
Recognising volunteers

One way to think of volunteers is that they are donating their time, in the same way that people might donate money. Charities express their gratitude to their financial supporters, but can often neglect to say thank you to their volunteers. It is just as important. Volunteers give up their time without thought of financial compensation, but no one wants to feel unappreciated.

This information sheet suggests different ways of recognising volunteer involvement, both individually and collectively. We suggest that you use a range of methods, as some volunteers may appreciate a more formal approach, and others something more informal. The list isn't exhaustive – feel free to use it as a springboard for ideas.

Lastly, don't forget the importance of a simple 'thank you' at the end of the day.

Suggested forms of volunteer recognition:

Include the contribution of volunteers in your annual report. This can be through giving a figure for the number of hours people have volunteered over the year, or through softer measures of the impact they have made. Even better would be a thank you from the chief executive or chair of trustees.

Give volunteers the opportunity to learn and develop. This will keep volunteers interested and benefit your organisation in the long run.

Involve volunteers in decision making. This can be formally or informally. You could invite volunteer representatives onto relevant working groups, or consult them collectively on important issues. Less formally this could simply mean asking a volunteer's opinion about an aspect of the work they are involved in.

Encouraging senior staff to engage with volunteering. In larger organisations senior staff can spend their day with barely any contact with volunteers. This leaves them with little understanding of volunteering, and less likely to acknowledge their contribution.

Birthday cards. It's a nice personal touch.

Referring to volunteering internally and externally. Newsletters, bulletins, websites and so on should mention and celebrate volunteering where relevant. Press releases about projects could mention the central role volunteers have or will play. Team and staff meetings should include volunteering issues on their agendas.

Give volunteers additional responsibilities. This can be a way of recognising the skills and knowledge that they have. A good role for an experienced volunteer can be as a buddy for new volunteers, showing them the ropes and being a friendly face in the first few weeks.

Give time and attention to volunteers. This means both socially (a chat at the start or end of the day or over coffee) and professionally (listening seriously to comments, questions or complaints).

Volunteering certificates. These could be given to every volunteer as part of Volunteer's Week, or in recognition of a certain number of hours donated (say, 100), or for long service.

Keep volunteers informed. They are unlikely to feel appreciated if they are not told about changes to your organisation, future plans for activities or other news.

Specific thank yous. As well as the everyday thanks you should also show your gratitude where a volunteer has made a particular contribution – perhaps lending a hand at an event, or finishing a project. This could be verbal, or a note or card.

Christmas meals/parties. Or indeed volunteer socials in general.

Relevant talks or visits. This might not be appropriate for all settings, but some organisations in areas such as history, heritage and the arts occasionally arrange visits for volunteers to other museums or projects to see their work, or invite speakers on topics the volunteers find interesting.

Give volunteers the chance to raise issues. Whether this is through formal means – a volunteer representative, volunteer meetings and so on – or a culture of informal discussion, volunteers should feel like there is a channel for them to be heard.

Recognition of long service. It's nice to mark and celebrate the contribution of volunteers who have been with you for a long time.

Volunteers Week celebrations. Volunteers Week is a good time to show appreciation of your volunteers, perhaps through an event. It usually runs from June 1-7 each year, but for 2016 it is June 1-12.

And finally: NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF TEA AND BISCUITS.

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Last updated: May 2016