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## Volunteer role design: the key to your volunteer program

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### What is role design?

Role design is analyzing and breaking down various tasks that help the organization achieve its mandate, and then combining these tasks into roles or jobs.

### Why is designing roles important?

Designing roles is important because:

**It allows us to look at the needs and mandate of the organization** and ensure that roles we are creating or designing help the organization achieve its goals.

**It allows us to make the best use of our resources.** Volunteer time is at a premium. Nobody wants to spend their time working at a task or job that is not interesting, enjoyable, fulfilling, or that is not helping the organization achieve its goals. We know that the number one reason why people volunteer is that they believe in the cause (Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, 2000; [www.givingandvolunteering.ca](http://www.givingandvolunteering.ca)). If their volunteer efforts are not contributing to the cause, they will generally not be motivated to continue their involvement.

**It can provide motivation.** A well-thought-out job communicates to the volunteer and to staff in the organization that the position is important to helping the organization achieve its goals. When volunteers feel connected and feel that they are directly contributing, their motivation will increase.

**It is a foundation for success.** If volunteers know what is required of them, they will be more successful at completing their task and contributing to the overall mission of the organization.

**It is a step in risk management.** Effective job design identifies not only required tasks, but the skills required to complete those tasks. Through the identification of skills and tasks, the level of risk can be assessed. It is during the job design phase of the Volunteer Management Cycle that you can begin to eliminate, modify, or decide to assume any risk associated with a volunteer position.

Designing roles is a fundamental step in the volunteer management cycle. When consideration is given to tasks that need to be completed, you can then begin to develop position description and recruitment plans based on the requirements of the position, screening standards for the position, supervision and evaluation criteria. A well-thought-out role design lays the foundation for the rest of the work you will do in managing your volunteers.

### What should you consider when designing roles?

**Mission and goals of your organization.** You want to ensure every role that is designed links to the mandate of your organization. Ask yourself, “how does this position contribute to the big picture?” A volunteer’s involvement should always align with the direction of the organization.

**Trends.** You want to ensure that our changing society and how people volunteer are reflected in your job design. We know from the Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, 2000, and subsequent analysis from Volunteer Canada, that:

- fewer people are volunteering
- young people volunteer to gain work-related skills
- more seniors travel or have multiple activities and therefore have less time available for volunteering
- more new Canadians volunteer to develop work experience and to practice language skills
- volunteers are looking for: a meaningful way to spend their time, ways to contribute their skills to an organization, a well-planned role and volunteer opportunities that benefit the organization, the community and themselves

**Needs of staff and volunteers.** Involve other staff in your organization when planning and designing roles for volunteers to see where they feel contributions could be made. Also ask yourself what a volunteer could bring to your current work team that would benefit the volunteer and your organization.

**Climate of your organization.** You should look at where and how volunteers are currently involved in your organization, what types of positions are working well and which ones are not working well. Consideration should also be given to how volunteer involvement is accepted and valued in your organization. The involvement of volunteers should be a good experience for both the volunteer and the organization.

**Motivations.** By identifying what person would be motivated to do this role, you have begun to develop your recruitment plan. It will also give you some potential ideas on how to structure the time requirements, skills needed, and time of day the volunteer will be involved.

**Risk Management.** When designing roles to involve volunteers in your organization, it is important to consider the risk associated with the position. Ask yourself – “How can the job be designed so that there is minimal risk associated with it?” or perhaps “Is my organization is prepared to assume the risk?”

## How do you create position descriptions?

Once planning has gone into designing roles, it is important to formalize the design into a position description. A good position description should have the following components built into it:

1. **Role title**
  - gives dignity to the job
  - be creative (‘volunteer’ is not a title – it is a rate of pay)
2. **Purpose of the role**
  - general statement of what the job is
  - explain how it relates to the overall goals of the organization
3. **Duties and responsibilities**
  - list duties and requirements specifically, using action verbs and the present tense
  - describe only one duty or task at a time
4. **Time requirements**
  - indicate hours required per week or month
  - indicate length of commitment expected (a start and end date if applicable)
  - be realistic and accurate about time requirements

**5. Skills and qualifications**

- be complete, but list only those skills and qualifications that you absolutely need
- if you can train a person, list the skill as a desirable, but not essential

**6. Orientation and training**

- list the orientation that the volunteer will receive—length and date if you know it
- list training opportunities

**7. Supervision**

- indicate the volunteer’s supervisor and how they can be contacted

**8. Other details** that may be relevant for that particular role

Finally, a position description can be set up in such a way that the volunteer and manager of volunteers (or supervisor) signs off on it. In this sense, it can become a contract between the volunteer and the organization.

**Other forms of defining volunteer involvement**

Leadership volunteer roles are often less defined at the beginning of a project/initiative. A ‘terms of reference’ that identifies goals and outcomes, resources and any critical issues may be more appropriate than a detailed role description. Board roles, however, while defined as leadership, can be defined with a role description.

## **Additional resources**

Ellis, S. J. (2002). *The Volunteer Recruitment Book*. Philadelphia: Energize Inc.

Graff, L. L. (2005). *Best of All: The Quick Reference Guide to Effective Volunteer Involvement*. Dundas, ON: Linda Graff and Associates Inc.

McCurley, S. & Lynch, R.. (1996). *Volunteer Management: Mobilizing All the Resources of the Community*. Downer's Grove, IL: Heritage Arts Publishing.

Volunteer Canada. (2001). *A Matter of Design: Job Design Theory and Application to the Voluntary Sector*. Ottawa, ON: Volunteer Canada. [Retrieved from: <http://www.volunteer.ca/volunteer/pdf/MatterofDesignEng.pdf>]

## **Acknowledgement**

This article was written by Cheryl Humphrey-Pratt; 2006

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