

Volunteering: Career Development through Community Service

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) recently released its *Volunteering in the United States – 2011* report finding that 26.8% of the U.S. population volunteered in the past year. BLS defines a *volunteer* as someone "who did unpaid work (except for expenses) through or for an organization."

What makes volunteering different from unpaid internships? Both can be rewarding and help you with your resume, but there's a key difference. A volunteer position usually includes an element of community service in which the individual volunteering fulfills a need within an organization while helping others.

From Volunteer to Career

Whether you are a student interested in gaining experience or a working professional considering a career change, volunteering is an avenue worth investigating.

In addition to providing a service, donating your time and experience as a volunteer can result in opportunities for career exploration, professional networking, and skill building. And for those who may be unemployed but looking for work, volunteering can be a helpful way to stay current in your field and also fill the gaps on a resume.

Career Exploration: Careful selection and placement can lead to volunteering that helps gain first-hand experience about a new field of interest.

ServiceLeader.org recommends looking for volunteer assignments that "place you in the type of setting you want to learn about; let you work side-by-side with professionals you can observe and who can answer questions you may have about their career" and allow you to "ask for as much training as you can get; and ask to be 'promoted' to tasks of greater challenge."

Professional Networking: Volunteering is a good thing, even if the assigned tasks don't appear at first to be relevant to your career field. The individuals volunteering in any given organization likely represent a wide range of expertise and professional backgrounds. You never know who you'll have an opportunity meet in this situation and who can help you expand your network. Getting to know the people in the local community where you would like to get hired is a step in the right direction.

Skill building: LinkedIn recently added a "Volunteer Experience and Causes" feature specifically designed to help you market the skills gained through community service activities along with those gained through paid employment. *Fast Company* reported LinkedIn's related study finding 41% of those "polled said they considered volunteer experience as valuable as paid work experience. And 20% of the hiring managers polled in the survey admitted to making hiring decisions based on volunteer work." Working in volunteer organizations often provides opportunities to build both soft skills, such as communication, as well as technical skills, related to the specific volunteer position and tasks you are assigned, both of which may be valuable to your future employers.

Finding a Match

Before you approach an organization about becoming a volunteer, take some time to answer a few questions. These will also help the organization's volunteer coordinator to help find a good placement that will both fill an existing need in the community and allow you to engage in activities you are interested in:

- **What are your goals** for the volunteer experience? Are you interested in learning a new skill? Or perhaps you want to be more connected to your community. You may even be required to complete community service or volunteer hours for a course project or scholarship.
- **How much time** do you have to donate on a weekly and monthly basis? There may be specific days and times that you have available around your existing schedule and commitments.
- **How can you help** through the application of your existing skills? Volunteer organizations often have specific needs, and helping them to fulfill their goals is a good place to start. You'll reinforce your skills in the process and this work can lead to new assignments within the organization.

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Explore volunteer positions through online search sites like Idealist.org, 1-800-Volunteer.org, and VolunteerMatch.org. These sites allow you to search for posted volunteer job descriptions by type of service, location, and keywords.

Government agencies and websites provide a wealth of information about volunteering at local, state, and national levels. Check out VolunteeringInAmerica.gov, Serve.gov, and Volunteer.gov for more details and listings of opportunities in your area. Some of these organizations are also active in social networking sites allowing you to "like" or "follow" them with your profiles.

Find a volunteer center in your area that works with multiple organizations to find and place individuals with available service opportunities. Directories of regional volunteer centers can be found on the [1-800-Volunteer](http://1-800-Volunteer.org) and [HandsOn Network](http://HandsOnNetwork.org) sites. You can also reach out to local organizations that traditionally use volunteers, such as schools, libraries, museums, and non-profit agencies to find out more about their current needs and upcoming information sessions.

Virtual volunteer opportunities are also an option. There are ways you can donate your time and skills that don't require you to go to a physical location. The list of virtual volunteer opportunities at VolunteerMatch.org includes announcements with tasks that can be completed at home via computer or phone.

Don't forget to check with your school's resources! There may be offices that work with individual students and student groups to identify and connect with local service organizations.

Passion and Positivity Required

HelpGuide.org reminds us "when it comes to volunteering, passion and positivity are the only requirements. ... Bear in mind that the most valuable skills you can bring to any volunteer effort are compassion, an open mind, a willingness to do whatever is needed, and a positive attitude." If

you decide to become a volunteer, look for a good match between the organization's needs and your goals, and be open to the opportunity to become a more active member of your community. Have you had a successful volunteering experience? Perhaps one that led to new career options and professional development? Share your story and advice for others with us here!

* Volunteering: Career Development through Community Service - OnlineCollege.org