**Volunteer Centre**
Bexley

# Creating a volunteer role

This information sheet explains how to put together a volunteer role description. Doing this provides a strong framework for creating a volunteer role.

This document:

- Outlines the benefits of using role descriptions
- Works through the structure of a role description
- Gives guidance on putting together tasks for volunteers
- Suggests ways of creating roles that are not tied to a location and certain times

**Why use a role description?**

A role description (sometimes known as a task description or role outline) has several functions:

- They help you put together a coherent role
- They make it easier for everyone to understand the overall role of volunteers within the organisation
- They allow potential volunteers to see what will be expected of them
- They give you something to refer to when supporting and supervising volunteers – or dealing with problems

Building on the first function, the role description is a useful tool to help you create a volunteer role that is right for you and will attract people willing to carry it out.

Sometimes roles spring up pretty fully formed – a volunteer 'greeter' welcoming visitors to a museum for example – while others take a little more effort to put together. But even the seemingly easy to describe roles will still need some thought. Are they (or perhaps some tasks within them) appropriate for volunteers? Is anyone likely to want to carry them out? Are there issues for the organisation to consider – safeguarding, health and safety, reputational risk and so on?

The rest of this information sheet works through the rough structure of a role description, with guidance and questions to help you create your own.

**Role title**

This sounds obvious, but it's good to give the role a title rather than simply make a call for volunteers. Many people might not see themselves as a 'volunteer', but 'Admin volunteer', 'Befriender' or 'Volunteer driver' are more likely to speak to people as activities they could get involved in.

**Role summary**

You'll probably need to fill in this section after most of the others. It's a space to give an overview of the role, so that the reader has a good idea of what it will be like. What will the volunteer be doing, and why?

**Tasks**

What individual tasks will the volunteer be expected to carry out?  Sometimes this is fairly easy to see because you are coming to the role with a top down approach – that is, you more or less know what you want the volunteer role to be, and just need to pin down the exact tasks. Other times it's not so clear and you may actually be starting from the bottom up – thinking about the tasks first and then building them up into a role.

If you're coming at this from the latter approach there are two things to be aware of. Firstly, does your list of tasks hang together as a role? There is a danger that it could be too eclectic, demanding differing skill sets, and/or lacking appeal to volunteers. Secondly are you just putting together a set of tasks that no one else in the office wanted to do? If that's the case, why would anyone else want to do it?

Having said that there is no reason not to take this approach. You may come up with all kinds of interesting roles that you would not otherwise have considered.

Even where drawing up a list of tasks seems to be pretty straightforward there are still some things to bear in mind. Suitability is one, which we address below. Another is how important all the tasks are, and how flexible you might be able to be with the role. Flexibility isn't always possible. To reuse the above example of a volunteer greeter, this role is pretty well defined and with a small number of linked tasks, whereas with an admin volunteer you may be able to make all kinds of changes to the task list. The reason for thinking about this is that it can be useful to have the scope to change things. You may have an applicant who would otherwise be absolutely fine but is unable to carry out all the tasks in the role description. Someone with anxiety applying to carry out the admin volunteer role might be perfectly fine with filing, replying to emails and a bit of internet research, but unable to answer the phone.

**Skills/experience**

This is an area where it's important to remember the difference between volunteers and employees. With a paid role it's reasonable to have a high demand on the level of skills or experience you are looking for, appropriate to the job and payscale. With volunteers you need to be realistic about your expectations. You may be lucky and find a highly skilled person for a specialist role, but on the whole this won't be the case.

You should determine how much training and support you can provide. For example, for a role that involves use of Excel, you may decide that you could train up someone who is comfortable with computers but hasn't used the program, but you would not have the time to train up someone who has never turned a PC on.

**Availability and location**

For availability you should consider how much time potential volunteers are likely to have to offer. So, for example, it might be easier to find 4 people who can each give half a day a week rather than a person who has 2 days a week spare.

When thinking about roles in general it's worth looking at whether you can develop some that are not reliant on a person being available at certain times and/or being in the workplace. Understandably most volunteer roles tend to be within normal office hours – but then of course this presents a massive barrier to involvement to anyone who are themselves working 9-5. It may be hard for some people to get to your workplace – traveling from one side of Bexley to another on public transport can take a long time. And some people may only have the odd hour to spare, or have irregular schedules.

There may be complete roles that people could do from home, perhaps in their own time, such as writing or research. However this is not so common, so another way of approaching this could be to go back to thinking about tasks. Some tasks could be done in isolation, either from home or intermittently, as and when the volunteer is available. For example, one archive had boxes of items set aside for individual volunteers. Each person could then work on their own items at their own pace. For some people this was a day or two a week, for others a couple of hours here and there.

**Supervisor**

Who will be responsible for training, inducting and supporting the volunteer? Do they have the time, skills and support to do so?

**Is the role suitable for a volunteer?**

This is not something for the role description but a question on its completion.  It is hard to give definitive answers. A role's suitability will vary according to both the opinion of the onlooker and the context of the volunteering. Some people will draw the line quite differently to others. There are often debates and disagreements within the volunteering world as to what it is appropriate to ask voluntary workers to do. Therefore you should consider yourself and perhaps have an internal discussion within your organisation on what you are comfortable with.

Where people do try to outline boundaries on volunteer roles they will typically state that:

- Volunteers should not be used to displace paid staff (this is often referred to as 'job substitution')
- Volunteers should add value to the work of an organisation rather than carry out core functions
- Volunteer roles should have something to offer volunteers – i.e. they shouldn't simply be a collection of tasks no one in the office likes doing.

However this is where context can make things more difficult to draw clear dividing lines. Many small organisations have few or even no paid staff. If they didn't have volunteers carrying out core roles, roles that in better funded organisations might be paid, then they wouldn't exist.


**Further information:**

Volunteer Centre Bexley information sheets:

*Planning for volunteer involvement*

*Recruiting volunteers*


NCVO guidance on writing volunteer roles:
https://knowhownonprofit.org/people/volunteers/recruiting/writing

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Last updated: May 2016