

The voice of the Voluntary Arts

Fostering a long-term relationship with occasional volunteers

Many voluntary arts and crafts groups and organisations, no matter what their size, run occasional or one-off events such as festivals, exhibitions, performances and summer schools. As a result, they are likely to need extra help on a short-term basis. This briefing will look at ways to engage with occasional volunteers (those that provide the short-term support) so that they will be more likely to volunteer for you again in future and act as advocates and supporters of your work more generally.

Sustaining a long-term relationship with occasional volunteers can be a challenge, but is well worth doing – so you can draw upon them again in the future and help them get more out of their volunteering experience. The following ideas can help make the process a lot easier.

If you would like to know more about managing regular or frequent volunteers, please see the Further Resources section below which will guide you to a wealth of useful material.

Characteristics of occasional volunteers

Helping Out was a national survey of volunteering carried out in England* in 2007 (see *Further Resources* for more details).

The report **Regular and Occasional Volunteers**, (published by the Institute of Volunteering Research) analysed the findings of the survey.

- The report defines 'occasional volunteers' as those who volunteer less frequently than once a month, or as a one-off activity.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests the nature of voluntary activity is changing, with a decline in regular volunteering in favour of occasional volunteering.
- Volunteers aged between 25 and 44 years are more likely to be occasional volunteers (24 per cent occasional) than those over 65 (14 per cent occasional).

- Occasional volunteers are more likely to become involved in volunteering because it is connected to the interests of family and friends, while regular volunteers are more likely to volunteer because it is something they are passionate about or because they want to use their skills to help the community.
- Occasional volunteers primarily help with fundraising and running events, with considerably fewer providing other forms of help, such as administration or committee membership.

**Although this study was carried out in England, the findings may also be applicable to volunteering activity in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.*

A. Finding occasional volunteers

Volunteers can be found in a number of ways – through word of mouth, by advertising, or through a local volunteering centre or agency (see *Further Resources* section for contact details). The **Helping Out** survey suggests that occasional volunteers are more likely to respond to leaflets and posters, and through advertising in newspapers and online. However, that doesn't mean you should neglect simple solutions like asking around amongst your staff, volunteers, participants and/or audience members to see if they can recommend anyone. If you run events regularly, you may have a mailing list of participants or attendees you could contact to see if they are willing to help out next time around.

If you do decide to advertise, the two most important things to bear in mind are 'who are you aiming for?' and 'what's your message?'

Who are you aiming for?

Knowing who you are aiming for is essential if you want your advertisements to be effective. Try to appeal to too many different types of people and there is a danger that your message will end up appealing to no one.

If you have a database of previous volunteers, look through it and try to identify trends. By looking at the characteristics of



those who have volunteered in the past over a significant period of time (e.g. five years), you may be able to draw conclusions about how your volunteer base is changing. Your own trends may be more important than wider trends gleaned from research like the **Helping Out** survey.

Before you can come up with a suitable message you need to work out what motivates your target volunteer. That way you can focus the message on benefits that will appeal directly to them.

Possible motivating factors for occasional volunteers include:

- developing new or existing skills;
- building up a network of contacts;
- adding valuable experience to their CV;
- the opportunity to socialise;
- giving something back to the community;
- helping out a friend or family member;
- free access to the event or performers;
- social status;
- contributing to the creation or performance of art or craft work.

What's your message?

Getting your message right is essential for a good recruitment campaign. This results in them contacting you and signing up. Your message should bring together two important things – the *benefits* and a *call to action*.

- **The benefits** – your advert should focus on the benefits to *them*, not the benefits to *you*. The latter are important to you and your group or organisation, but less so to potential volunteers. So rather than saying: 'come and steward at our festival because we really need your help', it would be much better to say something like: 'stewarding at our festival is a fun way to meet new people, improve your skills and save £s on the cost of a ticket'.
- **A call to action** – make your contact details clear so that it is as easy as possible for potential volunteers to contact you. Provide a range of contact methods, including phone, email, website and, if possible, an address where people can pop in to chat with you. Make sure that your phones are staffed during usual office hours and that an answering service is in place at all other times. Try to respond to emails and web queries within 24 hours. Include a closing date by which applicants need to contact you.

B. Providing them with the best possible experience

Because you don't always get the time to build a meaningful relationship with occasional volunteers, it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking of them as little more than free labour. This is dangerous because if they are not treated with respect and gratitude for the time they donate to your group or organisation, occasional volunteers can end up feeling undervalued, or even resentful. Not only does this mean that

they are less likely to volunteer for you again in future, they may also tell their friends of their bad experience, causing your reputation to suffer.

The better and more efficiently volunteers are treated, the better they will feel about the group or organisation they are donating their time to. There are a number of ways to help ensure that they have the best possible experience while they are with you. These include:

- **Making sure everything's ready** – decide in advance how the volunteer will be selected, what their duties will be, who will supervise them, how will they be trained, who they will report to, what will happen if things go wrong, and how you will pay their expenses (volunteers should not be left out of pocket). Involve the staff and management committee in the decision-making process, so that when the time comes they are aware of what can and cannot be expected of the volunteers.
- **Having an effective selection process** – depending on the duties involved, selection can vary from an informal chat to a formal interviewing process. If the role involves a higher level of responsibility, or dealing with children or vulnerable adults, selection should include interview(s), application forms, references and criminal record checks. Health checks and equal opportunities monitoring may also be applicable.
- **Giving a proper role description** – this is important as it lets the volunteer know exactly where they stand and what is expected of them. It will also be a useful tool for monitoring their achievements and providing feedback in the future.
- **Providing a proper induction** – make sure you or a designated person spends time with the volunteer when they arrive, going over the role description in detail and introducing them to the other volunteers or staff members with whom they may have contact. The induction should be a two-way process, with a chance for them to ask any questions they may have.
- **Being flexible** – role descriptions should be flexible enough to allow for some adaptation to suit individual volunteers. New volunteers may be at different stages in the development of their skills, and, as a result, need different things. Beginners need information and support to get them going, while experienced volunteers may want to be encouraged to try something new or gain recognition in what they're good at.
- **Giving them what they want** – for example, if they are looking for something to put on their CV, offer to provide a reference on successful completion of the placement. Or if they are interested in building their contacts, try to ensure they have the opportunity to meet and talk to a wide range of people, not just other volunteers. Remember, motivations can change, so make sure you have an ongoing appraisal process.



- **Supervising and providing feedback** – whenever you are working with volunteers it is a good idea to establish a means of sharing information with them about their performance. If you have created a role description, the supervisor and volunteer can use it to assess how well the task is being completed.
- **Providing training** – training may also be offered to volunteers carrying out special duties or activities. For example, those responsible for teams of volunteers at events might need basic management training and those responsible for managing crowds will need specific knowledge of health and safety procedures. This can be of huge benefit to the volunteer as it provides accredited skills that can be applied in other employment or voluntary situations. It is important to consult the volunteer though, and not assume that they will be prepared to commit to a lengthy or demanding training programme.
- **Offering some form of mentoring** – if the volunteer wishes to increase their skills in a particular area, you could offer to set them up with a mentor with the relevant expertise. This could be another volunteer, staff or management committee member. Part of the volunteer's time with you could be spent shadowing the mentor in their work, or having a one-to-one question and answer session.
- **Giving them opportunities to progress** – providing a level of responsibility and achievable but challenging targets will help keep volunteers motivated. Some occasional volunteers may wish to increase their commitment and become regular volunteers. Give them every opportunity to show you what they are capable of. They may have skills (such as accountancy or set design) you don't know about, which could prove invaluable to your group or organisation.
- **Thanking them** – everyone likes to feel appreciated. A simple 'thank you' costs nothing and makes a world of difference. As well as a verbal 'thank you', it is good practice to send a letter or note of thanks, perhaps with a certificate of achievement/training.
- **Reward their contribution** – other ways to reward their contribution might include: inviting them to social events; having a party; consulting them on your direction and work; featuring them on your website or in your newsletter; inviting them to opening nights or special events; offering them free or discounted services; a feature in a local newspaper; and so on. Be careful about rewarding them with cash or anything of monetary value, as you may find yourself in breach of employment or tax law – *contact your national volunteer development agency for further guidance.*

By implementing these measures you are providing your volunteers with improved motivation, increased skills, increased likelihood of gaining employment (if appropriate), personal development, recognition for their commitment, increased self-confidence and esteem – all things that will make them feel more favourably towards you, and more likely to come back to volunteer again.

Volunteer policies

A volunteer policy lays out what potential volunteers can expect while volunteering for your organisation and, vice versa, what you can expect from them. It ensures that everyone knows where they stand, and provides clear procedures on what happens if anything goes wrong. It also sends a message that you are a volunteer-friendly organisation, and have really thought about the kinds of opportunities you provide. Make sure occasional volunteers are included in your policy.

VAN has developed a volunteer policy which can be used as a good practice example (see *Further Resources* section). Also, seek advice from your national volunteer development agency.

C. Maintaining an ongoing relationship

Maintaining a positive relationship with your volunteers is essential in retaining their support. Finding opportunities to communicate with past volunteers strengthens that relationship. Rather than contacting them only when you need them to volunteer again, try to make a habit of more regular contact. This can include birthday and Christmas cards, invitations to events or information about upcoming consultations.

Some of your occasional volunteers may wish to volunteer more regularly as a result of having a good experience with you. If they wish to make a greater commitment (and have the potential to succeed in a more demanding role), arrange an informal meeting to discuss both the areas of work available and their motivations for volunteering.

Use the outcomes from this discussion to put together a draft role description that you are both happy with. Try to achieve a balance between giving the volunteer enough of a challenge, while not overloading them with work. Include a timetable for appraisals so that the role can be modified as a result of volunteer's first few weeks 'in post'.

D. Keeping safe – policies and procedures

If you want to take on volunteers for any duration you need to be aware of the rules and regulations surrounding volunteering. These include meeting child protection, equal opportunities, and health and safety regulations. You also need to ensure that you have adequate insurance cover. VAN Briefings and national volunteer development agencies (see *Further Resources* section for more details) will help you find out what is needed.

Further Resources

Organisations

- **NCVO** – lobbying, research and support organisation for the voluntary sector in England – www.ncvo-vol.org.uk
- **Volunteering England** – works to support and increase the quality, quantity, impact and accessibility of volunteering throughout England – www.volunteering.org.uk. Online volunteering centre finder at www.volunteering.org.uk/Local%20and%20Regional/findoutaboutvolunteeringinyourarea.htm

- **NICVA** – umbrella organisation representing voluntary and community organisations throughout Northern Ireland – www.nicva.org
- **Volunteer Development Agency** – the lead organisation for the promotion and development of volunteering across Northern Ireland – www.volunteering-ni.org
- **The Wheel** – support and representative body connecting community and voluntary organisations and charities across the Republic of Ireland – www.wheel.ie
- **Volunteering Ireland** – national volunteer development agency – www.volunteeringireland.com
- **Volunteer Centres Ireland** – find your nearest volunteer centre in Ireland – www.volunteer.ie
- **SCVO** – the national body representing the voluntary sector in Scotland – www.scvo.org.uk
- **Volunteer Development Scotland** – Scotland's centre for excellence in volunteer development – www.vds.org.uk
- **Volunteer Centre Network Scotland** – network of 32 volunteering centres operating out of some 60 offices across Scotland – www.volunteerscotland.org.uk
- **WCVA** – the voice of the voluntary sector in Wales, representing and campaigning for voluntary organisations, volunteers and communities – www.wcva.org.uk
- **UK Volunteering Forum** – bringing together the national volunteering development agencies of the four countries in the UK – www.ukvf.org.uk
- **Institute for Volunteering Research** – aims to develop knowledge and understanding of volunteering in a way that is relevant to practitioners and policy makers – www.ivr.org.uk
- **Do-it.org.uk** – an online database of UK local volunteering opportunities run by YouthNet UK – www.do-it.org.uk

VAN briefings

These are available to download for free from www.voluntaryarts.org/briefings.

- 118 – **Insurance for voluntary arts groups** (June 2008)
- 109 – **Child protection part III: an update** (September 2007)
- 66 – **Recognise** (June 2002)
- 65 – **Reward** (June 2002)
- 64 – **Retain** (June 2002)
- 63 – **Recruit** (June 2002)
- 61 – **Health and safety for voluntary arts organisations** (April 2002)
- 45 – **How do I create an equal opportunities policy?** (January 2000)

Other publications

- **Helping Out: a national survey of volunteering and charitable giving** by N Low, S Butt, A Ellis Paine and J Davis Smith (The Cabinet Office, 2007) – www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector/Research_and_statistics/third_sector_research.aspx
- **Regular and occasional volunteers: how and why they help out** by Mark Hutin (Institute of Volunteering Research, May 2008) – www.ivr.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/568EEABF-B25E-4E3C-870D-755FB2FA7955/0/reg_and_occ_volunteers.pdf
- **VAN Volunteer Policy** (Voluntary Arts Network, 2008) – www.voluntaryarts.org/uploaded/map7004.doc
- **Model volunteering policy** (WCVA, 2007) – www.wcva-ids.org.uk/wcva/1045
- **It's all about time** – volunteering in Northern Ireland (Volunteer Development Agency, 2007) – www.volunteering-ni.org/what_we_do/publications

Information contained here may go out of date and you are therefore advised to check its currency. Updated information may be available on the VAN website: www.voluntaryarts.org

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