

Volunteering

How helping others can help you build a whole new future

Perhaps you've been out of the workplace for some time and are trying to get back, or you have a job but are seeking a change of direction.

Maybe you're one of those who have ceased paid work entirely, but are still seeking something meaningful and challenging to do.

In all and any of these situations volunteering can be a great way of maintaining and increasing your involvement in mainstream society.

Not only can it be a route to actively learning or updating your skills, it can also open the door to improved confidence, and can help you develop some interesting and potentially beneficial new relationships.

For example you may be finding difficulty getting a job (perhaps because of issues which you perceive are related to your age) but you're sure to find that organisations seeking volunteers will find you extremely attractive.

That's because older people - who these days are still very fit and active, mentally and physically - have distinct advantages over all other sections of the population. For example, they:

- Have experienced life over many years and in many different arenas, enabling them to develop informed opinions on many different subjects.
- Have built up knowledge, skills and insights through work, through family relationships and through social interests.
- Tend to be hard-working, meticulous and conscientious
- Have the presence, and can gain the respect that comes with maturity and often tend, therefore, to be good leaders
- Are reliable, flexible and tend to be highly committed.

A win-win situation

Many unpaid posts are just as diverse, challenging and demanding as paid jobs, so can provide you with a bank of solid, impressive, relevant experience on which to base your applications for 'proper' employment – a real plus if you feel your CV is otherwise sadly lacking.

In some cases successful work experience within a charity can put you in a prime position to apply for some type of paid work at a higher level

Exploring the opportunities

Regardless of where you live, your gender, education level, or any other variable, the range of opportunities for volunteering is endless.

It only needs a little imagination and effort on your part together with a commitment to devote a regular amount of time in the future.

In relation to the latter, it helps if you have a real interest and personal commitment to the activity you're undertaking, so you need to think fairly hard at the outset about the types of thing you're prepared to do (or not do), are capable of doing, and you feel have real benefits both for others and yourself.

For example,

- It could be that you have a hobby or a sport which you are interested in. If so, you could become a committee member, become a referee or umpire, coach others, campaign for improved facilities, or just help out at events.
- You may have been close to illness, deprivation or disadvantage in which case there may be an existing charity that you could assist, through fundraising, as a practical helper, or as a trustee.
- You may be interested in more 'campaigning' roles – whether concerning a purely local issue, or more generally in

politics, environmental issues or on behalf of a particular group of underprivileged people.

- You may feel that your strengths would be best employed in a more commercial setting such as helping run a local business networking group, or branch of your trade or professional body (this can be particularly useful if you are trying to change jobs or get back into a particular field of employment).

Deciding what you want to gain

Whatever your exact age and stage in life it's really important to think through at the outset exactly what you want to *gain* from volunteering.

Although linking the word 'gain' to 'volunteering' may seem slightly unsavoury, it's crucial that you know what you want to get out of it if you're going to remain committed to the organisation over the longer term.

Even if becoming a volunteer is a way of helping you build your experience in order to get a new job, you will probably still want, ideally, to remain involved and committed to the organisation once you have achieved your aim, so you have to think through how this might work.

Volunteering can also be a more direct route to employment for some who start out as volunteers with an organisation and then go on to take up a paid role with them. There are all kinds of opportunities where skills and experience are needed and although salaries are not always high there tends to be a great sense of real purpose and often flexible working possibilities, for example part-time working.

Level of commitment

Another way that you could use your experience might be in some form of civic duty. Health, law and order, education, local government etc. all rely on significant input from members of the public.

Or perhaps you would be more interested in a one-off activity? Many long-term commitments start in such a way: a particular campaign you feel strongly about, or possibly something like assisting with a major campaign or event such as the 2012 Olympics? Or of course, you could always start your own charity, as many have done in fields such as animal rescue. This is undoubtedly great experience for starting up a subsequent commercial business.

Home or away?

For many people volunteering is something which they relate to very much at a local level. This may

be due to practical reasons such as the transport required to get to your volunteering location, or just a feeling that "giving back" should relate to local people and organisations.

Grown-up gap years

For others, particularly these days when the over 50s are arguably the most adventurous generation of all, the idea of volunteering through doing some sort of work abroad is hugely exciting and challenging.

In this case there are various organisations which deal with later life gap years, or it may be that your favourite existing charity if it is significantly large e.g. Oxfam, may have opportunities for overseas involvement.

If this is something in which you are interested, the caveat is that you must do your research so that you are in a position where you clearly understand what is involved and what you are committing to.

Certainly we would not recommend that you set out independently unless you have suitable experience and in-depth knowledge of the geographic, economic and social conditions relating to the area in which you are interested, local contacts, and very detailed knowledge of how you might assist.

Evidence shows that naïve, unprepared and ill-equipped people can end up creating more problems than they solve, so do take advice from those in the know

VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas) is a great place to start and their website has lots of inspiring case studies.

Getting back into the mainstream of life

Whatever your reasons for volunteering, the overall benefits are enormous not only in what they overtly provide but in relation to your own sense of achievement and purpose, your energy levels, your improved knowledge base and the social interaction and enjoyment involved.

So in summary, particularly if you have been out of the mainstream for a while, volunteering is a great way to refresh your people skills, boost your confidence and get your whole day-to-day approach back into the sort of routine that is required for working life.

Finding out more

As ever, a web search is the quickest and most direct way to access organisations which are interested in recruiting volunteers. Outside of this, try your local Council information centre, library, or Citizens Advice Bureau.