

Volunteer Training

Training for all workers, whether paid or unpaid, is essential and identifying training needs should be a priority when a new volunteer starts a role. Choice is an essential element of volunteering, and not every volunteer will want to undertake training. Organisations should also be aware that training offered to volunteers must have a direct bearing on their voluntary work to avoid being regarded as a taxable 'perk'.

However, for many, these opportunities are a central motivation in their volunteering, and some skilled volunteer roles may have training as part of their requirements. Every volunteer involving organisation should look at their own reasons, policies and values for volunteer involvement to identify how they will address the issue of volunteer training, but here are a few good reasons that might be relevant to your organisation.

- Unusual or highly skilled volunteer roles may be difficult to fill unless relevant training is provided.
- Many people volunteer in order to learn and develop new skills and knowledge.
- Training helps ensure that everyone can meet organisational standards of work.
- Funders may expect or demand training for workers involved in the projects they fund.
- Volunteers may need training in particular organisational procedures.
- Training is an important element in risk management and meeting regulations, i.e. health and safety, data protection, safeguarding.
- Training demonstrates the value placed on the voluntary work being done, and the volunteers who do it.
- Training is vital in the development of quality in an organisation.
- Training demonstrates the organisation's commitment to providing a high quality service to staff, funders, service users and the wider community- as well as the volunteers themselves.

Sourcing good quality training is important. You are asking volunteers to give even more of their time to attend training, so the least you can do is make sure the training is beneficial and the trainer is engaging. You also must consider if the volunteers need to attend face-to-face training, or if the training can be completed online.

Getting the credit

You may also want to think of ways to recognise volunteers who go through training and you can give out your own in-house attendance certificates. However, accreditation is also an official recognition that a learner's achievements have been assessed as meeting a set of predetermined standards and is usually awarded by an external body.

Accrediting learners can add value to training but volunteers may benefit from improved employment or promotion prospects; it may increase their motivation by recognising their achievements; it may provide a first step into further training and education courses; it may increase their confidence and therefore their satisfaction in their volunteering. Service users, too, should benefit from improvements in the quality (and even the range of services).

As well as enjoying more motivated volunteers delivering the services, accreditation can also reassure service users as to the quality of volunteers' work.

The benefits to the organisation and to those working with the volunteers, should not be overlooked. Accrediting volunteers shows that an organisation recognises the standard of the skills, knowledge and understanding that volunteers bring to their work and should, therefore, improve motivation and retention among current volunteers. It can also send this message to the wider community, enhancing the organisation's reputation and encouraging potential volunteers (and funders!). Most of all, accreditation can- by benchmarking the **standard** of volunteers' work- produce more effective volunteers.

All of this is not to say, however, that accreditation is appropriate or desirable for all organisations, or indeed, for every volunteer. Accreditation may be appropriate when:

- Volunteers **need** or **want** to have skills/knowledge/understanding of a specified standard;
- Volunteers are **willing** or **required** to undergo assessment against these standards; and
- **Clear benefits** to one or more of the 'stakeholders' from having this achievement recognised, can be identified.

It is vital that you can answer the question, "Why do we want to accredit our volunteers?" in the context of your own organisation, as this will determine how much the organisation should be prepared to invest in volunteer accreditation and suggest which route would be most suitable. Once you have established why you are considering volunteer accreditation, you should be able to identify what it is that you want to accredit, both in terms of topic and whether it is mainly the volunteers' skills, knowledge, and/or understanding you wish to develop. This should be incorporated into the process of identifying training needs.

Only when you have thought through both of these questions thoroughly are you ready to consider which form of accreditation will best meet your needs. There is an ever-increasing range of options for accrediting a variety of volunteer skills and knowledge. Programmes are available from beginner to post-graduate level, can last a few days or several years, and may be knowledge, skills or competence based.

You can choose to access existing programmes through external training providers or seek approval from the accrediting body to offer them in house. You could also get recognition for your own training courses. As long as you are clear about why you want accreditation and what you want accredited, your local training providers and national accrediting bodies should be able to help you assess whether they have something suitable to offer.