

The voice of the Voluntary Arts

## Retain!

VAN / EXPERIENCE CORPS



**This briefing takes a look at how to retain the support of volunteers in the cultural sector and ways to strengthen your relationship with them. It is one of four briefings on volunteering to celebrate Volunteer's Week 2002.**

**Unlike most information on retaining volunteers, we will look at retention issues from the perspective of cultural volunteers and those involved in managing these voluntary cultural organisations. It will focus on how to build a positive relationship with volunteers and how to put in place policies and practises that ensure their contribution to your organisation's work is recognised.**

For most organisations, cultural volunteers can be easily translated as 'members', for example, members of a choir, orchestra, quilting group, drama group, etc. and those managing, on a voluntary basis, these activities. In this briefing we will use the term volunteer to mean cultural volunteer, member and participant as well as voluntary board member or managers supporting arts and crafts activity.

### **Retention is about relationships**

Volunteers have a relationship with you, the organisation. Like any relationship, this can be good and last for many years, or not so good and result in a break-up, friendly or otherwise. Thus, maintaining a positive relationship with your volunteers is essential for retaining their support. This relationship will be strengthened if you put measures in place to look after everyone. The way

you make sure they are getting the best from your services, the support you offer and how you set about identifying and meeting their needs is worth careful consideration.

**The ingredients for a successful relationship with your volunteers are:**

- **Keeping your promises.** Have the promises you made your volunteers when they joined your organisation been kept? Were any of these promises weak? What can you do to strengthen them?
- **Interest.** Do you know what motivates your volunteers? Are you actively seeking to address their motivations? Do you show an interest?
- **Personal contact.** Do you know who your volunteers are and what makes them special? Do you show them they matter to your organisation? Do you tailor your communication with them to take their personal interests and history into account?
- **Value.** Are you adding value to the relationship? Can you improve your service or find new ways of delivering your benefits to give your volunteers more than they expected?
- **Commitment.** Will you stick with them, even if they go cold on you? Do you invite those leaving your organisation to rejoin? Do you give them news of your events and activities? How long does it take for you to give up?

### **The business of retaining volunteers**

Keeping volunteers once you have found them goes beyond the 'goodies' of the initial promises you made them. It involves the way your organisation is run and how your volunteers are seen within the



organisation. There are many aspects in the running of your organisation that will impact on your volunteers. These include:

- vision and direction;
- training and accreditation;
- supervision and feedback;
- responsibility and progression;
- equal opportunities;
- health and safety;
- insurance.

## Vision and direction

Why does your organisation exist? Why does it involve volunteers? Perhaps it exists purely to create opportunities for volunteering in a particular art or craft form and so volunteers are at the very heart of its existence. Perhaps volunteers are only one source of energy and activity to achieve a certain outcome. Whatever role volunteers play, it is essential to recognise their part in achieving your overall aims. This is an issue for management to address and clarify and seeks to address the question 'why do we need volunteers in this organisation'? Being clear about the unique contribution they make helps create a positive culture within an organisation for volunteering, fosters good relations with volunteers and high levels of retention. When the role of volunteers is unclear, or marginal to the overall aims, volunteers will soon realise they are not fundamentally valued by the organisation and more often than not, leave.

### Consider:

- reviewing your mission statement and guiding principles. Are volunteers included? Do they have a role in achieving the aims of the organisation?
- examining the role of volunteers within your organisation. How can build their contribution into the work of the organisation? Who represents them? What mechanisms do you have for listening to them?
- increasing contact between board members and volunteers. Do they know what volunteers do? Do they have a means of listening to what they have to say? How much say do they have in the policies and decision making?

## Training and accreditation

One of the most basic motivations of all volunteers is to learn new skills or improve existing ones. Your organisation may already have a clear route for volunteers wanting to improve their skills through different levels of participation, different grades of membership or other ways of recognising different levels of ability. Linking improving skills with recognised qualifications gives an added incentive to participate with you. The easiest way of linking your work with volunteers to qualifications is through accreditation of experience. Accreditation is the formal recognition of the achievements of an individual and credits can be used towards qualifications or to obtain entry into selective courses and qualifications such as certificate, diploma or degree courses.

### Accreditation offers volunteers:

- motivation;
- increased skills;
- increased likelihood of gaining employment, if appropriate;
- personal development;
- organisational and public recognition of a volunteers' contribution;
- increased self-confidence and esteem.

For the accrediting organisation there are many benefits, not least increased retention of volunteers as well as a growing body of well documented expertise which can be useful in showing the value of your organisation at local, regional and national level.

Accreditation can be awarded internally, with your own system, or externally using external assessment criteria eg. NVQ's. To offer your volunteers NVQ's take good advice from a recognised authority and set aside the time and resources you need to offer an effective accreditation system. See resources for information on contacts.

As well as accrediting your volunteer's current skills, you might also offer occasional training in specific skills. This is especially important for recruiting and retaining board members who may lack certain skills necessary to carryout their duties effectively. This makes sense for your organisation in the long term because you know those running it have the necessary skills to do a good job.



Training may also be offered to volunteers carrying out special duties or activities. For example, those responsible for teams of volunteers at events may need basic management training and those responsible for managing crowds will need specific knowledge of health and safety procedures. Such specialist skills can often be found in-house, amongst existing volunteers. If so, consider 'training your trainers', to encourage the effective sharing of information in house. Training can be expensive, so to ensure you get the training to those who will benefit from it most you put a training needs assessment system in place.

**Consider:**

- developing an accreditation system for your organisation;
- setting aside some of your budget for developing and then marketing this system;
- setting aside some of your budget for training board members;
- setting aside some of your budget for training in other specific skills;
- developing a training needs assessment system for your volunteers.

## Supervision and feedback

Whenever you are working with volunteers, it is a good idea to establish a means of sharing information with them about their performance. As well as the obvious group feedback on arts performance ('that was great, now let's try again with a little more feeling!'), there are many other ways of indicating to volunteers how they are doing and where they can improve performance.

**Consider:**

- creating job descriptions for volunteer tasks and identifying someone to whom the volunteer is responsible (this may be another volunteer). How well the task is being done can then be discussed in supervision meetings. Don't forget to put supervision in the supervisors job description and to plan regular supervision for this person!);
- offering some form of mentoring by linking experienced volunteers with novices. They can give advice, suggest ways to improve and give important feedback on the volunteer's work or performance;
- Tutorials for those volunteers looking to improve specific skills. Group work gives volunteers chance to compare themselves with others, as well as learning new skills and techniques. This can of course be linked to accreditation.

## Responsibility and progression

Do you give your volunteers the opportunity to take on new responsibilities and progress within the organisation? Volunteers may have skills you did not know about when they first joined, and as you get to know them and they become more committed to your organisation finding ways to use these skills will help build continued loyalty. Others will see there are opportunities to develop other skills as well as those related to your art or craft form, and this will strengthen your relationships all round.

**Consider:**

- inviting more experienced volunteers to take on new roles within the organisation;
- invent new areas of responsibility to create more opportunities to work with your organisation in different ways;
- make sure the process of selecting board members is open and transparent. If it is a collection of friends, or representatives from a group with a particular point of view only, it will create apathy and a 'what's the point' attitude amongst volunteers who have new ideas about how things might be done.

## Equal opportunities

Equal opportunities affects all aspects of an organisation, not least volunteers. Make sure you have an equal opportunities policy that is grounded in the actual workings of your organisation. Treating everyone fairly and giving everyone due respect is fundamental to good volunteer relations and an essential activity for building loyalty. Volunteers want to know they belong in the organisation and discrimination is one sure fire way to destroy this sense of belonging and replace it with one of mistrust.

## Health and safety

Do not put your volunteers at risk. If you do you don't deserve their support! Health and safety touches us all and you must have policies and procedures in place to protect your volunteers, employees and members of the public who come into contact with you, from un-necessary harm. Be aware that legislation on Health and Safety is complex, but essentially you are required to examine your premises and your activities to identify risks and then take the steps necessary to



minimize them. If you don't have a health and safety policy you definitely need one. Ensure that the policy covers the activities of volunteers. There is a great deal written about health and safety, but a good place to start is the VAN briefing on the subject, written specifically for arts organisations. (*Briefing 61 – Just how safe are you? Health & Safety for voluntary arts organisations. Also available on the VAN website*)

## Insurances

Make sure your volunteers are covered adequately in your insurance policies. This is particularly important if they are ever involved in driving a vehicle on your behalf. You should check your insurances once a year, and if you are in any doubt about your level of cover or the insurance you need, take advice from your insurance broker. The most likely types of insurance you will need to consider include:

- employers' liability insurance, if you employ people;
- public liability insurance, if you involve the public, or others who are not employees. Make sure you confirm with your insurer that your public liability insurance covers volunteers, as without it your organisation could be held personally liable;
- motor vehicle insurance. Again, check who is covered in your policy and if you use volunteer drivers make sure they are covered when they are driving on your behalf.

(VAN has a general guidance pack 'advice on insurance. Also available on the VAN website).

## And finally

As an organisation the retention of your volunteers will depend on how well you manage yourself and your volunteers. The most precious resource for

most people today is time and volunteers are giving you theirs in exchange for many different and often intangible benefits. One thing they do share however, is wanting you to succeed. Good management and good volunteer practice are ways of demonstrating your own commitment to success. The suggestions in this briefing are part of putting in place principles of good practise relating to volunteers, ones that show you are serious about the value of their contribution to your organisation's success.

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## Resources

**VAN Briefing – Accreditation**  
**VAN Briefing – Health and safety**

**[www.volunteering.org.uk](http://www.volunteering.org.uk)**

National Centre for Volunteering. Up to the minute information on all aspects of volunteering, including plenty of good information on volunteering good practise.

**[www.ivr.org.uk](http://www.ivr.org.uk)**

Institute for Volunteering Research. Lots of information, including research reports to download.

**[www.volunteersweek.org.uk](http://www.volunteersweek.org.uk)**

Everything you need to know about volunteers week, what's happening, where and how you can take part. Includes a useful section on ideas, with files to download on recruitment issues amongst others.

**[www.serviceleader.org](http://www.serviceleader.org)**

**[www.avaintl.org/resources](http://www.avaintl.org/resources)**



First issued with Update 31

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The Voluntary Arts Network is registered in Scotland as Company No. 139147 and Charity No. SC 020345. VAN acknowledges funding from the Carnegie UK Trust, the Arts Councils of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the Esmée Fairbairn Trust and The Baring Foundation.