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7 Ways to Find a Great Volunteer Opportunity

(Source: <http://nonprofit.about.com/od/volunteers/>)

If you are looking for a way to volunteer or do more of it, here are some helpful tips for finding that perfect volunteer match.

1. Identify the causes you're passionate about.

Do you feel strongly about a particular problem or issue? Just to think, "Oh, well, volunteering would be a nice thing to do," isn't really enough. You might start, but will you stick with it? If you feel strongly about something, such as animals, homelessness, women's rights, world poverty, or helping children, then that is a very good sign and the start of a great volunteer experience.

2. Determine how much time you have.

Do you want something that is short and infrequent? Or could you donate a certain amount of time each week or month? This is something you'll want to share with the nonprofits you talk with. There are volunteer opportunities that can fit any time commitment.

You may even be able to use work time to volunteer. Many companies have employee volunteer programs, days of service during which teams of employees help a cause, or even loan out "skilled" volunteers to help with sophisticated projects at charities.

3. Contact relevant organizations.

Look up the organizations in your community that deal with the issues you care about. You can also get an idea of what volunteer opportunities are out there by visiting Volunteer MBC's online volunteer opportunity database at: <http://bit.ly/vmbcLikeToVolunteer>

Contact one to three organizations and then visit them in person. Ideally, you'll meet with a volunteer coordinator and get a good idea of how the nonprofit works, the kinds of volunteer opportunities that are available, and how good a fit it is for your goals.

It's a good idea to volunteer for a small project before getting extensively involved. If it doesn't work out, you can move on. Finding your right volunteer match can make the difference between being a volunteer dropout or a happy, dedicated one.

7700 Hurontario Street, Unit 601, Brampton, ON L6Y 4M3 • Phone: 905.238.2622 • Fax: 905.595.2612 • Email: info@volunteermbc.org
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4. Look for a volunteer opportunity that will be fulfilling.

Volunteer work should not be entirely selfless. It is important that you enjoy what you are doing so that you will continue doing it. Think about what you like to do.

Are you a "take charge" kind of person? If so, you won't be happy knocking on doors or stuffing envelopes. Look for leadership opportunities at nonprofits, such as serving on a board of directors, helping with fundraising, or organizing an event.

On the other hand, you might not want something intellectually challenging. Perhaps you have enough of that in your own career and would like to do something simple but meaningful. Maybe you would enjoy cleaning up a vacant lot, planting a garden or signing people up for a charity run.

You can even combine your love of travel and adventure with volunteering through voluntourism. Many large, national and international charities offer trips which incorporate volunteering.

5. Match your skills to the volunteer opportunity.

Make a list of the things you are good at so that you can share them with the volunteer coordinators that you talk with. People who are sophisticated with computers, for instance, are in high demand at nonprofits. But your skills might be a facility with people, ability to do detailed work such as keeping meticulous records, hands-on ability such as carpentry or sewing, a talent with the written word, or public speaking.

6. Be prepared for a challenge.

Boredom and impatience with the process are the biggest threats to a fulfilling volunteer experience. Some nonprofits will be disorganized and ill prepared for volunteers. Don't stay with that kind of situation. If they deserve you, they will be ready to use you effectively.

If you work for a high-powered corporation, you may get impatient with the way things are done at a nonprofit. Try to refrain from telling them how to do their job.

If you work with things instead of people, you may have to rethink how you operate. Working with people and their problems takes a different and more patient mindset.

7. Expect personal growth.

You may be challenged by having to deal with people who are less educated than yourself, from different backgrounds, and who have a different ethnic background. For sure, your stereotypes will crumble as you witness the dignity of all people no matter their circumstances.

These challenges are healthy ones and will result in your own personal growth if you persevere rather than run away at your first glimpse of life as others live it.

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