

## Resource: Volunteer Retention

Retaining volunteers is important to ensure the continuation and consistency of the services you provide. Volunteers gain a lot of organisational knowledge during their time in your organisation - when they leave, they take that knowledge and experience with them. If you consider the time and processes you have gone through to recruit a volunteer - you will definitely want some return on that investment.

Volunteers are all different. They have different languages of appreciation, are motivated by different forms of recognition and there is not one thing that will incentivise them all to stay and perform their roles well. Some of the things you need to consider are:

### PROVIDE A GREAT CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

One of the main reasons volunteers leave an organisation is because of a bad customer experience. Consider what defines a “good” customer experience and ensure you provide this at every point of engagement volunteers have with you. Make a list of these touchpoints and then rate your volunteers’ experience from poor-excellent. Where you see room for improvement, make changes if possible.

### KNOW WHY VOLUNTEERS LEAVE

If you conduct exit interviews with your volunteers you will collect feedback that can inform your work. Even if someone has told you the reason they are leaving, you will still be able to gather data on their experience with your organisation, what they enjoyed or didn’t enjoy and any suggestions they have for improvements.

You can gather this information via “Survey Monkey”, a written survey by email or hard copy, or by having someone phone the person. Having someone do this for you is a great way to get information that a volunteer may have been reluctant to tell you directly - be prepared to get feedback on you!

Where possible, make changes that address any issues raised - and keep doing whatever is working well!

### ENSURE VOLUNTEERS HAVE THE RESOURCES THEY NEED

One of the other main reasons why volunteers leave is due to a lack of resources. Resources fall into three main categories:

**Learnt Resources:** These are skills and capabilities that volunteers have. Sometimes we need to develop these skills through training and coaching. If a volunteer feels they don’t have the necessary skills to do their role, and if skill development is not available, they may leave.

**Felt Resources:** These are feelings of confidence, self esteem and a feeling of efficacy - or making a difference. If a volunteer constantly feels inadequate, is anxious and nervous, feels unaccepted and uncomfortable, they won’t stay with your organisation:

**Practical Resources:** These are things like time, transport, health and money. Sometimes volunteers experience a lack of these things, which means they are unable to continue volunteering. We can influence practical resources by providing flexible roster options, reimbursing travel expenses, and ensuring volunteers do not feel overworked or overburdened.

As a leader of volunteers you need to address the resource needs of your volunteer teams.

Encouraging volunteers to discuss their needs openly with you is important. Where there are gaps, address these with coaching, support and training.

## LIFE EVENTS

The other main reason a volunteer leaves an organisation is the impact of a life event. Life events include a volunteer moving into the paid workforce, experiencing a bereavement, moving away, or some other change of circumstance.

Whilst you can't influence life events, you can ensure that volunteers leave your organisation in a positive way and know they are welcome to return should their circumstances change again.

## WHAT HELPS THEM STAY?

There is no one "silver bullet" that will ensure your volunteers remain with your organisation. Making them feel valued and an important part of what you do is crucial.

Recognition, reward, acknowledgement and valuing are all key aspects of retaining volunteers.

## REFLECTING THEIR VALUE

More than anything, volunteers want to know the impact of the work they do for you and how they have contributed to your mission and goals. In other words, volunteers want to know the impact they have made, and how things have changed for the better.

You can do this by reporting back to them regularly to reflect and summarise what they have done and achieved. This can happen verbally, through a presentation or infographic, or more formally via an annual report. Research shows that this is the most effective way you can make volunteers feel validated. Usually this kind of reporting includes stories, numbers, feedback from clients and staff and statements linking volunteer action to your mission statement.

Reflecting value is easier if you can collect data on your volunteer's contribution. This might include hours and years of service, number of clients helped and what tasks were done by who.

## SAYING THANK YOU

Everyone wants to feel appreciated. Thanking volunteers is important —and there are many ways to do this. Gifts and functions, letters and cards, badges and certificates all have their place in any recognition strategy you may have.

Volunteers do want to be thanked. Sometimes simple gestures with an individual touch are all that is needed - especially if you have a limited budget.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND RECOGNITION

Many organisations will acknowledge volunteers for the contribution they make and recognise the hours and years they volunteer. Some volunteers will stay in roles until they reach a certain milestone of service - e.g. they may be recognised at a function for three years continuous service and be awarded a badge and certificate to go with this.

Some volunteers shy away from this type of recognition and are not motivated by such things.

## FINAL THOUGHTS & TIPS

Where possible identify the benefits a volunteer receives from working for your organisation - and communicate these clearly. Benefits might include discounts, free parking, training and upskilling, social get togethers, certificates and references.

Make sure what you do for one, you do for all.

Mix up your recognition strategies to ensure you tick everyone's box at some stage.

Many volunteers just want some of your time - talk with them and spend time with them. Volunteers are very loyal when they like and respect the people they work with!

Most volunteers value feedback on their performance. They seek reassurance and want to know they are doing things well.

Whatever you choose to do - don't forget to have fun . Happy volunteers stay in their roles!

*Source: Volunteering Waikato November 2020*