



GETTING READY FOR THE HIGHLY SKILLED VOLUNTEER

A new kind of volunteer is emerging. More today than ever before, people with high-level skills are offering their services to respected not-for-profits. Here are 8 tips to help you engage them for the first time.

‘SKILLED’

The ‘skilled’ volunteer is someone who has specialized professional skills to offer, skills that do not fall within the scope of typical day-to-day volunteer tasks. These people may accept the day-to-day work that is necessary for volunteer programmes to function or they may not but, regardless, they definitely have a specific expertise they wish to contribute.

Working with these volunteers is a significant opportunity for not-for-profits. When offering their services, skilled volunteers take on work a contractor might undertake, except they do not charge for their services.

They are often retired or semi-retired. Any organisation can make use of professional help, whether it comes in the form of an auditor, grant writer, painter, or plumber.

There are two huge benefits to capitalising on these opportunities: the organisation can 1) complete projects they normally could not afford and therefore might never undertake, and 2) develop a relationship with a powerful new volunteer.

Here’s how you can get ready to make the most of these ‘highly skilled’ volunteers:

1. CATALOGUE POTENTIAL PROJECTS

Create a wish list of tasks that you need and want to accomplish. For example, you may need to upgrade your computer network, develop a new strategic plan, or put a new roof on the building. Don’t limit yourself and don’t be afraid

to think outside the box.

2. SET UP YOUR SYSTEMS

Have a system and/or protocols in place to accept people who can work on your projects for free. Accommodating skilled volunteers should be relatively simple because you can use systems similar to those you use for paid professionals—just ensure people in your organisation understand how this will work.

Will you screen the skilled volunteer the way you would a paid contractor, or the way you would screen other volunteers? Who will the skilled volunteer ultimately be working with and reporting to? Your staff and Board should know what systems are in place to accept skilled volunteers.

3. ASK AND YOU SHALL RECEIVE

In conversations with potential volunteers or during volunteer interviews, ask questions that will lead you to understand everything that a volunteer has to offer.

Keep records of their skills and experience in a searchable database. If the person is not already committed to your cause and doesn’t know about your mission, show them how vital your organisation is and the impact of your work.

It is important for new recruits to realize that they too can contribute to a worthwhile organisation.

4. FIND A MATCH

When a skill that someone offers can be matched to your list of needed projects, be ready with your next steps.

Set up a conversation with the appropriate staff or board member.

Do not delay!

Just as you would keep a potential financial donor engaged in order to secure a donation, you must also develop the relationship with a potential *knowledge* donor in a timely manner.

5. CHECK CREDENTIALS

When you have a match and you decide to go to the next step, describe your process to the skilled volunteer.

Let them know you need to check references, past jobs and so on. Explain the importance of this step. You don't want to get caught with someone who talks bigger than the deliver.

6. PUT THE TASK IN WRITING

Day-to-day volunteers should have a description of their duties. The skilled volunteer requires much more detail that may include the scope of the project, deliverables, reporting schedule, etc. Outline the project as much as possible in advance and be ready to accommodate the skilled volunteer's personal schedule. The project description may also need to be customized to fit within the skilled volunteer's expertise. Complete this document as soon as possible.

7. BE FLEXIBLE

Projects often run into delays, and in rare cases must move quicker than expected. Other changes may be necessary to fit changing circumstances. It is best to stick to the plan, but be ready to amend the project document as necessary. Communicate your needs to the skilled volunteer and decide together on any changes.

8. EVALUATE

Especially when first developing a relationship with a particular skilled volunteer, it is important to review the process and the results in order to ensure you are following the best process possible. Include the skilled volunteer and all related parties in the evaluation.

Hopefully, following these steps will allow you to take advantage of the tremendous pool of talent, skills and knowledge that this new group of volunteers has to offer. Working with skilled volunteers can not only save you money and help build your organization, it will also allow you to gain an important new ally.