



Encouraging Volunteer Participation:

Why don't people help out more?

You've put the word out. You need help from your wonderful volunteers for an upcoming event. You hear back from the three people who always put their hand up to help out...tumbleweeds from the other 20 people on your volunteer list. Why won't more people help out?

Recent experiences within our team related to helping out at a school event and with a sports club got us chatting about reasons why people don't put their hand up to help. People who organise and just get into it and get things done, as most people who coordinate volunteers are, sometimes assume other people approach things in the same way as they do. All people are different, especially when it comes to volunteering. Sometimes the reasons for the tumbleweeds are subtle. Sometimes not so subtle. Explore the following in the context of your volunteers.

They don't know you need help

If they haven't been exposed to it before, people can be completely unaware of what goes on behind the scenes. They simply don't realise the work involved. They might assume you already have a full complement of helpers, or your paid staff handle everything. Or they presume their fees or subs cover the cost of getting everything done. People who are not helping out may be assuming you don't need help. Those looking for volunteer help sometimes assume everyone knows what's involved and they are just choosing not to help out. Communicate, communicate, communicate. Ensure everyone knows the vital part volunteers play in your organisation and the impact volunteer help has for your organisation. The way you communicate is important too – 'just making sure you are aware' is powerful. Shaming people is not.

They missed the memo

Not everyone reads emails or newsletters. Others will see an email or newsletter ask and assume, with so many other people reading the request, somebody else will

put their hand up. 1 in 4 people say they don't volunteer because no one asked them. The group email, Facebook post, bit in the newsletter will not count as asking them. Make an individual invitation so the volunteer knows you need help from them specifically.

Shoulder tap and make the ask face to face. If it must be email, email the person directly. The worst that can happen is they can't help this time. At least now they know you need help. The 'one and done' approach won't work for next time though, you'll need to make a direct ask next time you are looking for help too.

They didn't get enough notice

Most people are happy to make time in their schedule if they know they're needed well in advance. Don't wait until Wednesday to find volunteers for your working bee on Saturday. Where you can, develop an annual calendar of events, so everyone knows what's on for the year and can plan accordingly. Or a quarterly calendar of events, if annual is not possible. Even a 'save the date' placeholder, or letting people know the event will be on the 4th OR 11th November (weather permitting) will help.

They don't know what you want them to do... specifically.

People like to ensure they are completely capable of doing a job before they volunteer to do it. They want to make sure they can do the job, especially if they lack confidence. They also don't want to let you down by saying they can do a job if they are not sure. The very general broadcast 'we need your help' will not be enough. You need to tell people exactly what you need them to do, when, how long it will take, where, and who they will be working with. Make it easier for people to say yes, through knowing what they are saying yes to. Create a list of frequently asked questions to give volunteers the full picture and allay any doubts or concerns.

The task is not their cup of tea

Look for tasks at every level of the organisation, beyond 'traditional' volunteer roles. Not everyone can help with the sausage sizzle or at a working bee or wrangling 30 seven-year olds at an athletics activity. Perhaps you could find a volunteer to refresh your website or look after social media or look after and find other volunteers. You'll be amazed at the wealth of 'hidden' talent within your organisation's network who would be happy to help with roles which fit their skillset and the time they have available.

They lack confidence

Not everyone has the skills or confidence to do certain tasks, especially at large-scale events. Be sensitive to what people might be feeling and offer opportunities to make it easier for them. Perhaps they need some extra training or there is a different task which is better suited. Offer the opportunity to buddy your volunteer with someone experienced to build their confidence. Be aware not everyone is confident working alongside people they don't know, so make it optional. Recognise what they do well and share the feedback with them to build their confidence for next time.

They've helped before and didn't feel appreciated

If they didn't feel appreciated the first time, chances are they won't offer again. Even if you don't always feel it yourself, it's important to ensure your volunteers feel appreciated. A thank shared directly with your volunteer goes a long way. Providing refreshments for volunteers during and after an event is great too, and helps your volunteers get to know each other. Asking for feedback to their experience and ideas for improvements is also a powerful way to make volunteers feel appreciated. A public thank you is a great way to communicate the difference volunteer help makes for your organisation, helping with point 1 above.



They didn't have a great experience last time

Sometimes you've got one shot. If your volunteer has a bad experience, chances are they won't volunteer again. Think of your volunteers like customers, who are looking for a great customer service experience. Ensure your volunteer has everything they need to feel equipped to do the role you are asking them to do and make it as easy for them as possible by being prepared yourself. Sometimes poor volunteer performance goes hand in hand with unreasonable expectations, poor training and someone in charge being inflexible about how tasks are carried out.

They don't feel welcome

Make sure the time, energy, and resources you've spent on recruitment are not wasted because new folks don't feel welcomed into the team. Foster an open and welcoming culture in your team. Buddy new volunteers with an existing volunteer who would be great at making them feel welcome. Volunteer teams can become tight-knit and cliquey, sometimes without realising. Make sure everyone in

the team knows it is their responsibility to help newbies seamlessly join the team.

Make sure the right person is leading the team

If you have someone who holds tightly onto the reins or gives the 'it's my way or the highway' vibe, they can impact participation. Before looking for volunteers, make sure everyone involved is truly ready to pass on some responsibilities. Ask them to make a list of those roles. For some people this is easier said than done and you may need to have some difficult conversations with the controlling personalities in your team before you try to recruit more volunteers.

The hours don't suit them

Often people would love to help out. Not everyone can be available during office hours or for the whole day. What roles can be done from anywhere at any time? Which tasks can be turned into micro-volunteering moments? Parents might not be able to spend the whole day helping at the school Athletics Day, but they'd be happy to spend 30 minutes marshalling

the sprints or replacing the high-jump bar while watching their child. Break roles down into bite-sized chunks if you can. Forty parents micro-volunteering for 15-30 minutes while they spectate is a win-win situation for everyone. Flexibility is key!

They've offered to help before and you turned them down

At a recent school athletics day, one of our team noticed another parent looking busy and frazzled doing the sausage sizzle and offered to help. To be told it was a job for specific volunteers. It doesn't have to be an actual 'no thanks'. Not replying to an offer to help is the equivalent of 'no thanks'. People volunteer to help out because they want to be of service, and if they are not being of service to you, they will go and be of service to somebody else. As soon as someone shows a desire to volunteer – find them a job – even if you have to create one!