

Volunteer Retention

Volunteer retention can be a major source of frustration for Out-of-School-Hours Learning Support Program (OSHLSP) coordinators. Often, many hours are spent in recruiting, onboarding, and training volunteers, and low retention numbers can be disheartening. However, there are many steps that can be taken to improve this. The initial contact with a prospective volunteer will give the first experience of what it's like to volunteer in your program, so it's important to provide a friendly and prompt response right from the start.

Communicating with new volunteers

A key step in volunteer retention is clear and efficient communication. Being clear about the expectations of the role, and of the organisation as a whole, will help prospective and new volunteers to understand if they are prepared to make a commitment to the role. You can help with this by providing a detailed position description for volunteers. It's also a good idea to ensure that your communication with new volunteers is efficient and streamlined. Prompt responses to enquiries also assure the new or prospective volunteer that their time and effort is valued and appreciated.



Responding to the needs of new volunteers

It is worth remembering that the needs and motivations of every volunteer varies, and therefore, the particular support and encouragement required will also have to be customised. You can gain an understanding of the needs and motivations of new volunteers through the application form and interview process, and plan responses accordingly. For example, if someone is volunteering to gain valuable work experience, offer to be a reference on their CV or help them to build connections within the sector. If they are there for social purposes, try to factor in time specifically for this during or outside of sessions. It's also important to be aware that volunteers might need breaks or flexibility around their schedule, or might prefer to only volunteer once a fortnight. It's good to get a sense of this, and keep checking in to be aware of any changes. Finally, use the interview process to understand how the volunteer would like to be supported in the role, especially in the first few weeks. Do they want lots of support initially, or would they prefer to jump in the deep end, and ask for help when they need it?

Volunteer Retention

Helping volunteers feel welcome

- ✦ Right from the start, ensure that you work on building rapport with new volunteers by getting to know them personally.
- ✦ Try to make the interview process less formal. You could invite them for a 'chat' rather than an interview, and take time at the start of the chat to get to know them. Use their application form to learn more about them and ask them questions about what they wrote.
- ✦ Introduce the volunteers to other people at the organisation. This will help them to make connections, and feel like a valued part of the program
- ✦ Put up photos of volunteers around the office and workspace, to show that volunteers are a big part of the organisation.

Helping volunteers feel connected

- ✦ Make time for new volunteers to build social connections with other volunteers, or other staff at the organisation. Not only will they build a support network, lessening your workload, but they will also find the volunteering experience more rewarding.
- ✦ Encourage debrief sessions at the end of each session. This will help new volunteers to develop strategies and learn how to be better tutors, and will also help them to make friends with their peers.
- ✦ Consider a buddy system, in which new volunteers are paired with more experienced tutors for the first few weeks to develop confidence, build connections and learn the ropes.
- ✦ Keep volunteers in the loop through sending newsletters or regular email updates about the events and changes at the organisation.
- ✦ Invite volunteers to attend staff or team meetings.
- ✦ Organise social activities, such as a social dinner or picnic. This could occur at the end of every term, or annually. You might consider inviting parents and siblings of students as well, to help volunteers build relationships with them.



Volunteer Retention

Helping volunteers feel useful

- ✦ Seek volunteer feedback on program operations and involve volunteers in program planning. Try to include their opinions and input when changes are being considered, and include regular formal or informal feedback sessions.
- ✦ Take the time to understand the strengths of your volunteers, and delegate tasks accordingly. Additional roles might include: set-up and pack-down; tutor/student allocation; maintaining resources; student reporting and recordkeeping; researching funding opportunities; organising tutor social events/meetings/training; writing newsletters; maintaining a website or database; or inducting new volunteers. Be mindful of not overwhelming new volunteers; check they have the time and capabilities before assigning additional tasks.

Helping volunteers feel valued

- ✦ Celebrate volunteer's milestones, such as length of time volunteering, or significant birthdays.
- ✦ Send personalized 'thank you' emails to a different volunteer each week, indicating something that you've noticed and valued that they bring to the program, or do a shout out every week during sessions.
- ✦ Include volunteer profiles and stories in newsletters.
- ✦ Send out special messages, cards or certificates of service during Volunteer Week, or at the end of the year. It's a great idea to ask for students' contributions in this space, such as getting to personalize the messages or make the cards.
- ✦ Invest in your volunteers. This could be through providing training or upskilling opportunities, or by enabling them to transition into leadership or paid roles if these arise.
- ✦ Nominate a volunteer in CMY's annual MY Education Awards. 😊

Conclusion

Volunteer retention is an ongoing challenge for OSHLSPs, but in utilising the tips above you are more likely to attract and retain high quality volunteers. A final tip: ask long-serving volunteers what they love about their role, and what could be improved. This could happen in regular feedback surveys or at exit interviews. Remember, they are the experts on what it takes to have a good volunteering experience!