

United Way of Salt Lake*serving Davis, Salt Lake, Summit, and Tooele Counties*

Ten Volunteer Retention Tips

The ability of communities to keep volunteers engaged year after year (volunteer retention) is strongly related to the volunteer rate. The right types of volunteer opportunities and management of volunteers can encourage an individual to continue volunteering. On the other hand, as with paid employment, a poor fit between a volunteer and a nonprofit increases the probability that a volunteer will not be retained. For nonprofits that depend on volunteers, turnover results in the need to incur substantial additional costs associated with recruiting, orienting, and managing new volunteers. On average nationally, one out of three volunteers (64.3%) dropped out of volunteering after one year of service.*

Taking the time to create and implement a volunteer retention strategy will not only save your organization time and money but can help you increase the amount and level of programming available to the clients you serve.

In no particular order are ten tips for a successful volunteer retention strategy.

1. **Welcome!** Make sure everyone on your staff, especially the first points of contact with the public in your organization, are informed and ready to handle volunteers. This could mean including the receptionist in emails or sending them a calendar invite if you schedule specific times for volunteers to come in. Your organizations first point of contact should also be prepared for walk ins. Have a procedure in place to have the volunteer apply immediately or to schedule an appointment to come back later. You would never want your front desk person to turn someone away or act like the volunteer is an inconvenience. First impressions mean a lot, and your volunteers should always feel welcome when they walk through your doors.
2. **Help me to succeed!** Often volunteers start excited about your organizations mission and goals but lose motivation without proper orientation and training. It helps to have a clear process for bringing in volunteers and getting them started in their volunteer duties. An orientation could include a short tour around your facility with introductions to key staff members the volunteer will work with as well as details such as break schedules, restroom locations and procedures to sign in and out. If the volunteer's position requires their tasks be executed in a specific manner providing training will help the volunteer to succeed.
3. **Effective volunteer management.** Your volunteers should always know who their supervisor is. They should know who to talk to in case of an emergency, injury or with questions and concerns. Volunteers should know where to find their supervisor

as well as who else they can talk to if you are not available. Another tool worth implementing is a volunteer evaluation process. Just like a job, volunteers want to know where they're succeeding and where they can improve. This helps to provide challenges to the volunteers and provides the benefit of improving their skills and abilities.

4. **I want to stay busy.** Make sure your volunteers have enough work to do and the tools they need to accomplish the job. It's helpful to let them know what they can do if they complete the task early or who to talk to if they run out of supplies.
5. **Let me know I matter.** One of the easiest forms of recognition you can provide to your volunteers is to know their name and what they do within your organization. As a volunteer manager you will likely know who they are and what they do but make sure others in the organization know this too. If your volunteer has been with the organization for 6 months providing art classes for your clients making sure other staff members can acknowledge the volunteer by name helps to foster a sense of inclusion and importance for the volunteer. Look for other opportunities to recognize a job well done such as a volunteer newsletter, a recognition board in your office or even a thank you card or pat on the back for a job well done.
6. **Opportunities for growth.** Some volunteers are looking for ways to receive professional development while serving. Identifying that as their motivation for serving with your organization can help you offer them opportunities to utilize their skills or learn new skills. Data entry may not be exciting to most volunteers but if you have someone looking to learn computer skills to help them apply for jobs this could be a great opportunity to match the volunteer to an opportunity that benefits you both.
7. **Challenge me!** Don't underestimate the capabilities of your volunteers. Volunteers want to get in your organization and make a difference. Expect the same quality of work, timeliness and commitment of your volunteers as you would your employees. When volunteers feel they are an important part of your organization they will rise to the challenge and may even exceed your expectations.
8. **Stay in touch.** Never miss an opportunity to highlight your volunteers on birthdays and at service milestones such as 6 months served, 1 year, etc. Sending a card or calling the volunteer on those days can help them feel like you care about them as an individual. If you have a volunteer who is normally very consistent and suddenly doesn't show reaching out to them to see if they are sick or having other issues lets them know you care and noticed they weren't there.
9. **Be clear.** Set realistic expectations for your volunteers. These days not everyone wants to commit to one organization for life but if your needs require volunteers stay for a set timeframe make sure that is clear to them before they begin volunteering.

Some volunteers may only want to participate in a one-time opportunity but there are volunteers who would enjoy a long term commitment. Helping your volunteers understand what you need from them can help them determine if your organization is a good match for them and their availability.

10. **Get connected.** Some volunteers see service as a way to get connected within the community. Your organization could host an annual volunteer social or event where your volunteers could come together and meet each other and your staff. Networking opportunities may interest volunteers who are looking to obtain job skills or connect with others in the community. If your organization has a Facebook page, Twitter or LinkedIn share that with your volunteers so they can connect with other volunteers and supporters of your organization.

Things to Consider

- Would YOU volunteer with your organization? If your answer isn't an immediate and resounding yes think about why. Do you know other staff members don't value volunteers? Are you aware there aren't good processes in place to engage volunteers? Asking yourself if you and your friends and family would enjoy what you're asking of your volunteers may quickly clarify opportunities for improvement and highlight places your organization is excelling.
- Don't feel you have to overhaul your entire volunteer process today. Take the time to create a plan and then go to work implementing the pieces you can. Determine the places that need the most improvement or that will have the biggest impact on new and existing volunteers and make those changes happen. Seek opportunities for professional development so you can network and meet other volunteer managers to share experiences and gain knowledge.