



Skills acquired through
Volunteering in Sport

LEARNING RESOURCES

/// PILLAR 3: VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT AND RETENTION

SUB-PILLAR 3.3 Communicating with and consulting your volunteers



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/// Sub-Pillar 3.3

Communicating with and consulting your volunteers

a/ DESCRIPTION

With so many options available, digital and otherwise, what is the most effective way to communicate with volunteers in different roles in your organisation? This section will enable you to review your current approach whilst identifying the most appropriate channels through which to keep your volunteers informed and involved. This will enable you to gather volunteer feedback, ideas and advice regarding improvements, helping you undertake timely and comprehensive consultation to ensure your decision-making is volunteer-informed.

b/ KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS – DID YOU KNOW THAT:

From our Global Survey of sport organisations:

- 25% of sport organisations reported it was difficult to maintain communications with their volunteers.

In terms of the communication methods which they used:

- 81% used emails to communicate with their volunteers
- 78% used telephone, text and messaging services
- 72% used face-to-face meetings
- 40% used social media posts and updates
- 33% used online meetings
- 26% used their website,
- 18% used newsletters.

When it comes to the importance of consulting volunteers:

- 49% felt that giving their volunteers more say over the running of the organisation would help to retain their involvement.

Your organisation might benefit from considering the full range of communication methods to maintain regular contact with your volunteers.

You may also benefit from seeking feedback from your volunteers and using that feedback to improve their volunteering experience.

>> CONTENT AREA 1 : METHODS OF COMMUNICATION: VERBAL, WRITTEN, DIGITAL ETC.

The management of volunteers, specifically how their participation is planned and implemented, what roles and tasks they are involved in or how they are treated and handled during their contribution are critical in the formulation of their volunteer experience. Clear and consistent communication to volunteers is a key element of this. Unfortunately, many sport organisations fail to communicate effectively with their volunteers for a variety of reasons. For example, they may not provide enough time and space for one-on-one interactions, or they don't have any proper mechanisms in place to receive feedback. Poor communication leaves your sport organisation at risk of increased misunderstandings, unhappy volunteers, and volunteer attrition. It might even deter some volunteers from getting involved at all! Of course, effectively communicating with a large group of people who may be spread out in different locations or have different communication needs and preferences is easier said than done. As such, this section of the toolkit provides some useful hints and tips for creating effective communications with your volunteer workforce.

🔗 Regular contact with your volunteers will help to:

- Keep volunteers engaged and ensure they feel valued
- Create a safe working environment
- Encourage repeat volunteering
- Ensure volunteer roles and responsibilities are fulfilled correctly
- Ensure policies and procedures are followed correctly

🔗 Methods of communication

There are a variety of methods and tools that you can use to communicate with volunteers. Many of these methods will be very familiar to you – the key is to select the most appropriate method for your volunteers. Remember, you may need to use a combination of different methods to reach all your volunteers depending on their own communication preferences and depending on what you wish to communicate. You may wish to discuss communication preferences with new volunteers during their induction.

The main methods of communication are:

Email offers a way of communicating consistently with large numbers of volunteers via the creation of a group email account or enables you to send more personalised messages to smaller numbers of volunteers. It is often a good communication method to use if you need to send detailed information and attachments.

There are a range of different **social media platforms** that you can utilise. You may wish to consider using different digital communication tools and group your volunteers based on their preferences. For example, for younger volunteers, TikTok and Instagram may be the most suitable social media tools to use, whereas older volunteers may prefer Facebook or WhatsApp. See the MTÜ Triatlioniakadeemia case study for a great example of how social media has been used to recruit and manage volunteers.

On-line forums may be suitable if you are trying to recruit new volunteers or consult existing volunteers in large numbers. They are not an effective tool for managing volunteers and sharing detailed information about an event or regular activities connected to the sport organisation.

Using **postal services** now seems 'old fashioned' due to the technological advances in communication, but it still has its advantages over other methods. It can be more personal than using email or social media, so may be worth considering if you are sending out a 'thank you' or wish to some form of recognition or reward for a volunteer's contribution.

Text messages are useful if you need to communicate immediately with a volunteer. But are more suitable to communicating individually or with a small number of individuals.

Face-to-face communication may be necessary if you need to discuss something sensitive with a volunteer or wish to have a detailed conversation. It can also make a volunteer feel more valued because you have taken the time to speak to them in-person rather than using one of the other methods above. This type of communication is often crucial and important in relationship building.

In summary, each method has its own advantages and disadvantages, so you will need to choose the most appropriate method and be prepared to be flexible. You may also wish to consider the following 'tips' for effective communication:

Tips for effective communication

- Keep communications short and brief (remember volunteers are often working full time or have other commitments)
- Avoid using complicated and unnecessary jargon, especially when recruiting new volunteers who may have little-to-no experience. Too much jargon may confuse or disengage potential volunteers who may not understand your lingo. So as much as possible, keep communications simple and clear.
- For important messages, communicate them several times in different formats. Don't assume that sending it out once means it has been read and understood.
- Include visuals where you can, pictures are always great for attracting attention.
- Do remember that anything you post online is public, regardless of whether your organisation's page or account is private or not.
- Get to know your volunteers so you can understand the most effective ways to communicate with them.
- Be flexible and use different methods of communication as needed. Your organisation and volunteers will all benefit if you learn to convey messages effectively while eliminating misconceptions.

And remember to say 'thank you' often. Your volunteers donate their time, attention, and skills to your organisation so showing gratitude is vital for communicating their impact on your organisation. A simple thank you can go a long way in making your volunteers feel appreciated and valued, which can, in turn, help you retain more of your volunteers year over year.

>> CONTENT AREA 2 : GATHERING VOLUNTEER FEEDBACK ON ALL ASPECTS OF THEIR EXPERIENCE

A key aspect of creating a good environment for volunteers is to provide them with opportunities to feedback on their experiences. This can help your organisation to improve the way it recruits, manages, and develops its volunteers, and thus contribute to their retention. This section of the toolkit will provide you with advice and suggestions on how you can gather volunteer feedback.

The first thing to consider is why you want this feedback. Is it in relation to a specific question or aspect of the volunteer experience or is it more generic feedback on the whole volunteer experience at your sport organisation. This is important, as it may determine which method of gathering feedback is most appropriate.

One of the best practices for collecting volunteer feedback is to make the process as easy and accessible as possible. This can include providing multiple channels for volunteers to provide feedback, such as online forms, email, or surveys. You should gather all feedback whether it is positive or negative and then act upon it. In addition to helping the organisation improve its volunteer management practices, feedback also helps volunteers to understand themselves and their role better, and to reflect on what works well as well as any challenges and problems.

🕒 **Methods for gathering feedback:**

1. Run an annual volunteer survey.

You can use online tools such as SurveyMonkey to help design, distribute, and gather responses from a simple questionnaire that asks volunteers about their experiences. This can then be used to help you plan or develop future strategies around the management of volunteers. See the template provided for sample questions you may wish to ask your volunteers [link to template].

2. Meet with volunteer leaders (if applicable)

regularly to provide opportunities for them to feedback on the experiences of their volunteers. This can be an effective way of identifying an issue early and addressing it before it becomes more problematic.

3. Organise group activities and get-togethers

such as picnics, dinners, or training sessions. This gives volunteers an opportunity to speak informally about their experiences and can do wonders for volunteer engagement. In-person interaction gives volunteers the chance to bond with each other and develop a sense of community and purpose. They also provide a value opportunity to share and gather information. Consider adding a question-and-answer session at the end of the activity to give volunteers a chance to raise issues or ask questions.

4. Give volunteers opportunities to voice their opinions.

Effective communication also means giving volunteers a chance to voice their opinions or concerns, ask questions, and share suggestions. Whether a volunteer needs advice or feels displeased with how a particular activity is being managed, they should know how to contact you and should have multiple opportunities to do so. This could include having a nominated individual that volunteers can approach if needed, or an email address they can use to raise concerns or make suggestions.

5. Make an effort to talk to volunteers

informally and ask them how their volunteering experience is progressing. This could be at a training session or event – the key is to ensure the contact is informal and relaxed. Listen carefully to what they say, and if they raise any concerns ask them for recommendations on how to fix the problem.

6. Organise specific meetings with volunteers –

these can be face-to-face or online. You can use these to discuss specific elements of the volunteer experience or gather more generic feedback about the volunteer experience at your organisation.

The next step of this process is to utilise the feedback you have gathered. We consider how your organisation can this in the next section.

>> CONTENT AREA 3: INCORPORATING FEEDBACK TO IMPROVE THE VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

The main goal of getting feedback is to gather information that will be used to improve the volunteer management processes.

Firstly, it is good practice to always thank volunteers for their feedback, for example, respond to emails they may have sent, or send out a summary of any volunteer surveys your organisation has undertaken. It is important that volunteers feel their opinion has been listened to and taken seriously.

You should also commit to acting on the feedback you have received. This is known as a closed loop system. This feedback may need actioning at different levels of your organisation, so you may need to consider the most appropriate way to cascade the feedback to the different sections of the organisation or other volunteers / staff members who need to take action on the back of the feedback received. It is also important that you follow-up on the feedback to ensure it has been actioned, and to let the volunteer(s) know what actions have been undertaken.

🕒 How to make the most of the feedback your organisation has received:

1. Find an appropriate way to record,

store, or keep track of the feedback received. You could copy the feedback into a shared document or spreadsheet which can be accessed and shared by multiple people within the organisation. Organising your feedback in this way, will make it easier for you to analyse the responses you receive, share them, and then feedback to volunteers on what you have learnt.

2. Evaluate your feedback.

It is important to consider all feedback you receive and to recognise that some of this may be negative. This is the feedback that you can use to make positive changes to your volunteer management procedures. If the feedback has an overly negative tone, or is impolite, don't be offended and don't disregard the feedback. Look at the feedback, pick out the points they are trying to make, and turn it into a useful piece of feedback. When you have received enough responses, you can start to have a look for patterns. Are the respondents identifying the same area that needs improvement? This should be the first thing you focus on. If the feedback does not identify any potential improvements, you may need to ask your questions in a different way or make the feedback anonymous to get honest opinions. While you are evaluating the feedback, think about how it compares to your perspective, and then think about it from the volunteer's situation. Putting yourself in the volunteer's shoes should give you some perspective on the reasoning behind the feedback.

3. Use the feedback to make an action plan

or integrate the feedback into any strategic planning you may be doing around volunteer management within your organisation. Once you have evaluated the feedback you should have an idea of what areas need to be improved. Create a list of areas or procedures for improvement based on the feedback and prioritise these based on their importance. This should allow you to work on the most important areas first. You may also wish to create a schedule for when you want these changes to happen by, what needs to be done to make those changes, and who is responsible for implementing these changes or improvements. Be realistic, considering what time and resources you have available.

4. Try and avoid just focusing on the easy fixes.

If the feedback has identified an important area that needs improving but which will take longer to action, you may wish to focus on that first as it may have the biggest impact on improving the volunteer experience at your sport organisation.

5. It is also important to follow up on the feedback

received with the volunteer(s) themselves. If the feedback is not anonymous, you should verbally, or via email, thank the people who provided it. If their feedback is something you are going to action, let that person know what you will do, and when it has been actioned.

The key to using feedback effectively is to act on it. If you ignore it, this is likely to contribute to a poor organisational culture and a negative volunteering experience. If you demonstrate your willingness to act on feedback, this will contribute to the development of a strong and supportive culture for volunteers, and is likely to help recruit and retain volunteers.





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