

Serious Tips for Volunteer Interviewing



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Other tips in this series:

[Volunteer Recruitment \(July 22\)](#)

Coming soon:

[Volunteer Recognition](#)

[Volunteer Retention](#)

[Volunteer Training](#)

[User-Friendly Volunteer Experience](#)

Guideline for Purchases


ACL provided SHIP and SMP directors with a document titled Common Grantee Questions about Specific Purchases that addresses grant guidelines for purchases. It's in both the SHIP and SMP resource libraries.

Smart interviewing is what makes successful volunteer programs successful. Matching a potential volunteer to a role where they can contribute and feel successful is the most important task of a coordinator of volunteers. If you assign the right volunteer to the right role, you won't have very many management problems – successful and happy volunteers become a self-fulfilling system. Here are some tips for making this happen:

1. "Interview" is perhaps an unfortunate term to use to describe what should happen during the first meeting with a potential volunteer, since it may suggest the process is more of an interrogation than a friendly conversation. On the other hand, calling the conversation an "interview" should serve to remind you that you can't just wing it – the better you prepare the more likely you are to achieve a good result. What you want is a "friendly chat with a purpose."
2. During the process of the interview, it is crucial to remember that the volunteer has not yet been recruited. At this stage the potential volunteer has only been "attracted" to your program. One purpose of the interview is to give the potential volunteer the time to make a more deliberate examination of what the program has to offer and to give you a chance to "sell" your program and its work to the volunteer. Equal time has to be given to focusing on why a particular role is important and interesting as well as to whether the volunteer would be right for that role. Never assume that just because a volunteer has come to the interview they are already sold on your program.
3. Volunteer interviewing is not just a simple process of comparing candidates against a list of desired role-related characteristics; it is a much subtler process of trying to learn about the person who is being interviewed, with an ultimate intent of shaping a work situation that will be satisfying to the volunteer and useful to your program. Never try to get a potential volunteer to accept a role unless you are pretty sure that they will be able to do it well and enjoy it.
4. The site for conducting the interviewing process will vary, but it is important during the interview that the volunteer feel a sense of privacy and comfort. Nobody ever went wrong by offering food and drink to the prospective volunteer. Do not conduct the

interview in a public place or in a shared office, since this will deter many volunteers from offering complete information about their backgrounds and their interests. None of us likes being eavesdropped on while discussing our personal lives.


5. The key to beginning a successful interview is to start building rapport with the potential volunteer as quickly as possible. It is crucial that the interview process belongs as much to the volunteer as it does to the program. If there is a time limit for the interview, make sure that you have allocated sufficient time for the volunteer to express concerns and ask questions. The interview should be a mutual, not unilateral, information exchange process. It is a negotiation, not an interrogation. Make sure that you explain to the volunteer at the beginning of the interview that they should feel free to ask questions and express any concerns at any point during the discussion. Close the interview by asking them if they have any last questions you can answer.
6. If there is paperwork that needs to be completed by the potential volunteer, try to make it available online so that it can be done in advance and reviewed by you prior to the interview. Among other things this will enable you to avoid having to deal with applicants who don't want to provide any of this information.
7. Always tell the hard truth during volunteer interviews. If anything, lean to being more negative than is factually warranted – it never hurts if the volunteer eventually finds that the situation is better or easier than you described it. Answer any questions about the agency and its work openly and honestly. This will demonstrate your sincerity and your intelligence. You can't hide things from people who will be starting work with you and will, therefore, find out eventually anyway.
8. Good interviewers are active listeners. You need to understand the applicant and this requires paying very close attention both to what they are saying and what they are not saying during the interview.
9. The point of the interview is to let the potential volunteer talk as much as possible. The Golden Rule of Interviewing is "the more you talk, the less you learn." Often the best question to ask in an interview is the simple "tell me more."
10. If the role requires further screening and background investigation, let the applicant know approximately how long this will take, and be pessimistic in your estimate. Tell them when you will get back to them to keep them apprised of how this process is going. It is impossible to overstate how easy it is to lose the interest of a prospective volunteer by making them feel ignored between the interview and actually starting working with you.
11. Conducting an interview in a face-to-face setting is by far the most desirable and effective method. Things being what they are, however, this will not always be possible, so don't beat yourself up. Collect what information you can over the telephone or online




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but expect a higher resignation rate thereafter because you aren't able to fully develop a relationship or accurately check for a good fit. And as soon as possible, try to find a way to sit down and talk with the volunteer before they start to feel like they aren't really part of the program.

12. Volunteers often make better interviewers than do paid staff. This is true for two reasons. First, they tend not to be "burned out" by interviewing because they may be involved in a lesser number of them. Conducting interviews is a draining process and one that can easily be overwhelming. It is common, and fatal, in this situation to stop listening after awhile. Second, current volunteers tend to be better able to build rapport with potential volunteers because, after all, they have something important in common – they both think the program is worth donating their time to.
13. When a person who wants to do good work comes in for a volunteer interview, sometimes you have to say "no" at the end of it or shortly thereafter. After all, one of the key responsibilities of a volunteer interviewer is to identify those cases in which the volunteer in question should not be invited to work with the program. While this is never a pleasant feeling, your primary obligation is to the safety and well-being of SMP or SHIP beneficiaries. You can decide to not accept a prospective volunteer much easier if you begin the volunteer interview by stressing that your primary interest is ensuring that you have a role that you believe will work for the volunteer and that you will only go forward if you are sure you can deliver on this commitment. Consider using wording such as, "We are very cautious about involving volunteers. We only proceed if we are absolutely sure that both of us will benefit; if we, or you, have any doubts we would rather not risk wasting your time."
14. Remember the old adage "you never get a second chance to make a first impression." What the potential volunteer sees and feels during the interview may shape their eventual attitude toward your program.

Any time you decide to not spend in screening and interviewing volunteers you will pay for later. Interviewing is the first-line risk management and quality control mechanism in the volunteer management system, but it only works if you make the time and effort to do it well. 



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