

# VOLUNTEERS

## DISCUSSING THE DECLINE

### WHAT IS HAPPENING?

With volunteer participation falling nationwide, Volunteer-Involving Organisations (VIOs) face new challenges in recruitment. This factsheet pulls together key findings to inspire fresh approaches to designing roles that connect with today's volunteers.

### WHAT HAS CHANGED?

Shifts in people's lifestyles, whether by choice or due to outside influences, have created a "perfect storm" that has widened the gap between the opportunities VIOs offer and the availability or capacity people have to volunteer..

#### LIFESTYLE CHANGES

People are choosing informal volunteering or participation activities over formal volunteering.

Volunteering has become a competitor for people's time in a crowded market

#### RED TAPE

Volunteer obligations have grown, and for some, the requirement to use new technology, complete paperwork, or undertake training can be a barrier to participation

#### SHIFT IN MOTIVATION

Generational shifts mean volunteers are seeking meaningful experiences. Many now choose to volunteer for causes they feel passionate about, with altruism no longer the primary motivation. Volunteering must move beyond being transactional to becoming transformational

#### CHANGES TO CENTRELINK

Around a third of people receiving Centrelink benefits manage their responsibilities entirely online. Volunteering to meet their mutual obligations, needs approval by a Workforce Australia Employment Services provider or Services Australia, if self-managing

#### CHANGES TO FAMILY STRUCTURES

More people are living alone, more families are living in multigenerational households, and many in the "sandwich generation" are caring for both kids and ageing parents. This can bring greater financial strain, competing responsibilities, and increased stress, leaving less time available for volunteering

#### EMPLOYMENT IMPACT

Shifts in work patterns, such as casual employment, multiple jobs, longer commutes, and remaining in the workforce later in life, are leaving people with less capacity to volunteer. Unpredictable schedules, longer hours, and retirees delaying their volunteer involvement, all contribute to a shrinking pool of potential volunteers

#### COST OF LIVING CRISIS

When volunteering involves personal expense, even fuel to get there, people may choose not to be involved. To alleviate financial pressure, grandparents and extended family may find themselves providing unpaid childcare, further reducing their free time.

# MOVE TO INNOVATE & ADAPT

So where does this leave Volunteer Managers?

For many organisations, the way they present volunteering opportunities no longer matches the availability, interests, and motivations of today's potential volunteers. The long-term, "lifelong" volunteer of the past is now a rare find. People's lifestyles and expectations have shifted, and organisations may not be keeping pace.

To attract and retain volunteers in 2025, roles need to be:

- **Flexible** – Provide options for short- and long-term roles, varying time commitments, and tasks that range from quick one-offs to ongoing responsibilities. Build in flexibility around work, study, and family commitments, and accept that people may not stay in a role as long as they once did.
- **Inclusive** – Welcome a broader range of people, including those who may not have volunteered with your organisation before, such as students, people living with disability, or others that are underrepresented in your volunteer base.
- **Low-cost (or cost-free)** – Be mindful of the financial burden on volunteers. Cover, or work to minimise, expenses such as travel, uniforms, protective clothing, memberships, and training wherever possible, aiming to make volunteering free for people to participate in.
- **Accessible** – Make the application process simple, with multiple pathways. Offer online, paper-based, telephone (including landline number) and in-person options to apply, and also ask questions before applying, with a named contact. Ensure support is available with applications, police and screening checks. Limit unnecessary requests for personal information, which can deter applicants. If other volunteers are taking volunteer enquiries (e.g. in an op shop) ensure they know how to direct someone to apply and make it clear all applicants are given equal opportunity to apply.
- **Clear on compliance** – Be upfront about things like police checks, working with children checks, other screening or compliance obligations. Let volunteers know why they're needed, what ID they'll need to provide, and how long it might take. Provide support if using online platforms to access checks etc is a barrier. Being informative and transparent about essential compliance needed for the role builds trust, shows respect and encourages volunteers to follow through.
- **Rewarding and appealing** – Design roles that offer unique, engaging experiences, whether short-term or ongoing, and that connect with the volunteer's personal motivations, whether that's gaining work experience, building social networks, or giving back to the community. Asking about and understanding each person's "why" is key. Also other VIOs should be seen as collaborators, not competitors. By building strong relationships and referring volunteers on when your organisation cannot fully meet their needs for hours or experience, you strengthen both volunteer engagement and the sector as a whole.