

Looking to grow your career? Volunteer!



By Karl Noseworthy

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As National Volunteer Week is fast approaching (April 18th to April 24th), it is important to remember that nonprofit organizations are, typically, a combination of both paid employees and volunteers. It is important for a nonprofit to understand the value a volunteer provides to the organization. As well, the volunteer should recognize that, from a career perspective, they too can benefit in this relationship. In order to discuss this topic in more detail I spoke with **Jason Evanson**, Alberta & N.W.T. Chapter Director for [The Children's Wish Foundation of Canada](#).

An employer's perspective

Many nonprofit organizations would not even be able to get started without support from volunteers. As a result, there are many areas where volunteers add value to an organization. As Evanson states, "we have to run a very tight bottom line and our human resources are quite stretched. If we do not partner with people who are willing to come in on their own time, and at no charge, we would not be able to provide the services that we do." This allows the organization to save money. "By working with volunteers we are able to keep our costs in check and, more importantly, keep our operations at a healthy level."

As a nonprofit organization grasps the importance of volunteers, it is also imperative to know what approach to take in order to create the right fit for a volunteer position. For Evanson, they have different approaches based on the type of position they are hiring for. In hiring administrative volunteers that would work in the office on an ongoing basis, they have a continuous posting. However, if they are recruiting for a more specific task, they treat that person in the same manner they would if they were hiring a paid staff member. "We advertise in some manner, either formally or by word of mouth. Once we have identified people, we screen them and invite them to go through a formal interview process. We then ensure there is a fit between the individual and the duties and responsibilities they would have as a volunteer and then start the training process."

When looking for a volunteer position, it is important not to think of it in the traditional sense, such as going out on one Saturday a year to a fundraiser. Nonprofits are beginning to understand that it is more important to create ways to engage people who want to make a contribution and build relationships. From Evanson's perspective this could mean a variety of things, depending upon the volunteer's perspective. "Oftentimes, volunteers prefer increased levels of short-term commitment with very specific responsibilities that are often aligned with a particular task, event or function." He also feels there is a need for organizations to be flexible

in terms of availability and even having the ability to create an opportunity for an entire family to help out. Evanson feels that "people need to look past their own notion of the traditional thoughts about volunteering as many organizations are willing to work with volunteers to carve out something that meet both their needs and restrictions."

Gaining nonprofit experience

After gaining knowledge from an employer's perspective, it is important to understand how a person can take advantage of volunteering to better their career. Volunteers can use opportunities like this in order to further develop skills or create new ones. As Evanson comments, "some [volunteers] do want to enhance what they already have and they will offer up a skill to us that we can leverage knowing that they are coming in with some expertise. In other cases, they like to learn something new so they come and work with us in order to develop some kind of knowledge that doesn't get developed in their place of employment." He also believes that there is a benefit in helping out with a known organization. "There is a certain level of pedigree that comes through association with organizations such as The Children's Wish Foundation as it is a very well known brand. If people are able to develop a relationship with us I think that brings a lot of credibility indirectly toward the person that volunteered with us." There is also a leisure component that is associated with volunteerism. People really enjoy the social aspect as it is an opportunity to create new relationships. It is also a great networking tool for volunteers looking to do so.

Listing your skills

Once a person has obtained these new skills and experience it is important to know how to properly list it on a resume. Because there are so many unique formats of resumes, it is difficult to say exactly how to approach this, but two of the mainstream ways are chronologically by work history and experiential. Evanson believes that the experiential type of resume works better if you want to list skills learned through volunteerism. He explains an experiential resume as "rather than saying you worked with a company from a specific date range you list your administrative skills that demonstrate the experiences gained from the position. Then, in a less detailed manner, you will list who you worked for and when. Then list your volunteer work in a separate section, if you choose."

However, when listing your volunteer work on your resume, you should be aware of what you have listed. Evanson feels that unless the volunteer work is relevant to the position, you should only list things that are at a maximum of two years old. He also does not feel it is appropriate to list things from high school or during the summer in between university years unless you are a younger employment candidate. "As an employer, we are looking at the employability of an individual. The person they were in grade eleven or twelve is typically not the same person after completing an undergraduate degree. As a result, you have to show some discretion and judgment in deciding on what to keep on a resume."

Following through

It is important to try to find volunteer positions that can help you on your career path. However, it is also necessary that a volunteer does not take their responsibilities lightly. As Evanson states, "I think it is important is that you make good on commitments. If you say that you are going to do something, you need to make a valiant effort to follow through. If you can't, then be honest with people along the way." As is true in every organization, there is nothing worse than when an employee or volunteer state they are going to do something and then don't. "Volunteers often talk about the challenge of juggling work responsibilities, home commitments and volunteer obligations. I would expect a volunteer enters into a commitment having understood what they're already attached to and the commitments that it requires. It's about knowing your

limits and not treating the volunteer obligation lightly. A person should treat searching for a volunteer position much like they would treat employment. If they do so they will likely find that it will set them on the track to success going forward."

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