

Benefits and goals for the organisation in EVS

When you receive a volunteer

Volunteers as workforce

The scenario is seen all too often: Your organisation is driven by lofty goals but struggles with both financial and personal resources, so you receive a volunteer (ideally an experienced, educated and skilled young person) as a “cheap” human resource for your operations. While this seems logical at first sight, this approach is not only in conflict with the aims of the EVS program, but also hurts both you and the volunteer.

The EVS Charter states that “Activities must not replace any employment” and “neither can they require qualifications or a certain educational level in order to select the volunteer(s)”. Instead, you commit to “identifying clear learning opportunities for the volunteer(s)” to further develop their skills during the whole project while “ensuring universal accessibility to EVS”, including those with fewer opportunities.

This usually presents a large obstacle to organisations, but nothing can be further from truth. Organisations who run EVS long term show that cooperation with volunteers who have little or no work experience is much more interesting and mutually beneficial. There’s indeed a risk that such volunteers struggle with elementary working habits (reliability, punctuality), but if you invest in them from the beginning, the volunteers are more malleable, open, and grateful. To the contrary, overqualified volunteers are more demanding as to their job level, and often complain that they can’t learn anything new, which is, in fact, the single most common issue they report. Highly skilled volunteers are in the end better catered to by other European programs (e.g. Erasmus, internships).

Volunteers as “view from outside”

Another common pitfall you should avoid is to ask the volunteer to evaluate your organisation, thinking that he or she can bring some best practices from abroad. This can very quickly go awry, leading to endless criticism and comparisons like “in my country, it works better”. Instead, the volunteer should be encouraged to practical help in improving the functioning of your organisation.

Volunteers as part of your team

It is seen as good practice to have regular meetings with your volunteers, both with all of them together and individually, in order to handle their specific issues and needs.

Even though organisations often don’t do it, you should also include your volunteers in your actual team meetings. Yes, language can be an issue, but only at the beginning and it is in fact a good incentive for volunteers to learn it. The volunteer will realise his/her role in the team, understand better what is happening, and your other co-workers will see them as an integral part of the organisation.

Phasing

Many large organisations, in good faith, let the volunteer choose amongst a large variety of activities at the beginning. However, a volunteer overwhelmed with specific tasks is as big a risk as a volunteer who spends too much time orienting and jumping indecisively from one task to another. You’ll do well to plan in advance and structure the first few weeks, and give more flexibility to the volunteer over time.

Impact on the local community

Organisations often forget that EVS has an indirect influence on their local environment. It may sound as cliché, but volunteers' primary motivation for EVS is usually to get to know new people and culture. You should leverage that, and expose them to your larger community as much as possible. You will benefit by raising awareness about your activities, while local young people will be inspired to start their own projects, communicate in a foreign language, and perhaps travel abroad as well. This effect is even more significant when you work with disadvantaged youth, for whom it is eye-opening to see how well someone can fare in a foreign environment.

When you send a volunteer

You should not underestimate your role as a sending organisation. The energy you invest in your volunteer early on will pay back. A well-trained volunteer will know what to expect from the project and will better be able to cope with possible problems. Also, if you stay in touch, the volunteer's reintegration back into your organisation will go smoother and you will be able to use his or her newly gained experience more readily.

As in many other areas, you will gain most from EVS not when you focus on your own goals, but when you ensure that your volunteers flourish. The benefits for your organisation will come almost automatically. In the end, when the project goes well for both you and the volunteer, there's a high chance that you will unwittingly also meet the program goals of EVS: to build a diverse network of organisations and people, who in the end form the glue of our European society.

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