Volunteer
Retention

Introduction

Volunteers are generous with their time and most will join several different teams throughout their journey. How long they remain with your team depends on your volunteer retention. Supporting volunteers with the leadership, resources and motivation they need doesn't just help your organisation maintain a roster – it also builds knowledge, creates a community and is a clear sign of your organisation's value of its volunteers.

Volunteer retention is an organisation's ability to keep volunteers in its team and avoid the negative outcome of volunteers withdrawing earlier than required. It is one of the core challenges for volunteer involving organisations, along with recruitment and funding. Strong retention consistently reminds your organisation's volunteers why they signed up and why their contribution is so important, while poor retention will leave your team wondering why they bother.

Hundreds of volunteer managers were asked about the issues they face as part of the State of Volunteering in Queensland 2021 Report. Of all the volunteer-related issues in the sector, retention was top among them. Volunteer retention isn't a discrete process – it is the result of your overall volunteer management practice. Keep volunteer retention in mind as you design the other processes needed for best practice volunteer management.

How to use this guide

This guide provides practical information about retaining volunteers, including ways to identify poor retention and suggestions to improve outcomes. It provides suggestions and prompts to serve as a starting point when addressing this issue in your organisation. These prompts will need to be evaluated against the needs and scope of your volunteer engagement and customised as required.

Contents

National Standards for Volunteer Involvement

The National Standards for Volunteer Involvement provides a framework for organisations to consider the role of volunteers and the impact effective volunteer involvement can have on achieving the strategic goals of the organisation. Created by volunteering peak bodies across Australia, the Standards allow organisations to make use of simple, practical criteria across a broad range of volunteering situations.

Volunteer involving organisations are encouraged to consider the National Standards when working to improve volunteer retention. Because retention is impacted by the entire volunteer experience, the entire suite of National Standards are relevant. In particular, Standards 7 and 8 relate to volunteer retention.

Standard 7: Volunteer recognition

Volunteer contribution, value and impact is understood, appreciated and acknowledged.

7.1 The governing body and employees understand how volunteers benefit the organisation, service users and the community.

7.2 Volunteers are informed about how their contributions benefit the organisation, service users and the community.

7.3 The organisation regularly acknowledges contributions made by volunteers and the positive impact on the organisation, service users and the community.

7.4 Volunteer acknowledgement is appropriate to the volunteer role and respectful of cultural values and perspectives.

Standard 8: Quality Management and Continuous Improvement

Effective volunteer involvement results from a system of good practice, review and continuous improvement.

8.1 Policies and procedures are implemented to effectively guide all aspects of volunteer involvement.

8.2 Volunteer involvement is regularly reviewed in line with the organisation's evaluation and quality management frameworks.

8.3 The organisation's performance with volunteer involvement is monitored and reported to the governing body, employees, volunteers and stakeholders.

8.4 Opportunities are available for volunteers to provide feedback on the organisation's volunteer involvement and relevant areas of the organisation's work.

For more information on the National Standards, visit:

www.volunteeringaustralia.org/resources/national-standards-and-supporting-material

Why is volunteer retention important?

Volunteer retention consistently ranks among the top issues faced by volunteer managers. Poor retention puts additional pressure on every other aspect of volunteer engagement – especially recruitment.

The loss of a volunteer doesn't only represent the time spent recruiting and training that team member, it also has a future cost to your organisation: lack of ongoing development, fewer candidates for leadership roles, and fewer people available for upcoming volunteer shifts.

Signs that your organisation needs to focus on volunteer retention can include:

- Higher turnover than usual for your organisation or sector
- Volunteers leaving abruptly without notice
- Volunteers gradually reducing their commitment until they are no longer attending
- The commitment your organisation asks for has increased over time for fear of losing people early
- Social media groups going dormant
- Pressure to recruit more volunteers, without an increase or expansion in services
- Remaining volunteers being asked to do more
- Decline in volunteer satisfaction in feedback surveys
- Volunteers not responding to communication
- Volunteers leaving once they complete a necessary milestone or requirement
- Recent change in workplace culture to an environment that is less productive, welcoming or social.

Methods to improve retention

1. Recognise, acknowledge and thank volunteers

This method is the simplest, but that means it can often be overlooked. Check if your organisation recognises and thanks volunteers for their support. If there isn't a process to thank volunteers, consider setting up a reward and recognition program. This program could include presenting awards, celebrating volunteers and their impact, or hosting events during National Volunteer Week and International Volunteer Day.

When designing a rewards program, focus on intangible benefits and experiences that 'money can't buy'. Ask local events or businesses if they'd consider hosting your team for a day out. For example, a cinema may want to promote that they are giving back to the community by hosting a private screening for your organisation's volunteers.

Of course, you don't need a formal process just to say thank you! A recognition program shouldn't prevent supervising staff from thanking volunteers whenever appropriate.

2. Design your other processes around volunteer retention

A volunteer's decision to stay with your organisation, or to leave, is impacted by the volunteer journey as a whole. When designing other parts of your organisation's volunteer engagement, consider their impact on retention.

- Does the application form collect information needed to make sure a volunteer's needs are met? This can include their motivation to volunteer, role preferences, availability and any barriers they may face while volunteering.
- Have you used your training as an opportunity to inspire volunteers, or only to tick a box?
- Does your regular communication demonstrate the value and impact of volunteers, or is it just a reminder of duties and deadlines?
- Do you collect the feedback needed to track volunteer satisfaction?
- When a volunteer withdraws from a role, do you have an exit survey to ask how their experience could have been better?

3. Examine the data

Your organisation should track volunteer data that helps you improve their experience. Don't just track if someone has withdrawn from the team – when did they withdraw, when, and how? Do you see any patterns in the resulting data? Is there a specific shift, event or staff member that is associated with large numbers of volunteers leaving your organisation?

Here are some examples of observations your group may make:

- Volunteers unable to be reached after applying
  - › You may have taken too long
  - › They applied to multiple roles and didn't choose yours
  - › The tone of your message didn't match the recruitment messaging used to promote your group
- Volunteers attend induction and don't return
  - › Negative, unappealing work environment
  - › Reality of doing the role didn't meet expectations
  - › Induction was unmotivating or irrelevant
  - › Logistics of attending the site were more difficult than anticipated
- Volunteers attend first shift and don't return
  - › Shift was poorly managed, low-impact or otherwise seen as a waste of time
  - › Volunteers are treated poorly
  - › Negative team dynamic or workplace culture
  - › Another aspect of the role didn't match expectations.

4. Offer reimbursements

The State of Volunteering in Queensland 2021 Report found that volunteers in this state incurred an average of $1,600 in out-of-pocket costs while volunteering in 2020. Not all volunteers can afford to spend this much money – especially to freely give their time to benefit the community. Wherever possible, your organisation should offer reimbursements for expenses incurred by volunteers.

5. Personalise their involvement

Every volunteer is unique, and parts of their volunteer experience should reflect that. Like all people, volunteers in your team will appreciate an effort being made to accommodate their individual preferences. Personalising a volunteer's experience can include:

- Volunteer managers and supervising staff remembering the volunteer's name and something about them

- When new opportunities open up, checking the records for your team to see if someone had indicated interest
  in that kind of role

- Accounting for their availability and working around their other schedules

- Either offering consistency or mixing up the experience to offer new challenges, depending on the volunteer's preferences

- Checking that volunteers are not asked to do something they had previously identified as a limitation
   or barrier for them.

6. Re-establish routine

It's not uncommon for a volunteer to temporarily step down from a role. When that occurs, you should make sure that the volunteer still receives regular updates while on hiatus. After an appropriate amount of time, reach out personally to ask if they're ready to re-engage and if they need any support.

This can also be useful with volunteers that have stayed with the organisation consistently. Inviting them to renew their volunteer agreement (for example, on an annual basis) can be an opportunity to assess their role, check in and let them know that you don't take their attendance for granted.

7. Connect volunteer peers

Social connections and personal bonds are an important part of the volunteer experience. Many volunteers initially sign up to tackle a specific issue, then find that the friends they've made are an even stronger incentive to stay involved.

To help volunteers establish these bonds, you can set up a mentoring or buddy system, pairing volunteers based on experience, mutual interests or personality. You might also want to set up some social events – even a quick morning tea.

If your team doesn't connect on social media, take the lead on setting up an online group for volunteers. Ask which platforms they already use and which they'd feel comfortable using to chat with other volunteers, if any. This group can be used to share photos, videos, inspiring stories, funny moments and anything else people want to contribute. Try to keep social media social – don't smother the group with too many obligations and requests to cover volunteer shifts.

8. Ongoing development and progression

Volunteers are always learning, gaining new experiences and honing their skills. Your organisation should formalise this ongoing development and offer training to volunteers who want to broaden their skillset. This may mean some volunteers change teams internally to pick up a new skill, or your organisation might bring in an external facilitator. Investing in a volunteer's skills demonstrates that you value their development. It will also pay dividends to your organisation through increased volunteer productivity.

In paid work, most employees would be dissatisfied if they didn't progress through roles over time. Some volunteers in your team may feel the same way. Make sure they have the opportunity to advance and take on more responsibility when they are ready.

9. Check in with volunteers

If communication and engagement are dwindling, find reasons to check in with volunteers. A process that is fully automated might benefit from manual intervention if it gives you an opportunity to connect with a volunteer. When upcoming rosters need to be confirmed or policies read, reach out to distant volunteers personally to ask if they have any thoughts. Be sure to respect the volunteers' private time away from your organisation – they may not have spare time to connect.

10. Demonstrate the impact and value of volunteering

Wherever possible, your organisation should track and celebrate milestones achieved by your volunteer team. Whether it's someone's first shift in a new role, their 1,000th hour or their 10,000th donation received, taking a moment to acknowledge the volunteers' efforts reminds the team of their impact and that the organisation's leadership cares.

Assume that every volunteer is asking themselves 'does it make a difference whether I turn up or not?'.
A volunteer manager should provide the information volunteers need to overcome this hurdle.

11. Offer flexible ways to volunteer

Flexible volunteering is one of the gaps identified in the State of Volunteering in Queensland 2021 Report. Increasingly, volunteers want flexible rosters and occasional hours, but the vast majority of volunteer involving organisations don't offer this to their team.

By adapting your volunteer roles to be more flexible, your organisation might be able to retain a volunteer who would have otherwise left. This may include incorporating new technology or online platforms into your volunteer management to allow people to contribute remotely. In times of disaster or pandemic, flexible technology-driven systems can allow your organisation to be more resilient and persevere through hard times.

Challenges to volunteer retention

External pressures

Like anyone, volunteers can be impacted by various external forces. This may include personal or family issues that come up, competing commitments, or large changes in the economy.

- Unemployment can affect volunteering in multiple ways. When unemployment is high, previously-employed people may take up volunteering due to a lack of paid roles. However, it can also cause decline in volunteer participation if your team has to prioritise finding paid work. You can help volunteers in this situation by training them in employable skills, reimbursing volunteer costs or providing a reference.

- Health can also have an impact on volunteer retention. Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused widespread illness, isolation and state-wide lockdowns. These have all affected volunteer participation in organisations. Robust workplace health and safety procedures and opportunities to work remotely can minimise the impact on your organisation.

- Bureaucracy and excessive administration can cause frustration among volunteers, especially those that have already complied with previous requirements. To reduce the burden of bureaucracy, create templates and offer to pre-fill forms for volunteers where permitted. Also, check which processes are necessary. Are you requiring all volunteer roles to comply with a requirement that only affects one team?

- Other volunteering opportunities can cause poor retention within your organisation if their volunteer engagement is more attractive. If your organisation is losing volunteers to another nearby group, ask the volunteers for feedback on what can be improved, or consider teaming up with the other group on a short-term initiative to share resources and knowledge.

Internal pressures

Changes, workplace tensions and other challenges within your organisation can also have an impact on volunteer retention. These factors are more likely to be in the organisation's control, but may be harder to identify.

- If your organisation's mission involves sensitive subject matter, it can impact volunteers in your team and cause additional burnout. Roles that expose volunteers to people suffering trauma and hardship may need additional support to make sure the volunteers' wellbeing isn't compromised.

- Volunteers can feel like their efforts are futile if they never seem to make a dent in the issue. If your team is addressing an endemic, ongoing problem, make sure you are regularly demonstrating the impact of the volunteer team and the improvements they've made to the community and common good.

- Internal tensions can cause poor volunteer retention, such as a sudden change in leadership style, in-fighting between team members or a negative workplace culture. Also, if volunteers are segregated from paid staff, that can impact morale in the team. In these situations, it is important to not let the in-fighting spread to the volunteer team while you ask the organisation's leadership for assistance.

- Unfortunately, poor retention can create worse retention. As volunteers leave your organisation, others will be wondering what caused their departure. Also, additional pressure is placed on the remaining volunteers who are at risk of burning out or simply withdrawing like everyone else. You need to identify symptoms of poor volunteer retention early to prevent a critical mass of volunteers from exiting.

- Withdrawal of funding and resources for the volunteer team can trigger a drop in retention. While volunteers give their time freely to benefit others, volunteering itself isn't free – it has associated expenses for equipment, uniforms, travel, food, administration and other workplace costs. If funding is reduced within the organisation, volunteers may feel that their efforts are not recognised or valued. Also, volunteers can feel pressure to contribute more or purchase items themselves, leading to unsustainable burn out. Make sure your organisation's volunteers have the resources they need for the role and offer reimbursements for relevant expenses where possible.

- Offering an inconsistent experience can impact retention, both between teams and within one team over time. If the volunteer experience doesn't live up to what was promised, or seems to be a worse experience than it was in the past, volunteers can be unmotivated to continue. This can sometimes be caused by 'mission creep', where duties drift further from your organisation's purpose over time. You should collect feedback from volunteers and occasionally compare the current experience to what happened in the past.

- Some people may resist change, even necessary change. If your organisation goes through a period of rapid renewal, some volunteers may withdraw during the transformation. To reduce the likelihood of this happening, give prior notice of the changes to the team and offer to support them through any difficulties they experience as a result.

Wrapping up

Retention is not a discrete, one-and-done process. It is an ongoing challenge for most volunteer involving organisations, where each day offers a new opportunity to learn and adjust. Volunteers are unique and their reactions to the retention methods given in this document will be different. It is essential to follow best practice, engage with positive intentions and always value the volunteer's perspective.

All volunteer involving organisations will see volunteers depart from time to time. A sign of successful volunteer retention is when many volunteers are leaving for positive reasons: they found paid work, they're entering university, they're travelling, or their family is growing. Other signs of strong retention are a growing volunteer cohort, positive feedback from volunteers, or if departing volunteers return to catch-up at events.

Volunteer retention requires ongoing attention and investment, but provides a return in a skilled, positive, motivated volunteer team. These volunteers will provide valuable leadership and insight to your organisation in years to come, as well as being strong ambassadors for your group and its mission. Find what works best for your team and demonstrate the ongoing value and impact of their volunteer efforts.

Localised Information