

Managing Volunteers for Retention

Guide

Once you have recruited some volunteers, your next objective is to keep them coming back. You can do this through effective management of your volunteer program.

National Standards for Volunteer Involvement and Retention

To support the retention of Volunteers, follow the best practice framework developed in the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement.

Understand their roles and gain the knowledge, skills and feedback needed for volunteers to safely and effectively carry out their duties.

Consider each of the five points in Standard Five; Support and Development:

- Standard 5.1: Volunteers are provided with orientation relevant to their role and responsibility.
- Standard 5.2: Volunteers knowledge and skills are reviewed to identify support and development needs.
- Standard 5.3: Volunteers knowledge and skill needs relevant to their roles are identified, and training and development opportunities are provided to meet these needs.
- Standard 5.4: Volunteers are provided with supervision and support that enables them to undertake their roles and responsibilities.
- Standard 5.5: Changes to the involvement of a volunteer are undertaken fairly and consistently.

Support and supervision

Providing ongoing support to volunteers is crucial; your organisation must devote appropriate time and resources to do so.

The kind of support volunteers need will depend on:

- the nature of the role
- the conditions of the role
- their motivation for volunteering
- their personality and circumstances.

Who's the boss?

Consider these needs when determining who will allocate work and supervise a volunteer – the manager of volunteers, another staff member or another volunteer.

If the supervisor is to be someone other than the volunteer program manager, you will need to ensure they understand their responsibilities and any issues specific to working with volunteers. You should also create lines of reporting that will help you identify whether the needs of both the organisation and the volunteer are being met.

Performance management

Organisations should monitor how volunteers are performing in their role and provide them with regular feedback, both positive reinforcement and where improvements can be made. This means determining whether they are:

- working within program and practice guidelines.
- demonstrating any problems such as overconfidence or requiring an unrealistic level of supervision.
- working well with other staff, paid and unpaid.
- working well with customers, clients and other stakeholders.

Performance management is also about volunteers having their say. Do they feel adequately supported and supervised? Do they have any feedback on organisational issues? Are they happy?

Taking feedback seriously is one way you can recognise a volunteer's efforts.

A carefully planned approach to conflict management is essential in case performance issues do arise: see VV Guides – 'Dealing with Conflict' for further advice.

Recognition

All volunteers need recognition for the work they do. Some will need or desire more than others and each volunteer will have a preference for how they like to be recognised.

Here are some options to consider:

- Say 'thank you' regularly
- Share positive comments from clients, staff and others with your volunteers
- Give positive feedback based on your own observations
- Celebrate successes in your volunteer programs
- Write thank you notes to your volunteers
- Include items about volunteers in the organisation's newsletter or journal
- Ensure volunteer services are included in the organisation's annual report – their activities, impact and in-kind financial contribution
- Provide references if requested or act as a referee
- Issue certificates for length of service, special achievements, completion of training, etc.
- Organise a picnic, barbeque or other outing for your volunteers
- Publicise the work your volunteers do throughout the community
- Put forward your volunteers to receive awards offered in the local community
- Name something after a volunteer (a room, an award, etc).

Training

Responsible organisations ensure that their staff are properly trained. Volunteer programs are no different. As well as orientation and training before they commence, you should plan for a volunteer's ongoing training and development needs. Changes to the program or organisation, or new systems or equipment, may require volunteers to update their knowledge— either through formal training or via newsletters, posters or briefings.

The added bonus of training and development is the opportunity volunteers gain for personal growth and progression within the organisation—which may make or break their commitment to your program.

Being counted

Involving volunteers in decisions that affect them can allay discontent and head off conflict – it may also bring useful ideas to your table.

Decision-making processes will vary from place to place, so the involvement of volunteers needs to be considered in the context of your organisation as a whole. Think about how you can ensure that volunteer involvement is effective. The part-time nature of volunteering must also be considered, so that volunteers are not excluded from decision-making simply because, for example, they do not volunteer on the day meetings are held.

Parting ways

A volunteer's departure is a good opportunity to continue the ongoing evaluation of your program. Exit interviews allow you to capture a volunteer's experiences at the organisation—perhaps with greater honesty than while they are still employed. You may also wish to provide a statement of service that acknowledges the volunteer's commitment and achievements.

Dismissal

Occasionally volunteers are asked to leave an organisation, perhaps due to a dispute or problems with performance. A dismissal policy is essential to ensure that the process is fair and clear to all. See VV Guide 'Dealing with Conflict' for details of what to include in the policy. Remember, while such an experience can be painful for all parties, it is also an opportunity to critically assess what works and what doesn't in your program.

More information

<http://www.nfplaw.org.au/disputes>