

## How to Develop Role Descriptions for Communications Volunteers

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In her recent blog post, Marlene Oliveira gave us an overview of [some of the ways volunteers can be engaged in communications roles](#). She has provided a solid foundation from which to build and I encourage you to read it if you haven't already.

Knowing the roles we want volunteers to play in helping us deliver our mission is vital to the success for both the individual giving their time and for you, the volunteer engagement professional who is giving your time as well to engage this new team member.

Sometimes individuals walk through your door (post on your blog, tweet you or post to your Facebook page) asking to be part of your team. What do we do then? If we have role descriptions in place the process is a bit easier; simply fit them into the pre-existing mold. But what do we do when they have strong skills we didn't realize that we needed?

For example, I recently was asked to contribute to my agency's newsletter. I didn't even think to hire a volunteer to support this initiative until a gentleman walked through my doors looking to do 'anything to help'. Initially he wanted to visit with seniors, play pool and share a pint. As we chatted, he let me know that he had 20+ years as an editor with a major Toronto newspaper. He was keen to keep his hand in the biz and happily agreed to be my editor, proof reader, fact checker and all round media guru for me.

Since I hadn't set out to recruit him, I didn't have a role description. Together we sat and discussed his goals and our agency goals. Together, he and I created a role description which:

- Outlined the expectations of the role
- Set the timelines- how many hours per week/month his help was needed
- Identified the skills and knowledge he needed to use
- Managed expectations around the benefits of volunteer that he might expect

Without a solid role description in place, you put yourself, your agency and clients at risk.

### **Remember these benefits of role descriptions:**

- Role descriptions provide volunteers with boundaries and parameters so they:
  1. Are able to do their job to the best of their ability, and
  2. Know your expectations.

This will help them feel engaged, productive and will lead to stronger retention rates

- Role descriptions provide the foundation for any corrective actions that need to be taken, up to and including dismissal of the volunteer. Without clearly documenting the parameters of the role we are not able to correct behaviours or actions that our outside of the role.

- Creating role descriptions can help strengthen staff buy-in of the volunteer's role by clearly demonstrating that the function of the volunteer is to support, not replace staff.

### **Building a role description: the steps**

#### **Define the purpose (of the role):**

At the top of the role description, provide a few sentences to help the volunteer understand how their contributions deliver the mission of the organization. "Thank you for giving your time. As a volunteer updating our Facebook page, you're ensuring that clients- current, past and future are aware of what's going on in the agency and how they can be a part of it"

#### **Create a position title:**

Try to ensure that the title of the role clearly explains what the position is. While there is a tendency to give volunteer roles fancy titles, we sometimes lose the cultural competency view- language and cultural barriers may arise with unclear titles. Avoid titles that are the same or similar to those held by paid staff.

#### **Specify the commitment required:**

Is this volunteer needed for a one-time event? Long term (6 months or more)? How often do you need them? Do they need to come to your office or can they volunteer off site? Specify these details in this section.

#### **State the skills required:**

Two important things to note here: #1- list the bonafide skills required for the role and #2- be specific about the skills required rather than creating a task list. If you're looking for a volunteer to contribute to your social media presence, address those skills i.e. ability to convey information clearly and concisely, knowledge of facebook, twitter, pinterest formats, ability to be self-directed. Many role descriptions will state actions in this area: i.e. 'post to Twitter feed daily', 'write short articles for facebook'. By specifying tasks, you may be narrowing the field as far as what they can do.

#### **Identify the benefits:**

So... what's in it for me? Will you write them a letter of reference? Fill out a university scholarship application on their behalf? Will you give them access to specific software they may want to use? Pay for their transportation? Buy them a coffee? Let them know the typical things you do and ask them if there's something specifically they're looking for.

#### **Indicate the location:**

Will the volunteer be coming into your office (do you have one?) or can they work from home? Are there various location they can choose from? Give them those details and where possible, give them the flexibility to choose.

**Oh yah, and....**

You may want to include such components as who they report to, what's the duration of the role and anything else that the volunteer should know in order to succeed in their role.

There are plenty of online resources to help you create a template and look that works for you or contact your local volunteer centre for additional guidance. Check the website for the Ontario Volunteer Centre Network to find a volunteer centre near you: [www.ovcn.ca](http://www.ovcn.ca)