



TO KEEP GOOD VOLUNTEERS, MINIMIZE THESE RISKS

The following guidance is provided by Sterling Volunteers (www.sterlingvolunteers.com), which offers background screening services to nonprofit organizations. (VIS members are entitled to a substantial discount. See our Member Benefits section.)

Is your organization standing in its own way when it comes to retaining volunteers? Avoid these common mistakes:

1. Not checking in regularly.

Are your volunteers comfortable in their role? Do they understand your organization, its goals and how they contribute to the realization of those goals? You can't answer these questions without communicating with your volunteers – not just at the beginning of their tenure, but regularly and often. Checking in periodically and creating a strong communication system from the start allows you to track volunteers' progress and performance, giving volunteers the chance to talk through any challenges or issues that may arise.

2. Volunteers aren't motivated or challenged in their service.

Volunteers stop serving when they are bored or uninterested in their service role. Does your organization offer multiple ways for volunteers to be involved? Create specialized service roles and allow volunteers to select which positions interest them. This will help you to key into each volunteer's interests and skill sets, and to ultimately keep them engaged. If they are doing what they love, they won't become bored with their service.

3. The volunteering schedule doesn't allow for flexibility.

With families, careers, and a variety of other activities, many volunteers have jam-packed schedules. If your organization offers few volunteer opportunities -- ones that only occur during work hours or on weeknights, for instance -- prospective volunteers may not be able to commit their time. Keep this in mind when scheduling service events. They should offer various times and days throughout the week to accommodate a large number of people. Another helpful tip for service organizations is to ask volunteers how many hours they are looking to volunteer and set expectations at the beginning of their time with your organization. Knowing whether they are committed to volunteering weekly, monthly, or just a few times a year, will help both the volunteer and the organization plan accordingly.

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4. Lack of organization

Is your volunteers' time being used in the most efficient way possible? An unorganized service event can lead to wasted volunteer hours and unsatisfied volunteers. Make sure everyone's time is used productively by having clear instructions ready for volunteers and letting them know who to report to should they have any questions about their tasks. This way their time can be spent in service instead of waiting for instructions.

5. Not showing appreciation.

Volunteers want to feel connected to the organization they serve and want to know that you value their time and commitment. If your volunteers feel their efforts aren't appreciated, they may get a negative impression of your organization and stop their service. Strengthen ties between your program and your volunteers by making efforts to recognize their service, whether it's by giving a shout out in your organization's newsletter, having a special event for volunteers, or offering a simple compliment on a job well done during their usual service hours.

Editor's note: For a variety of resources on volunteer recognition, visit www.energizeinc.com)