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# Designing Volunteer Role Descriptions

A guide for Volunteer Managers  
to help design quality volunteer  
experiences within your team

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## About Volunteer Role Descriptions

Defining and managing the work of volunteers is fundamental to good practice in Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) and a core part of Indicators 4 and 5 of the [Investing in Volunteers Quality Standard](#). It is also a core standard in the Charities Governance Code developed by the Charities Regulator in Ireland.

Written Volunteer role descriptions allow those Volunteer Managers and volunteers to document the nature of the agreed tasks.

Volunteers without role descriptions often report feeling unsupported in their work, inadequately trained and without opportunities to participate in decisions that affect them and their work. They are more likely to experience uncertainty, conflict or confusion between paid workers and volunteers in their organisation.

These kinds of experiences can lead to retention issues, as volunteers vote with their feet and seek better-defined roles in organisations that have the processes and systems to support, recognise and reward them. Increasingly, volunteers expect that the way they are managed as a volunteer will reflect their experiences in the paid workforce.

This toolkit has been designed to help you design volunteer roles and prepare effective role descriptions. With well-designed volunteer roles, your volunteer programme will stand out from the crowd and be an exciting, attractive proposition to prospective volunteers.

## What is a role description?

A good role description clarifies the responsibilities and support arrangements for a volunteer. It helps volunteers to be clear about what is expected of them and feel confident in their role. A role description also outlines how the role fits in with relation to the broader goals of the organisation.

A good role description is not simply a list of tasks that the volunteer will undertake, and does not need to contain reams of information about your organisation. It should be clear, concise and easily readable in plain English.

Instead of listing tasks, try to define the volunteer role in terms of what the volunteer is responsible for achieving. It is far more empowering, and will give both the volunteer and the organisation far more freedom, flexibility and room to grow the role if the areas of responsibility and objectives of the position are outlined, rather than a list of tasks.

As a leader of volunteers, you can always offer guidance or more detail about individual tasks. By focusing on responsibilities, you will also be leaving room for creative solutions.

For further resources please visit the [Volunteer Ireland web site](#) or get in contact with your [local Volunteer Centre](#) or [Volunteering Information Service](#)



Tasks define how and what sort of work should be carried out and are disconnected from any broader, more meaningful purpose.

Responsibilities leave the 'how' up to the volunteer and define what really matters – what the work actually achieves. This will be particularly appealing for those volunteers who are also seeking paid employment, as it will help them to conceptualise and demonstrate the responsibilities they carry out in a workplace setting.

The above terminology also reinforces the notion that volunteers can and often do occupy positions of significant responsibility, and that they are entrusted with roles that really matter to the organisation.

Consider the following example:

<b>Task</b>	Design quality charts and graphs, type set text, create templates
<b>Responsibility</b>	Support the organisation to generate income by creating a professional look for tender submissions.

**The following will help you clarify the sort of information to include in a role description, and what to leave out:**

A role description is only one of several planning and management documents that your organisation may use. Project plans, key performance indicators, manuals, procedures, and even verbal instruction will contain detail about various tasks and how the work is to be done.

Information that is relevant to all volunteers in the organisation should be included in a Volunteer Policy, and not the role description. Examples might be organisational charts, a grievance procedure, information about how the organisation is governed and funded and who its key stakeholders are. Try to restrict the information in a role description to what is relevant to that particular position.

Clear role descriptions increase the likelihood of appointing suitable candidates, leading to better outcomes and longer-term retention. Once you determine what skills, abilities and qualities are required you have a much clearer idea of the most suitable volunteer before you begin recruiting. It also helps you select from multiple volunteer applications and forms a basis for your interview questions.

- It gives you a point of recourse should you receive queries or complaints from candidates who were unsuccessful in applying for a volunteer position.
- Role descriptions facilitate feedback – they provide you with an agreed and documented basis from which you can provide guidance, advice and support, and is something that you can fall back on if you find yourself needing to 'performance manage' a volunteer.
- Role descriptions provide continuity and help with knowledge management. At some point, volunteers will leave an organisation, and many are required only for a short time each year (such as episodic volunteers). Ensuring that all roles have role descriptions which are kept on file helps to find replacements more quickly.



- Managers of volunteers also leave organisations and there is the risk of losing information about a role's requirements if they have not documented it. Having a centralised file of role descriptions gives you an overview of how your volunteers are collectively contributing to your organisation and the range of skills they have.
- It conveys to potential volunteers that your organisation is serious about its management of volunteers, that they are an integral part of the organisation and possess the same legitimacy and status as paid employees.
- Role descriptions are useful risk management tools that protect the organisation and the volunteer.

Writing a role description gives you the opportunity to tailor a role to maximise the skills and interests for a particular volunteer while meeting the needs of your organisation.

From the organisation's perspective, role descriptions are a vital planning and management tool.

1. **Preparing role descriptions helps you assess all of your current volunteer roles and review how each of them fits into your current mission.**  
How do the roles inter-relate and fit into the organisation structure? Can they be grouped into key functions of the organisation such as fundraising roles or client support roles? Is there a natural line of progression within functions so you can offer volunteers a pathway to roles with more responsibility (which could encourage long-term retention)?

2. **Role descriptions help manage the expectations of volunteers.**  
Role descriptions feed into a systematic process of appraisal and review, and clarify who the volunteer takes instruction from and can look to for support. If you have an appraisal process for volunteers, explain that this will give them the opportunity to have a say in how their role fits into the bigger picture and to request training which develops their skills, and can help them to expand or further develop their role. In this way, role descriptions assist with the professional development of a volunteer.
3. **Role descriptions assist in your volunteer recruitment strategy, and help you respond to opportunities that arise when individuals or groups want to volunteer with your organisation.**  
The process of writing role descriptions gives you the opportunity to re-evaluate or break down the components of a role so that your organisation can accommodate volunteers with time pressures, or tailor a role to maximise the skills and interests of a particular volunteer. This flexibility will make your volunteer roles more appealing and help you recruit new volunteers. Which components of a role might appeal to the type of volunteer you are trying to attract?
4. **Role descriptions are useful risk management tools that protect the organisation and the volunteer.**  
A volunteer may be acting outside the scope of their role or contrary to instruction. A role description documents what is in the scope of their duties.



## Designing Volunteer Roles

Designing a valid volunteer role comes down to two crucial factors: the role needs to be philosophically sound, and the role needs to be viable.

1. Philosophically sound roles mean they are in keeping with the definition and principles of volunteering, respect the rights of volunteers and are roles that add value to the organisation in a way that paid roles do not.
2. Viable roles are roles that are designed with participation trends in mind, and meet the needs of the organisation and the volunteer. It is important to keep up with changing trends so that our expectations of prospective volunteers are realistic. In other words, that someone will want to take on the role, and can take on the role while still carrying out their family, work, leisure and other activities.

### How are volunteer roles different to paid roles?

To design roles that are in keeping with what volunteering is all about, the first thing to consider is how volunteer roles differ to paid roles. Essentially, the main things to remember about volunteering which differentiate it from paid work can be summed up as follows:

- Volunteering is always a matter of choice
- It takes place in or through not-for-profit projects or organisations
- It is unpaid and is not job substitution
- It creates positive change for the volunteer, the organisation and the community.

Determining whether a role is an appropriate volunteer role is one of the most difficult and challenging issues that volunteer-involving organisations and their paid staff and volunteers face.

Is this, or should it be a paid role?	Yes	No
Is the role critical to the overall successful functioning of the organisation?		
Does the role have intrinsic value to the volunteer and the organisation, taking into account motivation, perceived benefits and skill level needed to perform the job?		
Are there adequate and effective volunteer management supports for this role?		
Is this role significantly different to the role of paid workers?		
Will the client, organisation, and volunteer benefit from the role?		
Has the role ever been filled by a paid worker?		
Is this role normally a paid position in other not for profits?		
Would a person reasonably expect remuneration for this work?		



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## The volunteer role design process

One of the most significant distinctions between role design for volunteers and role design for paid workers is the process of designing the role.

Where paid roles are concerned, usually an organisation will design the role that suits their purpose, advertise that role and the conditions attached to it, and then take its pick from a range of candidates. Although this scenario is a generalisation, it points to a vital difference between the process of designing roles for volunteers, and designing roles for paid workers.

Volunteer-involving organisations may also design roles that suit their needs and follow an advertising process similar to one they would use for a paid worker. However, often volunteers do not respond to advertised roles, but approach an organisation that interests them. Many volunteers will go to an organisation with ideas about what they have to offer, and what sort of volunteer work they would like to do.

Because of the nature of their work, some volunteer-involving organisations will have less flexibility in the design of some of their roles. In general, however, there is an increasing pressure on volunteer-involving organisations to be more flexible and responsive to volunteers' needs.

## How do we design roles that 'add value'?

Volunteer roles are developed according to the principle that they add value to an organisation in a way that paid roles do not. The challenge for volunteer-involving organisations is conceptualising what 'added

value' really means for your organisation, and then creating positions that do this.

Volunteers add value to your organisation by bringing skills, knowledge and a willingness to make a positive contribution that opens up new possibilities for your organisation. They take on responsibilities and contribute in a way that assists your organisation to carry out its objectives, and they also provide your organisation with resources that it wouldn't otherwise have access to.

## Minimise the sense of isolation for off-site roles

If your role could be undertaken from the volunteer's home or office (virtual volunteering roles), consider ways to minimise the sense of isolation the volunteer may experience. This would include providing them with adequate training and induction, regular feedback and acknowledgement, introducing them to colleagues and inviting them to relevant meetings and celebrations (if it is possible for them to attend), and ensuring they have access to all the information they need to complete their responsibilities.

## When writing role descriptions, choose language carefully

You may be concerned that some people will be discouraged from applying for roles which have been documented in sophisticated language, such as older volunteers or those whose first language is not English. Use language that is professional and in plain English so you can speak to your target audience. Anticipate who your role might appeal to. Take care not to exclude certain groups.



## Designing a Volunteer Role Description Template - Page 1

ROLE TITLE:	
TASK	
<b>What?</b> List tasks in order of priority Identify the client group What skills are needed?	
<b>When?</b> What is the required minimum / maximum time commitment? Day / morning / evening?	
<b>Where?</b> Work pace including any other sites	
<b>With whom?</b> Will they work with paid staff? Will they work alone?	
<b>Support and training</b> Who is the designated supervisor? What training is provided?	
<b>Administration</b> What expenses do you offer? What other assistance?	
<b>Expectations / Benefits</b> What does the role offer or not offer? Personal development? A chance to change things?	



## Designing a Volunteer Role Description Template - Page 2

<b>ROLE TITLE:</b>	
<b>SKILLS</b>	
<b>What?</b> What qualities are needed? Are there any physical requirements? What and why? Do they need to have had any specific experience? What, and to what level?	
<b>When?</b> Do you need a long or short-term commitment? Do you require flexibility from them?	
<b>Where?</b> Do they need their own transport in order to do the job? Are there any access restrictions at the work place?	
<b>With whom?</b> Ability to work on own/in a team? (as appropriate)	
<b>Support and training</b> Are they willing to attend training? Are they happy to have a supervisor?	
<b>Administration</b> Are you expecting them to be able to provide own travel costs?	



## Checklist - Potential costs attached to involving volunteers

Keeping a record of all costs attached to your volunteer programme is important in planning your budget and in helping assess the value of your volunteer involvement.

Consider	Cost detail	Time / Amount
<b>Recruitment</b>	Advertising Printing Postage Refreshments Garda Vetting	
<b>Induction and training</b>	Staff time Materials Refreshments External trainer Room hire	
<b>Support and recognition</b>	Awards ID badges Social events Meetings	
<b>Equipment and supplies</b>	Furniture Clothing (T-shirts, uniforms etc.) Additional office space Additional computer Additional phone line Internet / Wi-fi Tea and Coffee	
<b>Reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses</b>	Travel to and from worksite Lunch	
<b>Administration</b>	Insurance Newsletters Training	
<b>Volunteer manager</b>	Salary	
<b>Other paid staff</b>	Portion of time / salary	
<b>Other</b>		
<b>Total Time / Cost</b>		



Reasonable precautions have been taken to ensure information in this publication is accurate. However it is not intended to be legally comprehensive; it is designed to provide guidance in good faith without accepting liability. If relevant, we therefore recommend you take appropriate professional advice before taking any action on the matters covered herein.



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