



*"If our hopes of building a better and safer world are to become more than wishful thinking, we will need the engagement of volunteers more than ever."*

- Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations

**November 2013**

## **13 Tips for Recruiting and Retaining Volunteers**

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Volunteers remain an invaluable resource for many organizations, particularly non-profits, who often rely heavily on volunteers to complete work central to their mission. Despite their importance, many organizations struggle to find volunteers and keep them engaged. This whitepaper will offer tips on both recruiting and retaining volunteers.

### **Tips for Volunteer Recruitment**

- 1. Tap into volunteer motives:** While volunteers inevitably believe in your organization's work, most volunteers have additional reasons for volunteering – perhaps they are looking to meet new people, develop skills, and feel needed. If you assign them to stand by a photocopier for long hours, it may not satisfy any of those motives. The best way to find out what motivates them is to simply ask, and then strive to find a position that fulfills their needs.<sup>1</sup>
- 2. Find a “hook”:** When describing your volunteer opportunity, try to use attractive and interesting language to draw in people. It is a good idea to have a go-to “elevator speech,” which is a short, 15-30 second sound bite that introduces your opportunity in a clear and memorable way.<sup>2</sup> Rather than saying “volunteers needed for a food distribution,” try something catchier, such as “come brighten the day of a hungry neighbor!”
- 3. Try specific, rather than general, recruiting:** Know what, when and how long you need your volunteer for, and clearly communicate this during your recruitment efforts. Volunteers are often hesitant to sign up when time commitments and/or details of the work are vague. Being specific helps to tap into volunteers’ motives and allows them to share their specific skill set with your organization.
- 4. Make one on one contact...:** While ads, posters and listserv emails remain a great way to reach a wide audience, they lack the personal connection sometimes needed to recruit new volunteers. By making one on one contact with a potential volunteer, organizations can take the time to see if the individual is a good fit for the position (and vice versa). Also, people are much more likely to lend a hand when personally asked.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/nonprofit-volunteers-top-five-tips-30075.html>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.volunteercentral.net/downloads/Recruit\\_Train\\_Retain\\_Workbook.pdf](http://www.volunteercentral.net/downloads/Recruit_Train_Retain_Workbook.pdf)

5. **...But utilize social media:** Facebook, in particular, is a great tool for recruiting volunteers; it bridges the gap between general (easier) and personal (more time intensive) volunteer recruitment. With Facebook you can post volunteer opportunities which will be seen by a large audience, but you can also engage interested people one on one. Additionally, friends of your volunteers might be intrigued by their involvement with your organization and decide to help out, as well.
6. **Reach out to members, partners and groups that are already involved with your organization:** Word of mouth remains a strong tool in your volunteer recruitment arsenal. Ask your current volunteers to help you recruit from amongst their family, friends and coworkers; often, people find it fun and rewarding to volunteer with someone they already know. Plus, these new volunteers will likely already have a good sense of what the job entails when they start.
7. **Try recruiting teenagers:** Teenagers often need community service hours, whether to fulfill a school requirement, to gain work experience or to round out a resume. Consider partnering with a local school to share the available volunteer opportunities at your organization. Let them know you would be happy to write them letters of reference or sign off on community service forms.<sup>3</sup>

### Tips for Volunteer Retention

8. **Thank them:** Early and often, as the old saying goes! Ensuring volunteers are thanked and that they feel appreciated will go a long way towards keeping them around. Saying thank you doesn't need to be an elaborate act; simply telling them thank you each day they help out is often enough to make them feel valued and like part of the team. Encourage your staff to express their gratitude as well!
9. **Offer small rewards:** If your budget allows, small rewards and gifts can be a great way to express your gratitude to a great volunteer. Next time you are out grabbing coffee, why not grab one for your volunteer as well? Perhaps you have a lot of volunteers, in which case you may want to consider hosting a small volunteer appreciation event. This should be a fun night, where they can eat, mingle with other volunteers and bask in the glow of appreciation.
10. **Thorough training:** The first step towards retaining volunteers is to start them off on the right foot. For many, this means being properly trained for the task at hand. Volunteers who are confused about their responsibilities or duties often become frustrated, and often don't stick around.
11. **Maintain constant contact:** If it is important to ensure volunteers are properly trained, it is equally important that they are continually supported throughout their volunteer efforts. This likely means checking in with them every so often to answer questions and

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<sup>3</sup> <http://childrensministry.com/articles/recruiting-that-adds-up>

hear their concerns. Ideally, volunteers should have one central point of contact so they know they always have someone to turn to if they have a problem.

12. **Solicit feedback:** Throughout their time with your organization, volunteers should be asked to give feedback on their experiences. Additionally, long term volunteers should be given the opportunity for an informal “exit interview.” This is a chance for the volunteer to speak candidly about their time with your organization; their suggestions can be utilized to ensure that future volunteers have good experiences.
  13. **Communicate how their work is important to the organization:** Ultimately, almost every volunteer wants to know that their work is of use and value. Share specifics about what their work has helped your organization to accomplish. Likely your volunteers already have a connection with your organizational goals and larger mission; continue to strengthen that connection by sharing success stories about your clients and programs with them. Allow them the chance to celebrate organizational successes with you as part of the team.
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