

# What's in it for me? Hidden volunteer motivations



.... and how to find them.



Ask a volunteer why they volunteer and a typical answer is: “to give something back”, “to help others” or “to help you help the community”. These altruistic motivations are valid and admirable, and summarise all that is good about volunteers. In the generous, compassionate and selfless world of non-profits, it just wouldn't be right for a volunteer to hint at a more selfish reason or acknowledge that they volunteer for their own benefit.

But behind every external, outward or overt reason for volunteering there is a secondary, internal or personal reason to volunteer. It may be to gain work experience, discover confidence, meet people, make contacts, to do something different to work, relieve guilt, find joy, or feel better about themselves. These reasons are also perfectly valid, but not as easy to state as motivations when the overriding need of others is more pressing. WIIFM (what's in it for me) is relevant, even if it's a hidden motivation for volunteers.

Conventional volunteer theory encourages us to reward volunteers in a meaningful way – a way that is relevant to the individual and satisfies their motivation for volunteering. Jobs that directly connect to your mission reward those who want to help others – but there is more to consider. Finding the WIIFM motivation of the volunteer, and ensuring that is being satisfied, is also important to reward volunteers in a highly personal and relevant way.

Let's think about Mike, a courier driver in the city. He offered to help 'Food For All', a volunteer involving organisation that repurposed unsold food for the homeless. His motivation, as explained to the organisation, was to help the homeless as he saw so many in the suburbs he drove through in the course of his work. He did not mention that he felt guilty driving by these people each day with a packed lunch in his car,

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money in his pocket and a comfortable home to return to each day. He also understood that he wanted a break from his normal day-to-day work activities, ie driving.

'Food for All' asked him to collect unsold food supplies from stores in a geographical area close to his home. This was rewarding insofar as it did contribute to the needs of the homeless. However, had they delved a little deeper however into his WIIFM motivations, they may have understood that a role in their Soup Kitchen close to his work, which would have both alleviated the guilt he felt each day and given him a break from driving

Carolyn, who has been in the UK for 2 years, is another example. She is busy with work and study, doesn't have many friends, is bilingual and has a keen interest in helping families who have fallen on hard times. When asked why she wanted to volunteer for "Neighbourhood Care" her answer was that she'd had experienced hardship in her childhood and wanted to help other children in similar circumstances. (She also – if asked further – would have shared that she would like to make more friends outside of her immediate community.) Her bilingual skills were immediately channelled into a translating and interpreting role for families within her community.

As time progressed Carolyn felt rewarded by helping families, but it wasn't enough as she didn't meet many new people outside her community and felt like she might like to volunteer elsewhere. If "Neighbourhood Care" had probed further and understood her WIIFM motivations, there may have been role to engage her for a longer time.

So how do you identify a volunteer's WIIFM motivation to engage volunteers at a deeper level?

1. They may self-select roles that reward this if given the opportunity. It's easy to put the onus on the volunteer to speak up, however volunteers are acutely sensitive to your needs. They see how resource poor you are, how needy your clients are and they do not presume that their needs are important. Sometimes it's easier to move on. They do not necessarily understand how flexible you might be unless you communicate this. Often their WIIFM motivations will be expressed in the roles they choose or later identify if given the choice.

2. They may tell you, but you have to probe. When you ask: "Why to do you volunteer?" - ask again and don't accept the 1st or 2nd answers as the only motivations. Probe further to discover the internal, personal and perhaps more difficult to express motivation for why they are giving up their time. Extend your 'why' questions: "...and why else?" or "...any other reason?". Give an example of a WIIFM motivation to help volunteers feel comfortable to express their own. Alternatively, enable volunteers to choose multiple motivations from a list that includes WIIFM options.

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3 Ensure you have the time and resources to really get to know your volunteers. Hidden WIIFM motivations may only be revealed over time or in an environment where volunteers feel comfortable admitting that they do have some self-interest in donating their time.

Rewarding volunteers by enabling them to help is only one level of satisfaction. Rewarding volunteers by satisfying their WIIFM motivations is perhaps more important to engage volunteers in a long term, meaningful relationship. Bolster your **Volunteer Pay Packet** by ensuring you deliver both.

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Community Volunteer Service BaNES  
Bath Central Library  
Drop-in open  
Tuesday – Thursday 09:30 – 3:30  
Tel: 01225 338 105

email [bathnes.volunteerservices@virginicare.co.uk](mailto:bathnes.volunteerservices@virginicare.co.uk)  
Website: [www.bathneshealthandcare.nhs.uk](http://www.bathneshealthandcare.nhs.uk)

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