

Interviewing Volunteers

Voluntary Action-Leeds

The earliest opportunity for organisation and volunteer to really begin the 'get to know each other' process is likely to be during some arranged meeting between the two parties. Although this meeting can be formal or informal it should have a purpose, a structure and be an opportunity to explore a number of issues. It is debatable whether volunteers need to be 'interviewed' as such, the use of the word 'interview' being contentious given the connotations this carries. Calling this meeting 'a chat' or 'get together' may be more appropriate, whichever, it should be seen as an essential part of the recruitment and selection process and careful preparation is needed for it to be effective. This paper looks at issues concerned with interviewing volunteers and covers areas for discussion and consideration on both practical and personal levels.

Why interview volunteers?

1. To enable the organisation to decide whether or not to recruit the volunteer and, if so, what tasks would be appropriate for them.
2. An interviewer will need to find out the volunteer's expectations, reasons for wanting to do voluntary work and if there are problems which may influence the type of task undertaken. They may also wish to know about the interests, skills, knowledge and experience of the volunteer, the time they are willing to give and what level of support is needed. The interview provides an opportunity to assess the attitude of the volunteer regarding issues relevant to the organisation and its work e.g. equal opportunities, homelessness, substance abuse etc.
3. To give a prospective volunteer sufficient information and understanding to enable them to decide if they want to take up voluntary work within the organisation. (During an interview, the potential volunteer will be looking for information about the organisation, the range and nature of voluntary work available, hours of voluntary work and level of commitment, details on support and supervision, reimbursement of expenses, opportunities for training and personal development etc.
4. Interviewing volunteers demonstrates their involvement is taken seriously.
5. A professional recruitment and selection process, of which interviews are apart, are considered (by insurers and funders) integral to an organisation's "duty of care" towards both its client/user group and volunteers. (For more details on "duty of care" see paper on 'Volunteers and Insurance'.)
6. It provides an opportunity to gain factual information on a volunteer, complete application and reference forms etc.
7. It is a time for exploring whether there is a match between what is needed and what is being offered by both prospective volunteer and organisation.

Who conducts the interview?

Decisions need to be made within the organisation about who will conduct interviews with volunteers. This will often be the duty of the senior worker or, if different, someone who has overall responsibility for managing volunteers. In addition, there is a sound case for involving existing volunteers and/or members of the management committee, client/users and other workers. Existing volunteers, for example, may have a greater understanding of what it feels like to be a new and potential volunteer. They will probably identify more closely with a volunteer interviewer, finding them less threatening. There are logistical issues to consider, however, inviting/encouraging as wide a range of people as possible, will enable people from under-represented groups to participate in the decision-making and recruitment processes of the organisation. In turn, this can be helpful in breaking down barriers in order to reach people from those under-represented groups.

An 'interview panel approach', similar to that used when recruiting paid workers, is worth considering but would not, in most instances, be appropriate. Firstly, this is not practical as most voluntary organisations do not have the resources to permit, say, three people time to interview all prospective volunteers. Secondly, having a panel would probably be intimidating for someone coming along to find out about being a volunteer, though having more than one person interviewing can avoid subjectivity on the part of that interviewer. This final point can be overcome if an organisation interviews someone more than once (e.g. the initial interview, during training, induction interview etc.) as this allows different people be involved in interviewing, thus enabling second opinions on prospective volunteers.

The idea of an 'interview' itself can be off-putting and may alienate a prospective volunteer. Interviewers should be aware of this and, therefore, need to develop a range of qualities and skills conducive to effective interviewing (see appendix 1).

Where should interviews take place?

Ideally, interviews should be held in a quiet location where privacy and confidentiality are guaranteed, and where there are going to be no interruptions. A prospective volunteer may want to discuss personal, sensitive matters and the interviewer must respect this. The environment should be comforting, welcoming, easy to find and accessible to everyone! Bearing in mind all the points mentioned so far, one possibility is to hold interviews in the home of a prospective volunteer, with their consent of course! This can lead to less of a power imbalance between the two parties with the volunteer feeling comfortable in their own surroundings. It does mean, however, the volunteer will not get a feel of the working environment, an issue which would need to be addressed in due course. A final point - the location for where the interview is to take place should be organised well in advance.

Is there any preparation needed before interviewing a volunteer?

Preparation relating to interviewing depends on the interviewer and the way in which they work. It could be argued, for the interview to be effective, an interviewer needs at least a basic structure or framework to work with. Whilst it is important not to be 'over-formal', this may be threatening to a volunteer, it is likely the interviewer will aim to both put across and gather the necessary minimum amount of information. Structuring the process will enable the interviewer to achieve this, as well as helping them deal with any problem, which can arise during an interview (see appendix 2). Furthermore, all volunteers should be treated equally and one way of helping this, at least in part, is to ask everyone the same range of questions.

Those responsible for interviewing need to consider their personal approach. For example, the minimum they should be is punctual, well prepared, well informed and well mannered. A prospective volunteer is likely to be a little nervous and may, for instance, feel anxious about taking up the time of people they perceive as 'professionals'. Therefore, the interviewer should ensure they do all they can to enable the volunteer feel welcome and at ease. This means showing a genuine interest in them, being friendly and responding in a warm, open manner. The interviewer also needs to be aware of their own body language and eye contact, so the interviewee receives positive messages. Similarly, the interviewer should be sensitive to any non-verbal signals being given by the volunteer.

The pace of an interview is important. It should not be hurried, especially if a person wants to talk about personal or sensitive matters, or drag on too long. Related to this are the interview questions and the manner in which they are asked. Being required to answer challenging or difficult questions, particularly at the beginning, may lead to someone feeling uneasy. Simple, unthreatening questions are most appropriate at the early stage, enabling a volunteer to feel comfortable and talk more freely.

Although the interviewer has responsibility to give volunteers as much information as possible, they should not bombard them with lots of facts, figures, irrelevant details and other unnecessary trivia about the organisation. It may, for example, be a good idea to have relevant 'job descriptions' and 'person specifications' to hand, as these will help the interviewer to remain focused on the roles of the volunteer. They should also clarify the recruitment process, including information on training, selection procedures (e.g. references, police checks etc.) and challenge discrepancies in information given by the interviewee.

A further, but very important, point concerns language. First, interviewers should try to avoid using jargon, or at least too much of it, as this may irritate, confuse or alienate a volunteer. It can even make someone feel inadequate or 'uneducated'. Second, the word 'volunteer' has different meanings/connotations to different ethnic groups. It may be more appropriate, for example, to use the term 'helper' instead. If an organisation is actively recruiting people from all communities (and they should be) its recruitment and selection practices need to be tailored accordingly.

Important reminder, have plenty of tea, coffee and biscuits available - these can work wonders!

For further details see appendices:

1. 'Qualities and Skills Required for Interviewing'
2. 'Some Problems when Interviewing'
3. 'Example of the Interview Process and Structure'.

What happens after an interview?

The interviewer needs to record the information gathered, reflect on the content of the interview and follow up on any action required. Any confidential information should be stored securely and access to it restricted only to those people who really need to know the details. If information is going to be passed on to another organisation, the prospective volunteer should be informed and their permission sought.

Finally, ensure prospective volunteers are kept up to date at all times regarding the recruitment process. Leaving a long delay or failing to inform the volunteer concerned may lead them to view the organisation (and possibly other voluntary organisations) in a negative light. It may also mean losing their services as a volunteer.

Are there any other issues to consider?

Before recruiting people for voluntary work, an organisation needs to have a clear policy on whether or not it will be able to find roles for all potential volunteers. In some instances there are valid reasons for not accepting everyone who offers to be a volunteer (e.g. only a specific number of volunteers required, resource limitations, inappropriate volunteers, size of premises, priorities of the organisation etc.) while on other occasions a person may be wanted as a volunteer but it could be some time before the organisation is ready to take them on. Rather than rejecting volunteers outright, organisations need to look at handling these situations in a more positive and sensitive manner - this is often referred to as 'counselling out' volunteers. Whatever the situation, it is good practice for an organisation to have a contingency plan in place.

Finally, if any of the above issues, or others, arise an interviewer needs to be aware of their organisation's policies and how to follow them. Procedures will, of course, vary between organisations and their type of work but if voluntary work cannot be offered, for whatever reason, it is necessary to be open and honest with the volunteer. In addition, further guidance should be given, such as referring people to alternative sources of help and advice. A Volunteer Bureau, for example, has the means to recommend many other forms of voluntary work. For more details regarding this issue, please refer to paper on 'Releasing Volunteers'.

Interviewing volunteers is a key stage in the recruitment and selection process, often providing the best opportunity to really 'get to know' someone. An effective interview will enable a volunteer feels needed, valued as an individual and that their contribution is being taken seriously. Taking time to develop a professional approach to 'the interview' is an investment well worth making.

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APPENDIX 1

'Qualities and Skills Required for Interviewing'

- Warmth/Openness Enable people to feel relaxed, at ease and welcome, especially if they appear nervous or have had a problem finding you.
- Attention/Interest A volunteer should feel you are happy to spend time with them and that you are genuinely interested in their what they have to offer. Therefore remind others not to interrupt the meeting!
- Listening Give your complete attention. Listen to what is being said and for that which is hidden - there may be issues which people avoid!
- Prompting Encourage the person to say things which they may find difficult but do not pressurise.
- Questions Ask 'open' rather than 'closed' questions. An example of an open question is "How do you feel about?"
- Conversation Encourage conversation. This means enabling the other person to speak and say what they feel while you respond accordingly.
- Recording Write down vital points (with permission of course), for example factual information, names addresses, phone nos., dates, etc.
- Knowledge An important area! Have a thorough knowledge of your organisation, its work, structure, client/user group etc. Know what openings exist for voluntary work and the process for recruiting, selecting, training, placing and supporting volunteers.
- Sensitivity Issues can arise which are of a sensitive nature. A prospective volunteer may wish to disclose personal details or feel uneasy about some of the work involved. Listen to what is being said and try not to be judgmental or defensive.
- Instinct/Intuition Instinct/intuition is that intangible feeling people have about something not said or known. It can be positive or negative. For example, it is possible to get a 'good' feeling about someone who has little experience but you 'know' they will be an excellent volunteer. Similarly, you may feel instinctively uneasy about someone else. Whether you follow instinct or not is your decision.
- Clarity/Direction Ensure volunteers know what happens next - the future process - some kind of timetable perhaps. Try not to be vague.
- Politeness Thank people for attending the interview, offer tea or coffee and biscuits, a comfy chair, your full attention, no interruptions etc.

APPENDIX 2

Some Problems when Interviewing

- Unplanned/unstructured interview. May lead to important issues not being covered, information not being given, interruptions, a rushed interview, appearing disorganised etc. The organisation could be viewed as unprofessional. Postponing to a future date may be beneficial.
- Prior knowledge of a volunteer. Tricky. Prior knowledge of someone may prejudice judgement. On the other hand these issues need to be taken into account.
- Volunteer who talks too much. Listen. Wait and see if this abates. If not, be assertive and make a positive intervention.
- Volunteer who is too quiet. Try not to pressurise a volunteer. Do not talk too much. Try basic, encouraging, open - ended questions to begin with.
- Volunteer who is not suitable. Be honest and give the reasons for not accepting a volunteer. Offer alternatives, e.g. referring them to a Volunteer Bureau.
- Volunteer's limitations. Limitations may be due to time, childcare, work responsibilities, travel, etc. Be sensitive and enable a volunteer to evaluate the situation.
- Volunteer interested in everything. Enable volunteer to look at all options and select the most suitable activity. Alternatively, arrange another interview.
- Volunteer interested in nothing. Enable volunteer to look at options, be encouraging and enthusiastic. Offer them an opportunity to chat with other volunteers.
- Volunteer with extra support needs. Be aware of what support the organisation can offer, whether or not it can meet the needs of the volunteer and be honest if it is not possible to take them on. But do not use this as an excuse! Remember the advantages of working with volunteers with extra support needs!
- No apparent 'problems'. Remember instinct/intuition. Always check with volunteer there are no problems.

APPENDIX 3

Example of the Interview Process and Structure .

Before the interview.

- Prepare room, ensure it is warm, inviting, sufficient chairs, put the kettle on!
- Let everyone else know volunteer is expected and at what time.
- Ensure there will be no interruptions.

- Prepare appropriate documentation, application forms, options for volunteers etc.

Personal approach.

- Mentally prepare, switch off from other work!
- Be welcoming, helpful and polite to volunteer.
- Positive body language, eye contact, open posture, smile, acknowledge, listen etc.
- Regularly check with volunteer they understand what has been discussed

Structuring the interview.

a) Introductory phase:

Clarify and agree purpose, time and format of interview.

Briefly outline what issues are to be covered.

b) Exploratory phase:

(The main part of an interview, the giving and seeking of information, discussing issues, concerns, etc., in order to begin assessment of a volunteer's suitability.)

- Give information. (Minimum: work of organisation, role for volunteer, practicalities e.g. expenses, expectations of volunteer, commitment required, information on training and support, policies e.g. Equal Opportunities, HIV/Aids etc.)

- Information sought. (Minimum: motivation for volunteering, role volunteer wants, what attracts volunteer, time volunteer has available and other limitations, volunteer's understanding of relevant issues, previous experience,

interests and their relevance, factual information e.g. name, address, references etc.)

- Interviewing calls for a degree of flexibility. For example, the amount of information which needing to be provided. This will depend to a large extent on the volunteer, their prior knowledge and experience and whether they have read the organisation's publicity etc. Always leave time for discussing issues and answering any questions a prospective volunteer may have.

c) Concluding phase:

The two parties should, hopefully, reach a mutual decision regarding appropriateness of the work. Check all necessary details have been gathered, the volunteer is clear as to what happens next and is satisfied, has no further queries, and a course of action and date for a future meeting has been agreed. Offer to pay for any out of pocket expenses.

After the interview.

An interviewer should spend time reflecting on what has been said, noting points they feel important. Practical details should be recorded, references sent for etc. Confidential information should be kept safe and accessible only to those who need to know the details!