

Volunteers and interns can be a great asset to an arts organisation, but finding and managing volunteers requires planning to ensure that the relationship between organisation and volunteer is mutually beneficial.

Before taking on any volunteers an organisation should consider why they would like to involve volunteers in their activities and how they can help the organisation meet its objectives. There should be a clearly outlined purpose for taking on volunteers for a volunteer program to run successfully. Volunteers should be well integrated into an organisation and should not replace paid staff positions, but should support staff and the services that the organisation provides.

What volunteers are looking for

To successfully involve volunteers in an organisation their personal motivations and expectations need to be understood and satisfied while also meeting the objectives of the organisation. People volunteer to pursue an interest, broaden social opportunities, keep active in retirement, contribute to a cause, do something worthwhile, gain new skills, or seek a challenge. Some people might be only interested in volunteering for a one-off event, while others might be interested in something long-term and regular.

Internship or student placement volunteers are generally seeking an experience that may connect them to future employment opportunities. Students will often need a short term placement with specific goals to be achieved such as learning new skills, refreshing skills they already have, professional networking or road testing a particular vocation. Their tasks should reflect their areas of expertise or interest. Developing their knowledge within the arts industry is important, even if it is not immediately relevant to the task they are carrying out.

Other people may be more interested in the social interaction and leisure experience that volunteering can offer. For those wanting a social experience they should be matched to a role that will enable them to work as part of a team.

Managing volunteer tasks

In order for a volunteer program to be successful, professionalism should be always present: from the type of projects assigned to volunteers and the way they are recruited, through to volunteer orientation, training, ongoing mentoring, development and management.

Volunteer roles should be outlined in position descriptions, providing a clear picture of what activities are involved, what the outcome should be, the timeframe for the project or position and any other relevant information. This provides clarification not just for the volunteer but also paid staff to avoid any conflict of responsibilities. People interested in volunteering should submit an expression of interest form in relation to the position so that the volunteer can be matched to the right tasks for them. Volunteers should undergo orientation and training in order to gain an understanding of the organisation, how to complete their tasks and how these tasks fit within the objectives of the organisation.

Volunteer tasks should not be viewed as replacing staff positions or undertaking tasks no one else is prepared to do. A good volunteer project is one that is in line with organisational objectives, has a clear purpose and direction, presents the volunteer with learning opportunities, has attainable goals and is meaningful to the organisation. Volunteers should be able to claim ownership of their tasks and feel empowered to think about as well as perform the tasks. Throughout the volunteering period regular one on one feedback sessions are a good idea. This ensures strong communication throughout the project and allows the organisation to give and receive feedback.

Volunteers do not come for free

Running a volunteer program, whether it be for a handful of volunteers or 100 volunteers, involves tangible and intangible costs. Tangible costs may include a desk, an office, a computer, protective clothing, or social events as a thank you. If an organisation is thinking of running a large volunteer program, hiring a volunteer coordinator may be the best way of ensuring that the program is well managed as it takes time, effort and skill to recruit and train volunteers. If an organisation is unable to hire a volunteer coordinator then the task should be delegated to one staff member to avoid confusion around responsibilities.

WHS & Insurance

If an organisation is covered by the Work Health and Safety Act it must ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, the health and safety of all its workers, including volunteers. The organisation must provide the volunteer with training, information and instructions on how to undertake their work safely, personal protective equipment, first aid facilities or training and information on emergency procedures, and how to report hazards and incidents. Generally, volunteers are not covered by workers' compensation laws, therefore it is important to check that the organisation has insurance that adequately covers volunteers and the activities that volunteers are carrying out.

Resources

Safe Work Australia, The Essential Guide to Work Health and Safety for Volunteers

<https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/doc/essential-guide-work-health-and-safety-volunteers>

Managing Volunteers in Museums & Cultural Collections: 10 things you should know

<https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/doc/model-code-practice-how-manage-work-health-and-safety-risks>