

RETENTION & REWARDS

Retention

Volunteer retention is a crucial part of every volunteer-based organization. Bringing volunteers back year after year builds an institutional memory, wherein volunteer management can change with the seasons but those experienced volunteers participate in steering the organization towards its goals. It is these volunteers who closely align themselves with the mission and values of the organization and bring the invaluable marketing tool of word of mouth to the streets. In terms of diversity, volunteers need to feel they can be their authentic selves within your organization, while at the same time supporting the larger mission. As mentioned in previous sections of this manual, treat your volunteers well and with respect and your recruitment and retention numbers will increase.

The obvious ways of treating your volunteers well is with benefits (more details below), but there are other ways of retaining volunteers that ultimately benefit your organization as well as meeting your volunteer retention goals. An easy way to keep your volunteers coming back is with constant communication. Whether it comes in the form of a monthly newsletter or via social media platforms highlighting new initiatives, projects or general happenings in your organization, communication to your volunteer base will generate more interest and investment in what you do. Continuing engagement in the off season can surely be a struggle but creating fun ways of engaging the volunteers like contest giveaways to partner organizations' events, encouraging them to share their volunteer stories via words or pictures on Facebook or promoting other volunteer opportunities will keep you fresh in their minds.

Involving your current volunteers in the overall operation of the volunteer program will give them the "insider" feeling and will ultimately increase the capacity of the volunteer management team by focusing team efforts on achieving greater volunteer program goals. Whether it's helping with distribution of promotional material for recruitment, answering basic questions at sign-in during orientation or helping with data entry for scheduling purposes, making someone feel a part of the big picture strengthens the connection between the volunteer and the organization.

Now take a step back and look at the volunteer program that exists within your organization. Are there leadership opportunities for volunteers? Are there options for them to grow within your organization? Are there roles that exist for volunteers that are skill based? With the shift in volunteerism now looking at maximizing volunteer's skill sets within the organization, volunteer management must provide volunteers with roles that offer a chance to apply their skills and experience.

A great way to start is by creating supervisorial roles within your volunteer team. Whether it be team leads, shift supervisors or project leads, giving your volunteers a chance to become leaders will give your experienced volunteers a feeling of value while offering new volunteers an opportunity to experience peer mentorship. While you may do your best to prepare and train new volunteers, most of the tasks are learned on the job from a shift supervisor. This is just one way of implementing a skills-based engagement strategy.

In a discussion paper about the strategy, Volunteer Canada defines a skills-based engagement strategy as one that focuses on identifying the skills required to complete specific projects or tasks derived from the organization's mission, and then recruiting individuals with these specific skills or areas of expertise.

These types of opportunities do require shifting the focus from generalized to more specific recruitment, like targeting professional and/or business schools. The main benefits of engaging professionally or specifically skilled volunteers are:

- Increase organizational capacity
- Provide specialized skills
- Improve long-term capacity (knowledge transfer of specific skill sets to other staff)
- Increase volunteer base
- Increased visibility (positive experiences = great word-of-mouth marketing)
- Improve mission delivery (successful project completion with limited time from paid staff)
- Increase impact (implement new ways to encourage peoples to think differently)
- Raise current salaries (decrease number of paid staff thereby providing opportunity for reasonable salaries)

Assessing your specific needs by talking with your staff will help identify what projects could use some expertise. The more concrete a project is, meaning a specific goal with outlined tasks and deadlines, the better the chance of attracting the right volunteer for the job. Although it may take some extra planning and working with your staff to spell out the expectations and deliverables, the value to the volunteer involved and your organization is great.

Rewards

For some people it is hard to imagine why anyone would contribute their time to an organization without getting anything back. In fact, one of the top motivators as to why people volunteer with organizations is for altruistic reasons. Generally, people volunteer to give back to their community and because they wholeheartedly support the mission and goals of the organization. Understanding why people volunteer with your organization is the first step in developing rewards that your volunteers will appreciate.

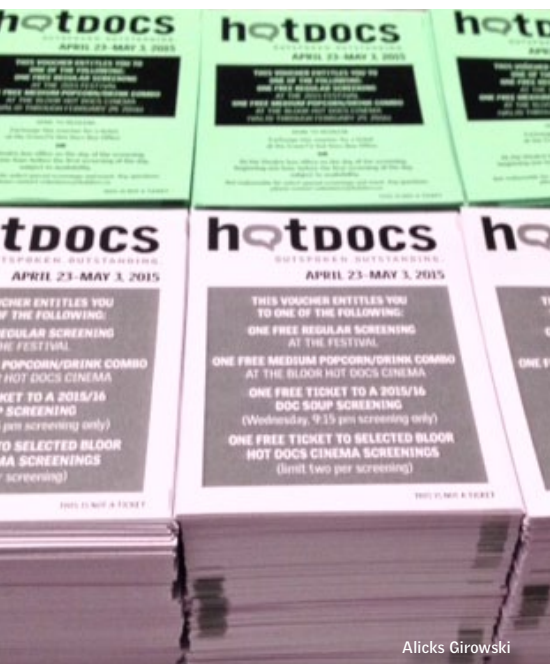
If your biggest recruitment push surrounds an event or festival, rewarding your volunteers for their time with tickets to the event is the most appreciated form of reward, according to the survey conducted this past March (Figure 3). Most volunteers dedicate their time to your organization because they support what you do, so naturally giving them access to your programming goes a long way. If it is not feasible to arrange tickets for all those working the event due to limited capacity, think about giving away tickets through a lottery system or through a contest. If your organization has a membership system in effect, offering your volunteers a discounted membership is another great way to keep your volunteers engaged throughout the year, and will automatically invite them into the community of patrons. It is not hard to imagine that volunteers who are experiencing your programming will almost definitely share their experience with family and friends, providing another way to increase invaluable word-of-mouth marketing, especially across diverse communities.

Not all organizations can afford to give away tickets to events to volunteers who dedicate time to the event, so setting up opportunities for professional development is a wonderful way to supplement your existing benefits. Identify professionals within your organization that you think could run a workshop for volunteers on different aspects of your organization, like marketing strategies or event planning and production. To expand on this idea, think outside of the box: introduce your volunteers to professionals in like-minded organizations at a networking event. The event does take some extra planning, but your volunteers will love the opportunity to get to know representatives from similar organizations and your connections with community partners will at least get your volunteer's foot in the door. Don't stop at professional development, though. Think about ideas for personal development too, like presentation skills and project management tools. People volunteer to grow personally and professionally and anything that you can provide to help them with that goal will be appreciated. This aspect can be particularly important for those from immigrant communities who are trying to establish themselves in the Canadian workforce.

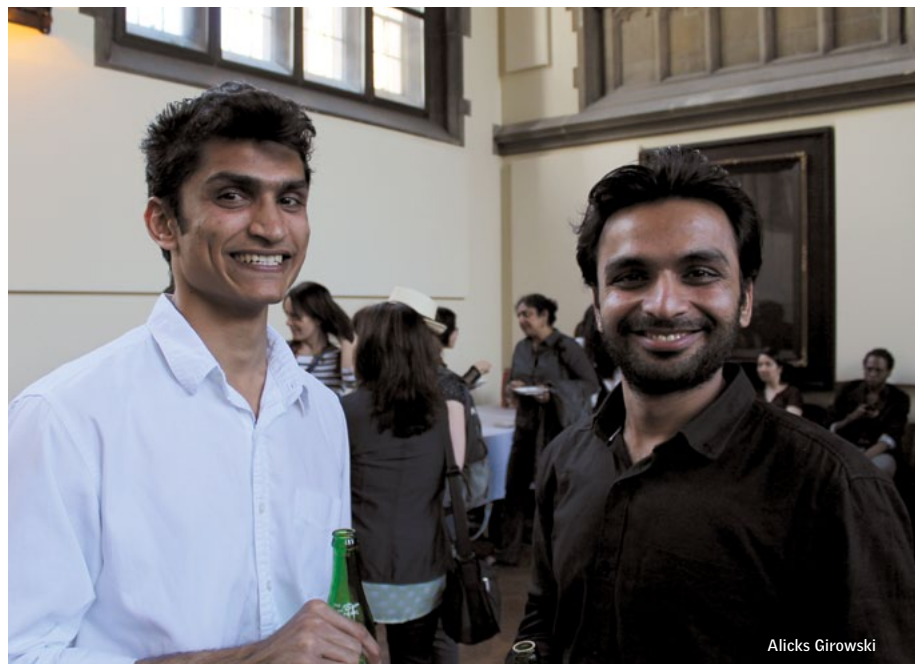
Some volunteers like to list their experience on their résumés to grow experience within a field that is interesting to them. Ensuring that you have the capacity to provide reference letters whenever possible is a great benefit for those particular volunteers. Develop a general template (Appendix Q) so that when requests come in, you can easily update the template with the number of hours that volunteer contributed, as well as any specific performance-related notes. This is yet another reason why keeping track of performance feedback is so important; it allows you to add a personal touch to the letter showing the volunteer that you respect the work that they have contributed to your organization.

Another motivating factor to get involved with an organization is to meet new people and experience something new. Planning a staff and volunteer appreciation party provides your volunteers an opportunity to enjoy themselves in a social setting. It's a time to get together and celebrate all of the hard work that goes into your organization, as well as a time to reconnect or get to know other volunteers and staff. Start thinking about things like a venue, snacks and entertainment for the party early on; this will give you time to think about potential sponsors or partners for the event or the space in order to keep your budget in check. Smaller events planned throughout the year are also a great way to keep your volunteer base engaged and will make them feel valued. If your organization works with various groups of volunteers dedicated to a project or department, then smaller social functions might be the way to show your appreciation for them. Attend a free event by a like-minded organization as a group, or plan a picnic in the park. Be sure to consider the accessibility of any venue and to avoid religious holidays.

There is more to showing your appreciation than a party, free tickets or workshops. Appreciation can be expressed every day to your volunteers with a quick thank you, a prompt reply to email or phone inquiries or by scheduling a time to sit down and catch up. The energy and attitude you bring daily to your job radiates through your volunteer base and spreads to everyone. While planning benefits, parties and events are great ways to thank you volunteers, remembering to positively interact with them is often the best way to show your appreciation.



Alicks Girowski



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INSPIRATION

The following quotes were pulled from the survey administered to volunteers in March 2015 in response to the question, "If you were a volunteer manager, what is the one thing you would love to offer in your volunteer program?"

Free transportation (public transport tokens) to get people to their shifts.

"Skill-specific opportunities to facilitate professional development and a post event meetup for networking and face-to-face feedback."

Good training sessions that address both what is needed for each specific volunteer position as well as some TED-like talks to inspire or educate us in ways that will move us forward as people :)

An opportunity to give more feedback through meetings or focus groups.

An effective volunteer network program for volunteers to connect and share with each other.

Development skills and a bridge to employment opportunities, either within the same organization or through connecting the volunteers to a network of peers.

Opportunities for various commitment levels—short-term positions as well as long-term positions, with development potential for those that want to contribute on a more significant basis with the potential of maybe eventually joining the organization on a paid basis.

I firmly believe in the power of education. If I were a volunteer manager I would like to offer conferences and workshops for the volunteers, with interesting speakers and networking opportunities for them. I believe volunteering is a valuable learning experience, where you grow from meeting new people and from being challenged in new ways.

A presentation or video on how my volunteering helps society directly.

If I were a volunteer manager, I would love to create opportunities for people to become leaders and develop their own initiatives of supporting the organization's cause. This could mean periodically organizing meetups where volunteers can exchange ideas on a new way to support the cause within the organization and depending on the result of these discussions, provide them with the resources and encouragement to act on those ideas.

A robust support system for volunteers. I know that's more than a single thing. But really, the volunteer positions I've returned to are the ones I've felt the most supported in, either because of a personal connection forged with an organizer or other volunteers, or because I felt like I was well-trained and had a good supervisor to turn to.