

ABC: WORKING WITH VOLUNTEERS

Stichting Musea en
Herinneringscentra 40
45

Improving Museum Education

The Museums and Memorial Centres 40-45 Foundation (SMH) has introduced the two-year-programme Improving Museum Education (KWIE) in January 2018. In this programme fourteen museums worked together to improve the quality of museum education in Second World War museums and SMH wishes to share their results with the entire field. The products from KWIE have been developed to improve the overall quality of museum education.

Stichting Musea en
Herinneringscentra

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Editors

Workgroup education

Translator

Lisa van Kessel

Design

Meester Ontwerpers, Amsterdam

INTRODUCTION

The ABC: *working with volunteers* is a document made during the Improving Museum Education (KWIE) programme. Before you lies an abbreviated version of the original Dutch publication which was composed to be especially useful to organisations that deal with the Second World War.

Working with volunteers is a privilege. As organisations it is key to make volunteer work as enjoyable as possible, as it is because of the effort of volunteers that visitors are given a better and more memorable experience. Not every organisation has a set policy for working with volunteers. And working with volunteers, while extremely rewarding, can also be a challenge, especially in small organisations. This ABC mentions themes, ideas and highlights that might help when creating a policy or serve as a reminder of things to keep in mind when dealing with volunteers in your organisation.

A

AGE

People of all ages do volunteer work, but in Second World War museums most volunteers are over 60 years old. People in this age category usually have more free time, while people from other age categories often have more responsibilities that require their attention. Organisations especially note that they have trouble keeping active volunteers under 30 years of age. Having volunteers of different ages is always good for an organisation, but creating a diverse team of volunteers sometimes requires that the recruitment and training of volunteers needs to be different as well. Be aware of the differences and always try to strengthen the group as a whole. You can think of adding a minimum or maximum age to recruit volunteers of a certain age. This will also make it easier to talk to volunteers about tasks that might be harder to complete because of old age.

ATTENTION

People who choose to do volunteer work often do so because they want social connections with people who share their interests. Volunteer work is a way to use their knowledge and skills in a way that benefits the community and volunteers often have a personal connection to the organisation where they work. Many organisations cannot exist without volunteers. While volunteers do not receive a salary, they deserve the respect and attention of the organisation. This means that time will need to be invested in them. This can be done by giving them training and by mentoring them so they can develop, improve and are happy in their role in the organisation. Giving them attention also means to be available in good and bad times and by offering support when things go wrong.

Judith Borra, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

"One swallow doesn't make a summer. Stay interested in the volunteers."

B

BUSY

Every museum has periods during the year in which it is busier than usual. For instance during the opening of new exhibitions or events. This has consequences for the volunteers as well. They are given more tasks, deal with more visitors and museum staff cannot give volunteers as much attention as during quieter periods. Try to prepare volunteers for these busy periods by, for example, planning a meeting in which events in the coming weeks are explained and volunteers can ask questions. If the high season has already begun, try to give volunteers the attention they are used to. Volunteers are often the ones tasked with welcoming visitors, a task that they should be able to do with confidence. This is harder when they are not up to date with changes or events planned.

Even when there are no big events, sometimes it might feel busy because it is hard to find enough volunteers. Try to find out why that is and recruit new volunteers.

Anita Ganzeboom-van Son and Sergio Derks, the Philips Museum:

“Make time for volunteers. If there are many visitors or the café is really busy, that can be a real task for volunteers. Sit down with them and look for solutions together. This way, you show that you are taking the problem seriously and that you are looking for a way to handle it.”

C

CHANGE

Overall, volunteers are able to do similar tasks for a long time without changing assignments. However, sometimes you want to change and renew certain processes. This can be easily done with small adjustments, especially when it is clear why things have to change, but large developments can be confusing and cannot be explained over a quick cup of coffee. It could be good to inform volunteers at an early stage and keep them up to date during the process. Do not be afraid to over-inform them. For them it is often more difficult to oversee a situation because they are not at the museum fulltime. Allow them plenty of time to ask questions and involve them in developments such as new guided tours. This way, volunteers will be part of the team that drives the process of change, even though they are not making decisions. Most volunteers want to feel as if they are part of the decisions and that they won't be left out.

Elsbeth van der Vlist, Rijksmuseum Boerhaave:

“Every so often employees from certain departments share developments in a meeting for volunteers. This could be a new exhibition or a change in policy which affects volunteers. This way we involve them in developments in the museum.”

CONNECTION

It can be quite a process to recruit new volunteers. An important component is that you need to be able to offer something that makes a volunteer want to connect to the organisation. The first step is putting yourself in their shoes and determining what they can get from you. There is no salary for volunteers, so the added value should be derived from other things. In addition, you need to invest in a relationship with volunteers which means frequent conversations, both formal and informal. Show your volunteers that you value their efforts and that they are an indispensable part of the organisation. Be good to them and even when things go wrong, make sure that you have their back. This will make volunteers feel loyalty to the organisation.

D

DIVERSITY

Cultural diversity is one of the major challenges in the cultural sector. A part of our society is not involved with or invited to museums or other organisation which makes them far less accessible. Being inclusive has thus become an important goal. Museum collections especially, should be looked at with different eyes. Equally as important is the diversity of the people who work in the museum so they represent the diversity in society. The first step is to think about the people who work at your museum and cultural, gender, and age diversity. Involve your employees in talks about recruitment and try to keep note of (un)conscious prejudices in your organisation that might influence the experience of new volunteers.

E

EMPLOYMENT

When an organisation needs volunteers, it is important to make sure you employ enough volunteers so no one gets overworked and you are able to make a schedule. There are plenty of reasons to want to recruit new volunteers, such as too many volunteers leaving, lacking volunteers with certain skills, or creating more diversity. You can start recruiting with a recruitment plan. This does not need to be an extensive plan, but should include what kind of volunteers you want to recruit and which skills they should have. Then, you should think of ways to reach them: using the website, newspapers, job portals, social media and/or word of mouth. Try to clearly state your needs and give information about tasks, wants and what selection criteria you will use. Again, try to form a strategy that will help your recruitment in the future.

F

FEEDBACK

Giving and receiving feedback is an important skill in working with volunteers. Make sure to include regular feedback in your volunteer policies and, when possible, train yourself in giving feedback. Even if things seem to be going well it is important to keep giving feedback and allow others to do so as well. This way, you will keep a good relationship that is open to input.

Feedback can be positive or negative. There are many ways in which to give feedback, such as the sandwich method. Using this method you start with positive feedback, followed by negative feedback and end on positive feedback. It can also be very effective to let volunteers give feedback to each other. This can inspire volunteers to see their work as more of a group effort and use and learn from each other's strengths. Be generous with positive feedback as compliments and encouragements.

Elsbeth van der Vlist, Rijksmuseum Boerhaave:

“What should you do when a guide is no longer fit to represent the museum, but they do not realise this themselves? This is a difficult conversation, but can be discussed in a group. Guides also give each other tours and evaluate their efforts. We ask questions such as: what did we learn, what was good and what should the guides keep in mind? The guides evaluate together and give me their insights. When necessary, I join the discussion.”

G

GENERATIONS

From a survey carried out in fourteen Second World War museums in the Netherlands, it has been determined that most volunteers are over the age of 60. When a museum also has many younger volunteers or employees, this can sometimes cause a generation gap due to different viewpoints and way of life. This might cause groups to form within your volunteer team. You can counter this by making sure volunteers of different ages mingle during museum activities or by scheduling them together. This gives them an opportunity to get to know each other better.

H

HEALTH

It is often said that doing volunteer work is healthy. However, it could happen that doing volunteer work becomes too taxing. It is important to talk about this regularly, for instance during performance reviews. Keep in mind that having trouble with tasks cannot only be caused by physical, but also by mental issues. If you fear that volunteer work is too taxing for people of a certain age, you can use a maximum age in your recruitment.

Liesbeth Tonckens, Erfgoed Gelderland:

"This can lead to difficult conversations, but you need to discuss it. The quality of the organisation needs to be maintained. You can protect the organisation by including it in a volunteer agreement. It might also be possible that a volunteer takes on different tasks."

I INTERACTION

It might seem a cliché, but the most important aspect of working with others is good communication. Similar to your paid employees, volunteers need good, clear and honest communication about events and decisions that impact them. If there are issues in communication, this can negatively impact the atmosphere at work and this could even be noticed by your visitors. Our advice is to keep both staff and volunteers updated. Keep asking yourself if there is information that you can and should share with volunteers, especially in regard to big projects. Announcing big changes early on helps volunteers to feel included. In addition to including them in big developments, it is good to realise that communication is something that you should work on all the time. So not just at set moments throughout the year, but also in small moments or conversations. Drink a cup of coffee together after a guide finishes a tour or help to clean or stock the museum shop. It starts with making an effort and this is often much appreciated.

J

JOB TRAINING

Your volunteers probably receive an introduction and on the job training when they join your organisation. There are, however, plenty of ways to keep strengthening the knowledge and skills of your volunteers. Think of special training in giving tours, hospitality, giving presentations or guiding youth. Training sessions for groups of volunteers increase the professionalism of the volunteers and your organisation as well as bettering relationships between volunteers. Look at heritage centres or museum organisations for the possibilities.

Liesbeth Tonckens, Erfgoed Gelderland:

“Take your guides to other museums. Let them judge guided tours in other museums and look critically at what you remember and how the story is told. Ask them which elements they thought were good and if and how they would want to incorporate them themselves. This might make them more aware of their own role as guides.”

K

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

Every employee and volunteer has skills in which he or she is excellent and those on which could be improved. For them and for the organisation, it is good to know which talents people have so they can be put to good use. If you notice that someone is not playing to their strengths you can discuss this, for instance, during an evaluation. You could organise job training to increase people's knowledge and improve their skills, but you could also let volunteers try out other departments of the museum and perhaps let them discover hidden talents.

L

LEARNING

In most organisations learning is a central element. This could also be applied to volunteers. Many museums develop an information folder for new volunteers, but you might also have additional meetings in which they receive on the job training. By learning together, volunteers settle into their roles and people learn to work together more efficiently. This also applies to the relationship between volunteers and paid employees. They can also train and learn together. If there is time for informal moments as well, this allows them to get to know each other better. For volunteer coordinators it is important to know what volunteers need and try to help them achieve that within the organisation.

M

MENTORING

Working with volunteers requires organisations to make time to mentor new volunteers. This means putting time into giving them attention and information, and being available for any questions or issues that may arise. The best way to handle this is to select one or several people as a mentor or a volunteer coordinator. This person is available for new volunteers and mentors them in the first few months. The job training can be handled by others as well, but it is important that this is coordinated by the volunteer coordinator. This way, new volunteers are not left with questions and the job training meets its goals. Remain available for general questions and questions about follow-up training after the first few months as well. To get a good grip on volunteer management, it is advisable to have new volunteer coordinators take a course in volunteer management.

MOTIVATION

There are many different reasons why volunteers do volunteer work. Most reasons given are gaining new knowledge or skills, meeting new people, gaining more work experience, or giving back to the community. In our field another important reason is a personal connection with the history of the Second World War. These are all very positive reasons to do volunteer work and the volunteers' enjoyment of their work can be increased still by allowing them to develop their skills within the organisation. In some cases it might be necessary to adjust people's expectations, for instance if someone expects to get a paid position with the organisation. Often, this cannot be a promise and this can be stated at a first interview. This could prevent people from having unrealistic expectations. It also happens that volunteers lose their motivation. Talk to them and find out together if there is a way to get them motivated again. This might happen by having them take on different tasks or allowing them to take a course to develop other skills.

N

NEGATIVE COMMENTS

It could happen that volunteers criticise the organisation and the other way around. Dealing with negative comments or having to give feedback is sometimes difficult, but it is an important tool to improve cooperation between employees and to improve the organisation as a whole. Be careful of the way in which criticism is given as it can be received as surprising or offensive. This is why it is important to create fixed moments in which you deal with negative comments, such as a performance review. In addition, you can train your volunteers and yourself in giving and receiving criticism. You can also train your volunteers in how to receive negative comments from visitors. This could make them more secure in dealing with criticism.



OWN STORY

Many volunteers who apply to museums and remembrance centres have a personal connection to the history of the Second World War and its consequences. This might include volunteers who focus on telling their personal story rather than your educational message. From conversations with museum education specialists and volunteer coordinators, it has become clear that one or more volunteers often take this too far. They do not immerse themselves in the stories the museum wants told, but take the opportunity of a tour to tell their own stories. This might be frustrating. At first, you can try to talk about this with the entire group of volunteers. If this does not help, you might talk to volunteers individually. It helps to have a clear format for a tour and to have a common thread throughout the narrative.

Liesbeth Tonkens, Erfgoed Gelderland:

“This is a story that we hear all the time. It is often the case that the guide is looking for personal approval. Advice: organise an afternoon for all your guides. Let them discuss the ways in which they give the tour and what question or narrative will be central to the tour. Let them analyse the story and ask them what they think visitors should remember and where that needs to be told.”

Elsbeth van der Vlist, Rijksmuseum Boerhaave:

“It can also be charming. To guarantee the quality of a tour I often tag along. They are allowed to include personal stories, but they should all be conscious of the common thread in the narrative.”

P

PARTICIPATION

When volunteers participate in the organisation, they feel acknowledged, included, and taken seriously. Participation can take many different forms and with many levels of influence. You can use questionnaires or organise meetings to discuss ideas, perspectives and spark conversation. You can even establish a volunteer council. The goal is to strengthen the position of the volunteer in the organisation. This will make them feel more connected to the organisation and to the paid staff.

R

REPRESENTATION

In many organisations, volunteers often work in jobs that deal with the visitors such as in the museum café, at the ticket desk, or as hosts. It is incredibly important for the organisation that volunteers represent the museum in a good and professional manner. It is good to pay attention to this during job training. In addition, you could spend time on the issue during evaluations. To keep things clear it is good to formulate a guideline of what counts as being a good representative. This does not only count in behaviour towards visitors, but also towards colleagues. Set goals and remind people of them.

S

SCHEDULE

Making a schedule gives volunteers structure and shows them who is asked to do what task and in which location. Make sure to give volunteers the schedule in advance and make agreements about it, such as if people are allowed to switch shifts after the schedule has been finalised. For guided tours you could choose to have volunteers apply to do certain tours. Keep track of volunteers who are able to work outside of fixed scheduling to help out in (unexpectedly) busy times.

Judith Borra, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam:

“We have eight volunteers at work in the museum every day and they work two shifts every week. We begin each day with a short meeting with a floormanager who brings the volunteers up to date and who is available for questions that arise throughout the day.”

SPECIAL TREATMENT

The recommendations in this ABC are mostly based on applying a policy for working with volunteers, but you always need to be able to adapt it slightly. Every volunteer is different. Some might have special needs or are only able to do certain tasks. It is important to be flexible when possible and talk about this openly. On the other hand, it could also happen that volunteers demand special treatment. It could be something small that you don't mind doing, but you cannot do this for every volunteer. Prevention is better than cure. Make sure to discuss the terms and conditions with colleagues so every volunteer starts under similar conditions. Remind your volunteers of these terms if they deviate from the agreements you have made. Does the volunteer continue to ignore instructions? Then discuss the possibility that the volunteer should no longer work at the organisation.

T

TEAMWORK

Teamwork is extremely important. This applies to cooperation between volunteers, but also with paid staff. Teamwork causes a better atmosphere to work in, strengthens the bond between volunteers and the organisation, and shows respect for the work they put in. While volunteers do not receive financial compensation, it is important to take their work seriously and to respect their feelings and opinions. Teamwork leads to a more equal relationship. There are plenty of courses to increase teamwork within your organisation. Also, do not be afraid to ask other museums for ideas and advice.

U

UNIFORM

There are few things as frustrating as rules that keep changing or that are unclear to begin with. Volunteers find themselves just outside the centre of organisations: they make fewer hours or work irregular hours. This sometimes causes them to not be aware of information or changes in policy. Try to keep informing them and give uniform guidelines to prevent confusion. Uniformity is also important in terms of presentation. Write down how you want your organisation to be perceived and involve your volunteers in the steps you need to take to achieve it.

V

VALUE

It is important to value your volunteers and show appreciation. Volunteers offer their knowledge and skills free of charge and that should be rewarded in other ways. Give them attention and small rewards and tell them that they are valued. Do so by giving compliments and sharing positive reactions of colleagues or visitors. Say good morning, ask how they are and ask them to join for lunch or coffee sometimes.

Anita Ganzeboom-van Son and Sergio Derks, Philips Museum:

“Verbalise your appreciation and always say thank you!”

Y

YOUTH

Organisations often state that they have trouble finding and keeping volunteers below thirty years of age. This is mostly due to the fact that young people are at the start of their careers and make different choices. They will choose paid employment over volunteer work. The best advice we can give to attract young volunteers is to put yourself in their shoes and think about what you can offer them. Be open about the opportunities they have or do not have within your organisation. Sometimes organisations offer internships or work experience places to attract youth. But if you are unable to offer them payment you are required by law, we advise you to recruit volunteers from different age groups. Recruit youth as volunteers and not as staff without financial compensation.



AIRBORNE
MUSEUM
HARTENSTEIN



Bevrijdingsmuseum Zeeland



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onderduikmuseum
aalten

museum
ROTTERDAM | 1940
1945
NU



OORLOGSMUSEUM
OVERLOON



Nationaal Monument
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VERZETS
RESISTANCE
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HERINNERINGSCENTRUM
KAMP WESTERBORK



joods
cultureel
kwartier



NATIONAAL
MONUMENT
KAMP
VUGHT

FRIES
VERZETS
MUSEUM



MUSEON



VRIJHEIDSMUSEUM



Indisch Herinneringscentrum
DEN HAAG