteers, it will be much easier to **design your volunteer program** with the processes and shared expectations that will make it work.

Ask yourself:

- Are volunteers sought solely in order to save money on salary?
- Have paid workers within the organisation ever carried out the work?
- Do paid workers in other organisations carry out the work?
- Is the work covered by an industrial award or agreement?
- Is the suggested role or task unpopular with paid staff?
- Would the placement of volunteers in this role add value to the organisation?
- Would a volunteer offer a different relationship to the organisation’s customers than a person who is paid?
- Does the suggested volunteer role have intrinsic value and can it offer something to a volunteer?

Your answers to these questions will most likely highlight the kinds of things that only volunteers can do for your cause. These can include:

- personal attention in one-to-one relationships with clients
- the ‘humanisation’ of your organisation’s services
- an opportunity to tap into different generations, cultures or life experiences
- volunteers are not seen as having the same vested interests as paid staff
- closer contacts with the community in which your organisation provides its services
- new ideas, perspectives and input into the way the organisation and its services are run
- specialised skills and knowledge
- flexibility in the provision of services
- adding quality to the services you provide.

Volunteers with responsibilities

As with volunteer rights, the following is Australian best practice.

A volunteer’s responsibilities include:

- being reliable
- respecting privacy and confidentiality
- carrying out your volunteering job as specified in the job description
- being accountable for your own actions
- being committed to the project or organisation you are working for
- undertaking orientation and training as requested
- asking for support or assistance when you need it
- giving notice before you leave
- valuing and supporting other members of the team
- carrying out the work you’ve agreed to do responsibly and ethically.

More information

Way2Go Volunteering – a complete volunteer program management toolkit created by Albury Wodonga Volunteer Resource Bureau
www.vrb.org.au/training_way2go_toolkit.php

National Standards for Involving Volunteers in Not for Profit Organisations – a guide to best practice in managing volunteer programs by Volunteering Australia
www.volunteeringaustralia.org/html/s02_article/article_view.asp?id=3700&nav_cat_id=384&nav_top_id=61

Planning volunteer programs – on the Victorian Government Volunteering Portal
www.volunteer.vic.gov.au/resources-for-volunteer-organisations/best-practice-toolkit/manage-your-volunteers/planning-volunteer-programs

Volunteering Victoria is the state peak body for volunteering. We provide support to volunteers and not for profit organisations, and represent the interests of volunteering in Victoria.

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 Published February 2013.