

Recognising and Valuing Volunteers

What do we mean by recognising and valuing volunteers?

Volunteers don't start because they're expecting a reward but it is important that your organisation or group celebrates and values what the volunteers have done.

Acknowledging the contribution made by volunteers shows that your organisation or group appreciates their input and commitment. Doing this can help volunteers feel valued and supported. If volunteers feel appreciated they are more likely to stay with your organisation. It doesn't have to cost a lot but it needs to be regular, personal and not favour a small number of volunteers.

How do I recognise my volunteers and make them feel valued?

If it's possible, how you recognise volunteers should be specific to the individual rather than the same for everyone across your organisation. Some volunteers don't want public thanks and just like to know that what they're doing has helped others. Volunteers might be based at home and can't get to an event or location. They might also find the thought of an event a bit overwhelming. Also, some volunteers appreciate an award for long service but you also need to value the input that someone gives that's there for a short time.

You don't have to include all the suggestions below, but it is a good idea to think about some of the following areas to make sure that the contribution of volunteers is recognised.

Be prepared for volunteers arriving	First impressions count. When you advertise for new volunteers make sure you return their calls promptly and keep to the recruitment timescales that you have set. It makes a difference to a volunteer if you listen to what they want from the volunteering experience and match them to a role that is suited.
Letting volunteers know that their work makes a difference can be motivating and rewarding	Think about how you could measure the impact of your volunteers. This type of feedback enables volunteers to understand the impact that they have had on improving health outcomes. For example, a charity for the homeless in Scotland put stickers on the envelopes of letters sent out by their fundraising volunteers. This way, when funds come in they are able to tell volunteers directly the money raised through their contribution. There is more information on this in the <i>Measuring the impact of your Volunteering</i> guide.
Trusting volunteers	Giving volunteers a new task with a different role, or more responsibility, demonstrates trust. Trusting volunteers is an important way to show volunteers that you value and recognise their contribution.

<p>Saying thank you</p>	<p>Sometimes a simple thank you is all the recognition that a volunteer wants. This can be informally in person, by telephone, by email, in a Christmas card or formally at the annual general meeting. You may also choose to write articles about volunteer tasks or profile specific volunteers for newsletters, newspapers or volunteer's week. However you decide to do this it should be consistent and fair. But remember the same thanks every time can end up being tokenistic, so be sure to be personal, genuine, timely and specific.</p>
<p>Keeping volunteers informed</p>	<p>Volunteers can feel valued if they are kept up to date about what is happening with the organisation. Some organisations have started to use social media and set up blogs, or have dedicated pages for volunteers on their website.</p>
<p>Creating an identity</p>	<p>There are lots of different ways that you can do this. Being given clothing to wear and relevant equipment whilst doing their role helps volunteers feel part of the team. For example, some heritage volunteers said that having a 'volunteer' identity badge often helps the public appreciate that they are volunteers, and as such this gains respect.</p>
<p>Volunteer events</p>	<p>Providing time for volunteers to get together socially is a good way to acknowledge their contribution and keep them inspired. Meeting new people gives volunteers a chance to share their experience, hear about what others do, feel part of the larger team of volunteers and maybe think about doing more roles in the organization.</p>
<p>Acknowledging the people behind your volunteers</p>	<p>Sometimes inviting the family and friends of the volunteer to events can be a great way to show your appreciation to those who support or enable your volunteers to participate. This does not have to be costly, for example it may just be a 'bring your own' picnic or games in the park.</p>
<p>Access to training</p>	<p>A volunteer may value being able to attend training for development purposes (this has to be relevant to the delivery of the role so it's not considered a perk in lieu of payment). This is especially important for volunteers who are looking to develop their CV or boost their employability skills. This can be done face to face or online. Volunteers might value being invited to attend a seminar, convention, or meeting at the organisation's representative, as it demonstrates to them that they are trusted volunteers.</p>
<p>Being honest in feedback</p>	<p>Sometimes volunteering is not always positive and as an organisation or group you may have to give volunteers constructive criticism. The best way to give feedback is to be specific, focus on the requirements of the role, give real examples, and make sure it is not too long after an incident or issue arises. Know what you want to achieve and have some suggestions about how you think this could be done. Let volunteers talk and discuss their suggestions. Be prepared to be flexible. Being honest is a positive way to build mutual trust with your volunteers.</p>

Involving volunteers in consultation	Involving volunteers in planning and shaping volunteering practice can show volunteers that you value their opinion and views. You could have an anonymous suggestion box, invite volunteers onto the relevant committee, ask for comments by email or set up a volunteer forum. Be sure to acknowledge their involvement where you can.
Volunteer awards	Some organisations nominate volunteers for their in house awards ceremonies. This could be for team effort, length of time in service, inspiring volunteer or even a life time commitment award. You could nominate volunteers for external awards through their local volunteer centre, or if a young person in Scotland perhaps through the Saltire or Young Scot Awards. However, it is important if you chose to have awards that you find ways to recognise those who do not get nominated. You should also consider how to recognise volunteers who are not able to attend an awards ceremony.
Accommodating needs	Show empathy and try to adapt roles or activities to suit your volunteers. This is most effective when you ask how you can help, instead of implementing change without taking into consideration a volunteer's views and opinions.
Saying goodbye	Although it is important to keep volunteers once you have supported them into their role it is also important to remember that most volunteers will eventually leave. Thank them for their time and let them go with gratitude.
Providing a reference	Sometimes you may be requested to provide a reference for a volunteer if they are moving into paid work, education or another volunteering role.

What next?

If you are unsure whether your volunteers feel appreciated, ask them! Some organisations carry out an annual survey with volunteers to find out if the support and recognition they are providing is appropriate.

You might also find it helpful to create a recognition policy so you're clear about how you recognise and value volunteers. It is important to make sure staff and committee members understand that investing in recognising and valuing volunteers benefits the organisation. A valued volunteer can become a great ambassador for your organisation and can help to attract new volunteers.

Need some more help?

If you would like more help or advice in relation to this guide please get in touch with us:

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