
VOLUNTEER WORK

Why Volunteer?

The common denominator for all volunteer work – from tutoring kids to building homes to recording for the blind or delivering meals to homebound people – is that it is unpaid.

So why would you want to devote big chunks of time to a job that doesn't pay you anything? Because not only can volunteer work be fulfilling, it can give you the opportunity to learn new skills, gain much-needed experience and make some lasting contacts. Even volunteering part-time – like on nights and weekends – can show a potential employer your drive and ambition.

For recent high school graduates, volunteer work can be the deciding factor that puts you ahead of those who have only held minimum-wage jobs. Volunteer work shows future employers that you're a caring, committed person. It also gives you time to learn and develop a sense of self, a characteristic future employers look for. Being around experienced people who will be patient with you, answer your questions and let you succeed and fail without judgment is a huge career-building opportunity.

How to Find Opportunities

Your local newspaper often lists volunteer opportunities in print or on its website. You might also read about an organization doing work you admire and conduct an online search to see if there are any volunteer opportunities available. Friends and family can also be a great resource, and, since they know you, they may have some great ideas tailored to your interests. Religious organizations often have volunteer efforts underway, so they may be a great place to start.

There are many websites dedicated to matching willing volunteers with opportunities. The sites below are the best current resources.

VolunteerMatch.org

Volunteer matching system as well as plenty of sound advice to read before looking for a volunteer job

Idealist.org

Information from thousands of nonprofit organizations in over 100 countries

Volunteer.gov

Search opportunities by state, agency and ZIP Code

Serve.gov

Search local volunteer activities and career nonprofit opportunities

1-800-Volunteer.org

A national database of volunteer opportunities

What to Look For in a Volunteer Program

There are no hard and fast rules around what makes a good volunteer program, but it helps to set realistic time frames, goals, expectations and to understand your own motivation for getting involved. Here is what to consider when deciding on a volunteer opportunity.

Your schedule: How much time are you willing and able to commit? Consider your class and study schedule, travel time to and from an organization and whether you'll need to work a paying job simultaneously.

Your goals: What would you like to accomplish and learn? Do you need this experience to help you explore career paths and skills? Perhaps there are certain kinds of people you'd like to work with (e.g., children, teens or the elderly) or a type of project you'd like to participate in (e.g., fundraising, teaching or nursing).

Your motivation: Many people are motivated simply by the desire to do good things for others. This is very noble, but if you're looking for work experience, you might be disappointed if you're asked to scrub a pantry, play cards with senior citizens or address envelopes. You need to be clear about what you're willing to do.

Your skills: Be honest with yourself. You might want to work in a hospital but lack the training to provide patient care. Will you be satisfied doing less skilled work in the same environment? Just the chance to watch professionals work can be interesting and educational.

Once you've determined what you want out of the experience, you can find an opportunity that delivers what you're looking for. When you find a listing that sounds good, schedule a call with the volunteer coordinator. Some useful things to ask include the following:

- What kind of support structure is available for volunteers?
- Who will supervise or guide the volunteer work?
- Will any training be provided?
- Are there any skill requirements?
- What are the hours? What exactly will I be doing?
- Is any special clothing or equipment required? If so, who pays for it?
- What types of people have enjoyed this experience in the past?
- Do you have any current volunteers I can talk to?

You may have to call more than once, as many organizations are staffed solely by volunteers, and schedules may be unpredictable. But if you do your research and pick the right opportunity, the skills and experiences you gained while volunteering will stick with you long after you've moved on.