

Customised Volunteering

Creating and adapting volunteer
roles to suit the individual



Does your current volunteer workforce include all of the people who WANT to volunteer, or only those who CAN volunteer?

What is customised volunteering?

Customised volunteering is about getting to know your volunteers as individuals, and creating, or adapting an existing, volunteer role to suit them.

It aims to make volunteering more accessible, enjoyable and rewarding for a broader range of individuals.

It's a person-centred approach to volunteer management, and it recognises that each individual has different interests, strengths, skills, experience, goals and support needs.

Many Volunteer Managers will have already implemented practices that resemble customised volunteering. It's simply making reasonable adjustments to a role to make sure a volunteer thrives in their role.

This booklet will outline the practices of customised volunteering, and how it can provide benefits to individuals and organisations.



Why create customised volunteer roles?

Customised volunteering supports meaningful volunteer engagement. While creating a customised volunteer role may be more time-intensive, the extra effort leads to multiple benefits to both the individual and the organisation.

Benefits to the individual:

- Volunteering becomes more accessible, enjoyable and rewarding
- Greater access to the benefits of volunteering (social connections, work experience, skill development, physical activity, self-confidence, feelings of productivity)
- Greater connection with the community
- An increased sense of acceptance and inclusion.

Benefits to the organisation:

- An expanded pool of potential volunteers
- Greater volunteer retention due to increased satisfaction
- More diverse volunteer workforce, helping it to be more representative of (and therefore approachable to) the community it serves
- Service delivery can be expanded as the tasks that volunteers undertake are reevaluated, adapted and evolved
- Promotion of a culture of inclusivity, accessibility, diversity and support within the organisation.

Who can benefit from a customised volunteer position?

While many volunteers would appreciate the opportunity to have a volunteer role align with them as an individual, those who benefit most from a customised volunteer position are those who may not be able to volunteer without it.

There are many individuals who want to volunteer but can't due to various barriers to participation. Customised volunteering aims to understand these barriers, and make reasonable adjustments to overcome them.

Consider the following individuals, and how accessible a traditional volunteer position may be for them:

- Individuals with physical, mental, cognitive or psychosocial support needs
- Young people or students
- Individuals with limited English abilities
- Individuals with limited, inconsistent or short-term availability

By creating a customised role, you are creating an opportunity for a broader range of individuals to access the benefits of volunteering.



Customised volunteering & recruitment

Before you can begin creating customised volunteer positions, it's important to ensure that those who may benefit from a customised role are able to get in contact with you.

There are a few ways to ensure that your volunteer recruitment is open and accessible to a broader number of volunteers:

When advertising specific volunteer positions:

- Make your current volunteer advertisements use simple and clear language
- Outline the key details of where the role will take place, the desired days and times of shifts, and the specific tasks the role involves
- Include a statement that encourages people to apply even if they may not be able to undertake all the outlined tasks or meet the required hours.

Open expressions of interest:

- Provide an opportunity for prospective volunteers to flag their general interest in volunteering without having to apply for a specific role
- Ask for a few initial details such as contact information, availability, and areas they're interested in, and arrange a time to discuss potential roles

*Customised volunteer positions can also be beneficial for existing volunteers. Be sure to ask if there's any aspects of their role they may be interested in changing.

Understanding the individual volunteer

The process of creating a customised volunteer position begins with getting to know the individual, and what they are hoping to gain from their volunteering experience.

Arrange a time to chat with your volunteer, and find out about their strengths, areas of interest, goals, availability, and any support needs. Be open and honest about the intention of the conversation, and explain that you want to create a volunteer opportunity that best suits them.

Ask questions like:

- What do you like to do in your free time?
- When do you have free time at the moment?
- What are some things you feel like you're good at?
- Are there any skills you'd like to practice?
- What are your goals/things you're working towards?
- Is there anything we can do to support you, and make sure you enjoy your time volunteering?

By better understanding the individual volunteer, you will be able to create a role that they are more likely to enjoy, gain benefits from, and participate in for a longer time.



Creating a customised volunteer role

There are many different ways you can create a customised volunteer role. What approach you take will depend on the individual volunteer, the tasks volunteers undertake within your organisation, and your current volunteer workforce.

Create a new volunteer role:

- Explore new areas within the organisation where volunteers may be able to become involved, e.g. supporting staff, IT services, general maintenance, tidying and organisation, social support, fundraising, or welcoming visitors
- See if there's potential for one-off, event-based, short-term or even group volunteering opportunities, e.g. community events, social gatherings, or working bees

Adjust an existing volunteer role:

- Break down the role into the tasks that it involves
- With the volunteer, determine which tasks they would like to undertake
- Be willing to make reasonable adjustments to the way a task is carried out
- Adjust the timing for a role, i.e. how frequent or long shifts are
- Share tasks or time commitment of one role between multiple volunteers
- Understand that some volunteers may only want to take on a small number of tasks, but that their help is still valuable

Ongoing support and review

Customised volunteering is not a one-off event. It is an ongoing process of checking in, reviewing and making adjustments. Their volunteer role may change as:

- They begin to feel more comfortable or confident
- They want to try out new things or develop new skills
- Their support needs change
- Their availability changes

It's important to schedule times to check in with a volunteer in a customised role, and see if any adjustments could be made.

Some people in a customised volunteer role may also benefit from more one-on-one assistance or support. Ask if they have a support person, friend or family member that they would like to volunteer alongside. You may also consider buddying them up with another volunteer or staff member to help them feel comfortable.



Customised volunteering examples:

Sandra volunteers as an administrative assistant. She initially doesn't feel comfortable using a computer, so she answers phones, greets visitors and helps to keep the office organised. She later decides she'd like to improve her computer skills, and she is paired with another volunteer who works alongside her and teaches her what to do.



Kane wants to volunteer to learn new skills and get some work experience. He wants to help at his local community centre, but there aren't any roles that he's interested in. The Volunteer Manager finds out that Kane is interested in social media, and creates a new volunteer role for him. Kane now helps to promote the community centre's services and programs by taking photos and posting them on social media.



Marie would like to help at her local second-hand store, but she has arthritis in her knees, and can't stand for long periods of time. So that she is able to participate, during her shift she is given a stool so she can sit at the counter instead of having to stand. When she helps out with restocking items and tidying the store, she is given regular breaks so she can sit and rest.



Jamie volunteers at his local footy club. He has an intellectual disability and can experience sensory overload when around lots of people or loud noise. Instead of helping on busy game days, he volunteers at training sessions during the week. He helps to set up exercises, give out water and tidy up the club rooms. He also has a quiet space where he can go to decompress if he begins to feel overwhelmed.



Tony works on a full-time basis but still wants to try and volunteer. He is interested in helping animals and approaches his local animal shelter. They decide to start running working-bee events, to tidy-up the facilities, make repairs, and improve the garden. Tony can now volunteer one Saturday a month, and he also shares the opportunity with his workplace and gets a few other keen participants!



Sahra volunteers as a gardener with a local Aged Care Facility. She recently moved to Australia from Somalia and is still developing her English skills. She is initially given a role where she doesn't need to communicate with residents. Other staff and volunteers are encouraged to chat with her and help her feel welcome. As her language skills and confidence develops, she is encouraged to begin participating in social activities with residents of the facility, and is able to further develop her skills.



By creating customised volunteer positions – more people can access and enjoy the benefits of volunteering

If you need any assistance, or have any questions about customised volunteering, contact us at:

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