

# Section 11: Retention

The key to volunteer retention depends on an overall successful volunteer program. Every topic that has been covered in the toolkit until this point are all factors in maintaining volunteer retention. If volunteers are greeted with an organized, successful volunteer program, then they will likely return.

**Best Practices for Retention:** Organizations interested in increasing retention of volunteers should invest in volunteer resources leadership practices that enrich the volunteer experience.

- Invest in recognizing volunteers
- Provide training and professional development for them
- Screen volunteers and match them to organizational tasks
- Provide a culture that is welcoming to volunteers
- Allocate sufficient resources to support them
- Enlist volunteers in recruiting other volunteers
- Give them regular opportunities for program feedback

## 11.1 Retention Factors

The items below state factors for retaining your volunteers. Always think about what the volunteer is looking for when they enter your organization.

- Clear Expectations/Rules
- Rewards
- Climate/Setting
- Appropriate Systems
- Welcoming Attitude
- Clear and Regular Communication
- Apparent Success/Impact
- Respect for Individualism

## 11.2 Understanding Motivation

When someone shows up to volunteer, often there are many people making bids for his or her time. Everyone's "to-do" list rolls out, and a volunteer may find himself or herself shuffled to a variety of people performing a range of tasks. To retain volunteers, however, an organization needs to be aware of what motivates and leads each one to feel satisfied with the time he or she donates.

### Skill Development

Some volunteers want to bring their expertise to your group, whether it is their marketing background, computer experience, or people skills. Others may volunteer to enhance certain skills or maintain ones they already possess. Still others come with the desire to learn something new.

For example, if you find out that your new volunteer, Susan, works in the telemarketing industry, your immediate thought might be to assign her the task of fundraising via telephone. If you dig deeper, however, you'll learn that Susan is volunteering to get away from the stress of her day job, and that she really wants to become part of the volunteer training team. Susan would like to learn about your organization and refine her management and speaking skills. With the experience she acquires by volunteering with you, she hopes to secure a new job.

*This example illustrates how crucial it is to gather information from a newly recruited volunteer.* Find out not only his/her current skills but also what skills he or she wishes to develop through volunteer activities. This is a valuable means of evaluating the tasks that should be assigned to maximize retention.

### **Personal Growth**

Many volunteers come to an organization hoping to expand their horizons. Like Susan, some feel that their volunteer experience will help them advance in their careers. Others simply want to use their volunteer service as a way to cultivate new interests. Another portion will use their volunteering to aid them in making career or education choices.

### **Challenge**

Volunteers enjoy challenging tasks and look for chances to step up to the next level. If this sense of challenge is lacking, volunteers will not generally continue service with an organization. Make sure you give your volunteers some interesting, more challenging activities along with more "routine" assignments.

### **Contact with Clients**

Some of the most rewarding work for volunteers can be direct contact with the individuals an organization serves. They can see the direct benefits of their work in their role as a mentor, helper, or other capacity. Sometimes a volunteer's greatest motivation to continue his or her service is a heartfelt "thank you" from a client.

### **Recognition of Service**

Another integral part of volunteer retention is recognizing and appreciating the time and effort volunteers bring to your organization. Emphasize to your volunteers the importance of their contributions; volunteers who stay are ones who feel they are making a significant impact.

As far as actual tasks are concerned, volunteer jobs can be designed in hierarchical levels, allowing a volunteer to advance over time and acquire a higher "status." With each level, an organization can allow for increases in self-direction and decision making. Not only will the added responsibilities make the volunteer feel "promoted" but he or she will also feel more engaged. Volunteer coordinators may also want to reward well-proven volunteers by allowing them to train or mentor new recruits or by assigning them special projects.

Overall, the ability to offer exceptional volunteer management helps with the retention of your volunteers. Whether you decide to implement every aspect from the toolkit, or even just take a few sections and implement those; you are working towards retention.