

# Volunteer Wisely to get a Job

When I was a kid and I heard the word “volunteer”, I automatically thought of the old ladies who ran the hospital gift shop and the retired gents who helped people find their way throughout the hospital. Thankfully, we still have plenty of volunteers of all ages in our hospitals, and their efforts are sincerely appreciated. Either the scope and depth of volunteering has changed, or I’m simply more in tune with its benefits as a grown up who happens to be a career professional, but it sure makes sense to leverage your volunteer efforts if you’re looking for work. Volunteerism is so embedded into our lives in fact; the Ministry of Education mandates that students contribute 40 community hours in order to receive their grade 12 diploma.

If you are unemployed or underemployed, volunteering might be a great idea to help you make some headway to secure your next position. Carefully select the types of opportunities for which you would like to donate your time. Take into consideration your interests and skills, but also make sure that the organization is in alignment with your personal values. If you like athletics then coaching a sports team is a logical choice. If you don’t have the capability to coach, perhaps you can do some administrative or logistical that may be of help for the sports association. In other words, uncover opportunities from a variety of sources, not just from a formal office setting for example.

For the purpose of this article, I’ll focus more on the instructional volunteer perspective. It’s no surprise that securing any type of full-time, part-time or contract position within any element of the education field is extremely difficult in Ontario at the moment. If you have a friend or a contact who works as an educator and would like some help, absolutely offer your services.

I frequently have clients and others ask me if there should be a volunteer section in their résumé. The only consistent response I ever give is “it depends”. If you are working in an engineering or technical capacity for example, it usually does not add any value to include a dedicated volunteer area in your career search documents. But in other fields such as teaching, especially if you are not working, it certainly makes sense to include the notion of community reinvestment into your marketing collateral. If you are giving your time in an educational capacity, please make sure you represent this on your résumé wisely. Don’t simply put “Volunteered at ABC School.” Detail what you did, highlighting job-ready skills. Consider something like this for the volunteer section of your résumé:

- Offered to write the 10-week ESL program for students in ABC University’s family housing community. Contributed to the needs assessment and curriculum development functions. (’13)
- Accepted the Head Librarian’s invitation to teach the Beginner ESL Conversation Class for “City Public Library”. Referred to the LINC curriculum as a basis for games and activities to support language fluency and accuracy. (’13)
- For the past 5 years, regularly volunteer at XYZ School’s “Parents as Partners Program”. Work 1:1 with special needs students requiring structured reading support. (’13)

If you are seen volunteering in your field and you have subtly let others know you are looking for work, then this increases your chances of securing interviews to any upcoming job openings. Consider the concept of “top of mind awareness” in the marketing world. They say consumers need to be exposed to a product or service for a minimum of seven separate times before they will retain it. If you are not seen, you will not be in the top of the minds of the hiring committee.

There are however, ways to ruin your chances. Through my personal contacts and friends in the HR / recruiting fields, I have seen mores examples than not how skilled professionals have sabotaged their chances to be notified of position openings or to be invited to interviews. Here are a few of the common ones:

- People whine incessantly about how they can’t find work, can’t pay bills, need money because they are a single parent etc. They want others to pity them. This is perceived as being negative. Who wants to bring a whiner on board? Nobody hires anybody based on pity. Instead, they should focus on doing a good job and honing any skill-sets that they might be lacking.
- Sometimes people think that because they are not getting paid, they do not have to behave as professionally as the hired staff. Inappropriate attire, gossiping, flirting with staff, being late or being a “no-show” is the best way NOT to get an interview. Remember volunteers can be fired.

- “Kissing up” to the decision maker wears thin with existing staff. Although the hiring authority may not actually address this with the volunteer, he or she will notice. Being a “butt kisser” is one of those labels that sticks with somebody throughout their professional life.
- It's a mistake to treat support staff poorly. Just because somebody is a custodian or an administrative support person, does not mean that he or she should be given less respect than the senior-most personnel. I've seen cases where secretaries have been treated without respect by volunteers. They learned afterwards that the secretary was related to the teacher they were helping. Ouch!
- Asking for a recommendation letter shortly after commencing volunteerism is tacky. Request accolades only AFTER you have been there a considerable amount of time AND have proven your skills and character. Ensure the person writing the letter has seen you in action. Although people may not say it, most professionals are uncomfortable committing to something in writing when they cannot personally vouch for it. Ideally, it is best if the decision-maker offers to write the letter instead of you asking.
- Using a principal or classroom teacher as a job reference without asking them first is a mistake. It's common courtesy to ask permission beforehand. It's also smart to give them advance notice so they can be ready to tout your praises.
- Sometimes people don't clarify what it is they actually would like to do. To say “I want to volunteer in the school” is pretty much wide open. Washing out paintbrushes or weeding the flower bed in the front of the property is probably not in sync with your volunteer objectives. Saying that you specifically would like to work with ESL students is a smart approach.
- Don't spend all of your time volunteering. I know it can become a comfortable and supportive environment but you have to keep track of the bigger picture. Make sure you leave enough time to apply to job ads, to cold call and to attend formal networking opportunities.

I'll never forget the young lady who volunteered in my grade 7/8 classroom when I was still teaching in Simcoe County more than a decade ago. She had just graduated from teacher's college and was hungry for her first professional assignment. Her father was a prominent local businessman who was anti-union especially when it came to teachers. He was very vocal about this in the media and within the community. Strangely, this woman did not understand how teaching federations and their unions protect teachers. She echoed his sentiments, quite publicly and verbosely, every chance she got. I straight up told her that she was committing career suicide if she was cutting up the federations of the very profession she wanted to enter. She ignored my advice and became quite obnoxious. To the best of my knowledge, she never got hired and now works for her dad.

One of the strangest scenarios where volunteering led to a job offer was at a horse show. My friend had volunteered to operate a booth where fresh chicken eggs were being sold. She was volunteering with one other person. After spending a pleasant afternoon selling eggs to horse show attendees, the man who was with her asked her what she did for a living. She responded that she had a masters degree in food science and was currently looking for an opportunity within the region. He happened to be the president of a local food processing plant and was looking for somebody to run their quality control section. Because the gentleman saw first hand how she interacted with others and was kind, articulate and well-organized, he offered her the job on the spot. It doesn't always happen this easily and usually doesn't happen when selling eggs however this goes to show that volunteering can pay off.

Good luck.

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