Information Sheet

Job Descriptions

Why Use this Resource?

Understanding the 5 models of volunteer engagement is essential for organisations' to remain viable and socially inclusive in our contemporary society. This information sheet provides an overview of the 5 models and examples of each.

What is a Job Description?

A job (or role) description is a device often used in paid work - and increasingly in voluntary work – to describe the purpose of a job, the tasks involved, the context in which those tasks are done, and the expectations relating to support and accountability. A person specification needs to be directly linked to this job description - and also to the values of the organisation. It states as clearly, and as realistically as possible, what is required from a paid or voluntary worker in order to do the job.

What are Job Descriptions and Person Specifications For?

In paid employment the use of job descriptions and person specifications is a key element in equal opportunities recruitment and selection. Instead of judging people by "gut reaction," selectors now have to link their assessment methods and interview questions closely to a set of essential and desirable "criteria", which arise directly from the values of the organisation and the needs of the particular job as set out in a job description and person specification. This leads to selection which is fairer to the candidate and more effective for the organisation.

These documents are not only useful at the selection stage however; they can be used to plan recruitment, support, supervision, and training. They are also helpful in negotiating or communicating with others in an organisation about a particular role, and are a helpful reference point for reviewing a job or for behaving fairly if things go wrong.

In some contexts volunteer recruitment and selection can also benefit from using a job description/personnel specification approach. However, it would be a mistake to assume that equal opportunity procedures are automatically the same in the recruitment and selection of both paid staff and volunteers.

What is Different about Volunteers from Employing Paid Staff?

Some of the issues to be addressed are:

- Some agencies try to fit a job to a volunteer rather than a volunteer to a job.
- Volunteers often have the potential to bring something different to the organisation - so we can't always decide what this is in advance.
- Volunteers are able to offer varying amounts of time.
- Volunteers are often choosing the agency as much if not more than the agency is choosing them.
Flexibility in the Use of Job Descriptions and Person Specifications

Because volunteering is different from paid work in so many ways, a more flexible approach to job descriptions and person specifications is needed. For example:

a. Job descriptions can often be negotiated with the volunteer rather than being decided on in advance. Perhaps a volunteer can do just one task from a job which would usually be much bigger. They may bring an idea to an agency of something new which needs doing - or have been specially recruited to develop a new area. Or perhaps an agency has a whole range of tasks which need doing from which a volunteer can choose. If this is the case with your agency, the job description and person specification proforma still cover issues which you could usefully discuss with the volunteer as part of this negotiation.

b. Because volunteers are often choosing organisations rather than the other way round, job descriptions and person specifications need to be even more "two way" for volunteers than for paid staff.

c. Whether you decide to negotiate job descriptions and person specifications or to decide them in advance you may still have some key requirements which you need from everyone working with your organisation. These are often linked to the values of an organisation, for example a commitment to equal opportunities or confidentiality. These need to be considered - and communicated - separately from the job description, perhaps in the form of information for volunteers or as a volunteer agreement. They still need to be remembered when planning selection, training and support.

d. Job descriptions are there to be changed. Volunteers and paid staff often want to develop and change in the job, and a good way of helping this is to review job descriptions regularly with them.
Equal Opportunities Considerations

If the first contact a volunteer has with an organisation is an application form and a job description, then they might well think this rather an odd response to a spontaneous offer of help. Clearly if an agency does decide to use volunteer job descriptions they will need to think about when and how they will present them to volunteers.

For example should they simply be explained verbally?

Can they be put in a "user friendly" format?

Should they be given to volunteers after they have agreed to work for the organisation as a record of what has already been agreed?

However we present job descriptions and person specifications they still have the important advantage of clarifying what volunteer organisers need to do to ensure that volunteers are fairly recruited, and enabled to do the work. Also they help the process of ensuring that volunteers have the information they need in order to decide if they want to do the job.

Another key element in good equal opportunities practice is ensuring that any criteria arising from job descriptions and person specifications are not in themselves discriminatory.