

Broadening your volunteer base

Volunteers are the lifeblood of heritage projects. This guide will cover:

- Why you need a diverse volunteer base
- Why people volunteer
- How to write an appealing role description
- Supporting your volunteers
- How the University of Leicester can help with projects in and near Leicester

Why you need a diverse volunteer base

All projects require a wide range of skills. For example, you may need people who can:

- read old documents
- repair old buildings
- do heavy lifting or other manual tasks
- create a website
- write effective press releases
- design posters
- provide high quality maps or illustrations
- produce quality written outputs, such as a trail or a book
- advertise your project on social media

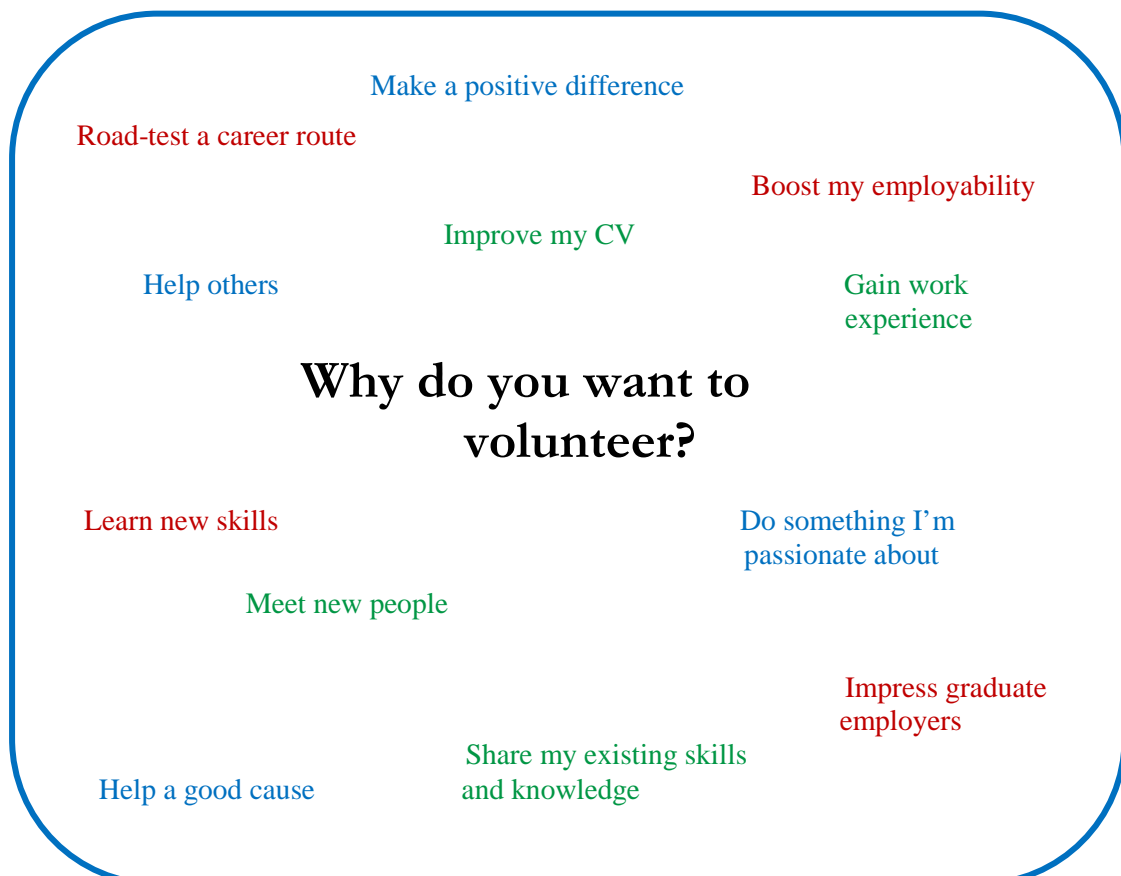
Many projects attract volunteers who are broadly similar to each other in terms of age, social background, ethnicity and interests. They may also have similar skills, and there may be some tasks that no one can do well. By broadening your volunteer base you are likely to widen the range of skills available to your project. Those new volunteers are also likely to have a wider range of social contacts, and may be able to introduce further volunteers who have the skills to fill any gaps. There are many different steps you can take in order to attract a diverse mix of volunteers:

- Have a range of different volunteering opportunities available.

- Break down larger tasks into smaller pieces of work, to limit the commitment people need to make.
- Offer very short ‘taster’ sessions of just a couple of hours. If you give people a positive experience of volunteering, they will come back for more, and possibly introduce their friends.
- Advertise your project, and your range of volunteering activities, as widely as possible.
- Don’t be afraid of asking for help with tasks you find unpleasant or boring. There is probably someone, somewhere, who will enjoy doing it.
- Make direct contact with many different types of people, young and old, disabled and able-bodied, professionals and those with no qualifications, and people with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, telling them why your project is important and why their skills would be valuable.
- Remove potential barriers to volunteering, for example by paying travelling expenses, offering flexible times and tasks people can do at home, or finding funding to cover a volunteer’s childcare costs.
- Promote a friendly and welcoming culture within your organisation
- Take care with the language you use. A project that ‘needs to use’ volunteers sounds less attractive than one which ‘would like volunteers to help’.

Why people volunteer

Everyone has their own motivations, but some are shared by many people. It can be helpful to think about why people volunteer, and what your organisation can offer to the volunteer.



Younger people in particular see volunteering as a way of gaining new skills and experience that will help them to get a job. Older people might also see volunteering as a way of getting back into the job market, perhaps after a career break or redundancy, and people of all ages might want to learn a new skill.

How to write an appealing role description

People will want to know what is involved before committing themselves. A clearly defined role description will reassure people that their skills will be valued and that neither the range of tasks nor the time commitment will be too onerous. It can be useful to think about the role in terms of the nature of the task, the skills needed, the working environment and the time commitment required. What barriers might prevent some people from applying, and can you do anything to overcome these?

Task:

Most roles naturally fall into one of two categories: those which are clearly time-limited, such as clearing an area of ground, or writing a report, and those which are more open-ended, such as being the group's treasurer or web-master. The time-limited tasks are probably the easiest to fill, because people know exactly what their commitment will be, and when the role will end. It can be helpful to try to replicate this certainty with the more open-ended positions. Think about how many hours will be required each week or each month. Is it realistic to expect someone to give up this much of their time, or should the duties be split between several people? Can you set an end date, such as an AGM, so the volunteer has an 'exit route' if they don't like the work?

Skills:

What skills and experience are required? What training do you offer? What skills will the volunteer gain?

Environment:

Will they be working on their own or as part of a team? Is the task indoors, outdoors, or can it be done from home? How will they be supervised? Who do they talk to if they have a problem?

Time:

How many hours are they expected to give? Are the hours flexible? Are you looking for a regular commitment, e.g. weekly or monthly? Is it a short-term or longer-term project, or a one-off event? Aim to give people small tasks at the start, which could be extended if they enjoy the experience.

Barriers:

Will you refund the cost of travel or other out-of-pocket expenses?

Now try and turn these points into a role description, remembering to include what the volunteer will gain. An attractive role title can be important, especially to younger volunteers and the unemployed, who may want to have something that looks impressive on their CV.

Example of a role description

Role: Gallery Customer Care Advisor

Task: Working as part of a small team, you will provide excellent customer care to all visitors to the gallery, to enhance their enjoyment of their visit, leading to a greater understanding of the gallery's collections and increasing its reputation as a visitor attraction.

Commitment: 1 day a week (hours are negotiable), preferably for a minimum of 6 months. Travel expenses will be reimbursed.

Desired skills:

- Excellent verbal and written communication skills
- Able to prioritise own workload

What will you gain? Team-working skills, confidence, networking skills and more.

No previous experience needed but an interest in arts would be beneficial.

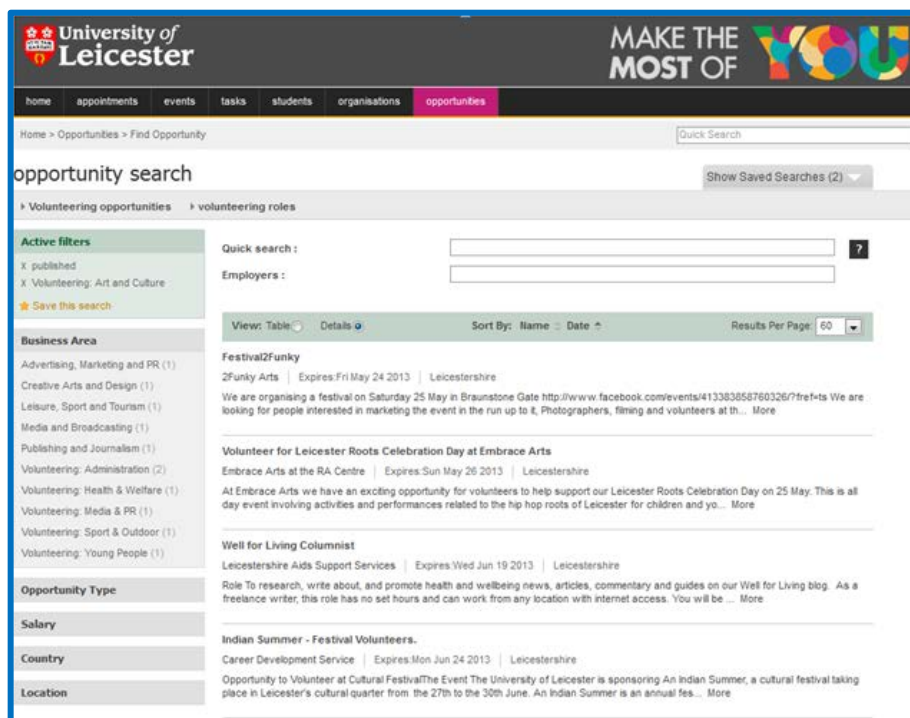
Supporting your volunteers

- Before recruiting volunteers, ensure your organisation has appropriate insurance in place.
- Make sure your volunteers have your contact details and feel confident to approach you with any concerns or questions.
- Maintain regular contact with your volunteers, through individual and group meetings and through emails or telephone calls.
- Involve your volunteers in decision making.
- Ensure they receive any training you have said you will provide.
- Encourage them to contribute new ideas and suggestions.
- Treat your volunteers as individuals, and provide opportunities for them to develop the skills that they each want to acquire.
- Acknowledge their contribution, and praise their efforts.
- Volunteering should be fun and enjoyable. If enthusiasm starts to wane, try to think of new ways to do things or different tasks that your volunteers might like to do.

- Don't feel disheartened if volunteers leave half way through, but try to find out why they have left, and consider if you need to do anything differently.

How the University of Leicester can help you recruit volunteers for projects in and near Leicester (your nearest university might also be able to help)

- University students can make excellent volunteers. They are often keen to help and to learn new skills, and can often offer the IT and social media skills and experience that many heritage projects struggle to find.
- Many universities will be pleased to receive details of volunteering opportunities, and will make these available to their students.
- The University of Leicester has a dedicated volunteering unit which can match students and voluntary organisations.
- A website and free database allows University of Leicester students to search for voluntary work, as well as for paid work and internships.
- Organisations can also register with the University to advertise their volunteering opportunities. As well as advertising for any students who might be interested, it is possible to target specific cohorts of students, e.g. history undergraduates.
- Bear in mind that students may need help with travel costs, may not be available during exams (January and May at Leicester) and are probably away from Leicester for a few weeks from mid-December and during July and August.
- Visit <https://mycareers.le.ac.uk/home.html>



The screen that University of Leicester students see when they search for volunteering opportunities

Volunteering England's online 'Good Practice Bank' contains a wealth of information covering many different aspects of recruiting, training and managing volunteers.

See <http://www.volunteering.org.uk/goodpractice/information>

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