

Arts volunteering programmes: what does success feel like?

You can't always get the measure of something simply by looking. A volunteer programme may seem successful from an organisation's point of view, with, on the surface, a high demand for volunteer roles and low volunteer turnover. But these things don't necessarily signify satisfied volunteers – the key ingredient of a successful volunteer programme.

While you won't always be able to tell what a successful volunteer programme *looks* like, you can measure success by asking what it *feels* like to be a satisfied volunteer. Those who are part of a well-managed programme are more likely to feel:

- Useful – with a structure to their work, clear goals and tasks.
- Well-trained – comfortable in their role and confident in the workplace.
- Part of the team – helping staff and other volunteers work towards a common goal, knowing where to go for help and to share their ideas.
- Valued – equal, no 'us and them' culture. Volunteers feel 'in with the bricks', not an afterthought or an add-on.
- Happy to receive regular constructive feedback, identifying opportunities to improve, learn more and fulfil their volunteering aspirations.
- Happy to comment on how they are managed and provide suggestions for improvement.
- The benefit from flexibility in their volunteering, so that they can fit volunteering around paid work, study and other commitments.
- That they are not being exploited.
- Able to recommend volunteering and what your organisation does to others.

Does this sound familiar? If you don't know how your volunteers feel about their experiences you need to start asking.

Evaluation – what's in it for you?

If you are already involving volunteers it's likely that they play an important part in organisational efficiency and business success. As with any workforce, content volunteers are a major contributor to service excellence, and should be nurtured as such.

Volunteers are also your customers, so that's another reason why you should listen to what they have to say. Arts organisations are used to asking for feedback from their public and the same courtesy should be extended to volunteers. They occupy an important middle ground, blending with audiences and staff, and as such can provide valuable feedback on business performance and customer service.

Successful volunteer programmes should continuously improve, adapting to meet changes in your business needs, society and the economy – all of which affect individual needs and volunteering trends. Flexibility in the volunteering offer is increasingly important: with high numbers of people currently out of work, there is a demand for volunteering roles which meet employability needs. Shorter-term and micro-volunteering opportunities are also popular, so organisations need to be creative about how and when people can give their time to fit around other commitments.

Listen-up

There are a number of ways of keeping your finger on the volunteering pulse. Start by holding regular one-to-one or group feedback sessions with your volunteers. You will need to train your staff and volunteers how to elicit and give constructive criticism and share ideas. Feedback must be followed up, so there should be a mechanism for addressing issues and taking ideas forward, otherwise you will lose credibility and volunteers will lose interest. At the other end of the scale is the volunteer satisfaction survey. Organisations which think their volunteers are happy are often surprised at negative or low response rates. The most feared reaction should be that of apathy; volunteers may be so disaffected that they don't think replying will make any difference, or they do reply but sit on the fence, having no strong responses either way to questions. You need to find out what's behind these behaviours. Evaluation works best when it's part of a regular routine – not something that happens rarely, or when a problem arises. It should almost be invisible, with your programme evolving as it gathers and absorbs feedback.

Value your volunteers

Volunteer satisfaction always starts with value, so show that you appreciate your volunteers by embedding a top-down supported volunteering culture in every aspect of the organisation. Develop a visible volunteering vision, clarifying the relationship between staff and volunteers, structuring expectations so that everyone understands their role, feels secure and knows what they're signing up to. Reward and publicise volunteer effort and impact – you can even put a monetary value on their collective contributions. Most importantly, remember that volunteering is not free. The most successful volunteer programmes are well resourced, so budget for volunteering development to include management, training, equipment, thank-you parties, and, of course, evaluation.

Top five resources

- **Value Volunteer Management**
<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/WhatWeDo/Projects+and+initiatives/value+volunteer+management> Learn about Volunteering England's recent campaign to raise awareness of the importance of investing in volunteer management.
- **Investing In Volunteers** <http://iiv.investinginvolunteers.org.uk/>. The UK quality standard for all organisations which involve volunteers in their work.
- **Volunteer Impact Assessment Toolkit – A Self Help Guide**
www.volunteering.org.uk/viat A short practical guide for assessing the difference volunteering makes on your volunteers, organisation, direct beneficiaries and wider community.

- **Volunteer Investment and Value Audit (VIVA)**
<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/8A630C69-6F92-41A0-8E8D-968FD70F5AA2/0/VIVAbulletinsecondedition.pdf> VIVA analyses what volunteers do and for how much time, matches it to equivalent paid work and applies the market wage.
- **Cultural Volunteer** www.lynnblackadder.com/cultural-volunteer. A free information service for those managing volunteers in the arts and heritage sectors.

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