

Enhancing the Volunteer experience

How Do I "Make the Most" of My Volunteer Experience?

Ask questions, and lots of them. Volunteering provides a wonderful opportunity to...

Be inquisitive – See the application of the Knowledge, techniques and procedures you may have been exposed to in schools and colleges. Being in an active work setting also exposes you to professionals in the fields. Take advantage of that and ask questions to help you make an "informed" decision about your future. What key issues currently face the profession? How is the field changing? What ethical issues are of concern today? In addition to learning what the typical day is like for these professionals, find out how they put their days together, allow time for the unexpected, keep current in the field, address uncertainties, strike a balance between their personal and professional lives, and all the while derive satisfaction out of the career they've chosen.

Have the right attitude – It's not just about you and what you're going to get out of volunteering. Give something back, too! Go into the experience wanting to contribute to the organization, as well as wanting to learn about the profession. You might even view the volunteer experience as if you were a consumer or client of the organization. With this attitude you will also learn more about yourself and will become more effective as a volunteer and, ultimately, within your chosen profession.

Take the initiative – Once you have effectively mastered your tasks, demonstrated competence and shown your dependability, tactfully ask to do more. Volunteer for extra assignments, especially those that will increase your skills and knowledge in the field. Work on developing your "people skills" – those qualities that demonstrate your ability to communicate effectively with others. If, for example, your sole responsibility is to shuttle patients to and from doctor's appointments or to feed the homeless, you will often learn most by showing interest in them and simply listening to their stories. They will appreciate your attention as well! Challenge yourself – Put yourself in situations where you'll work with people very different from yourself. Interact with acutely or terminally ill patients, the very old, dying persons and their families, inner city youth, and other groups who are different in background and culture from you to enhance your cultural sensitivity. Also, don't just do things you know you're good at. Find positions that force you to develop skills or gain exposure to new things. If you know you need practice speaking in public, writing, or using a particular language, volunteer in settings where you can practice and improve those abilities.

Gather a variety of skills – Over time, volunteer in more than one setting to learn and practice more than one important skill. For example, volunteering in an emergency room involves observing, assisting and listening, yet volunteering as a tutor or teachers' aide will develop your interpersonal, teaching and listening skills. Be careful, though. While variety is good, you also need to demonstrate commitment and dedication to your involvements, so don't jump from job to job too much. Be professional – Volunteer work should be taken seriously. You will be counted on to fill a special need. Be visible by doing your job well; actions speak louder than words. Be enthusiastic, energetic and excellent. Develop and demonstrate "professionalism" – ethics, etiquette, and consideration of others – in your behavior towards co-workers and clients, your communication (written, online and verbal), and in your dress, punctuality and general attitude. These qualities make a positive impression with the staff and may serve you well in the future when seeking letters of reference for professional or graduate school, or assistance in your future job search.

Enjoy yourself! – Take your work seriously, but also have fun! Learn about yourself and the world around you. Get to know the people you work with and make friends (this is part of that "Networking" thing you always hear about!). If your volunteering seems like a chore, ask yourself why. Maybe that particular position – or this career path – is not the right fit for you.

Keep a record – Keep track of your activities – dates, supervisors, observations, the thoughts they stimulate, and your feelings – as you volunteer or observe. Document your experiences as you go, so later you can reflect on and communicate to others the skills and self-knowledge you have gained through the activity. Newsletter Editorial Team September 9, 2006