

RE-ENTRY THROUGH VOLUNTEERING:

The Best Jobs That Money Can't Buy

By Esther O'Donald

Update your experience and resume, gain new skills while helping the community. Call for an interview for these and OTHER volunteer opportunities . . .

When Ellen Johnson answered the help wanted ad for a volunteer clerical assistant, she didn't know what an impact one telephone call could have on her life! Recently divorced and the mother of two grown children, Ellen suddenly found herself trying to make her way back into the workforce after an absence of almost 20 years. Answering one newspaper ad after another, she tried to land an entry-level clerical position, only to find that her skills were outdated and that employers were not interested in hiring a 57-year-old woman with no recent experience.

After six months of volunteering, Johnson is now a secretary with a growing educational software company.

Frank Bates spent 11 years as a maintenance worker until a painful back injury forced him to consider a less strenuous

career. His vocational rehabilitation counselor suggested volunteering to build up his stamina and give him a chance to try out his newly learned skills in a less competitive setting.

Almost one year later, Frank has a civil service position as an account clerk, monitoring the purchase of maintenance supplies for a local government agency.

The old adage, "If you can type, you can always find a job" just doesn't ring true any more. Today's employers looking for clerical workers want more than just word processing skills. They want EXPERIENCE—and what better way to gain that experience than through volunteering! But don't think that re-entry volunteering stops at clerical work. There are teachers, health care professionals, craftsmen and others who are finding their way back to work as well. Any marketable skills can be strengthened and brought up to date in a well-structured volunteer setting.

Working with Re-entry Volunteers (REVs)

All re-entry volunteers, whatever their field, are looking for new opportunities. Before they've called you or come in for their initial interview, these volunteers already have decided to take an active part in their own success stories. Many have gone back to school for additional training before trying to find work and now, armed with new skills, lack the confidence to take the next step.

If you ask your REV why she has decided to volunteer, she will probably say she is looking for one or all of the following:

- The opportunity to build new skills or refresh skills she already has
- A chance to meet new people
- A position where she can prove her worth, to you and to herself
- An opportunity to receive credit for her work and to realize that she can make a meaningful contribution
- The chance to feel that she is part of a team effort

Working effectively with re-entry volunteers means identifying and understanding their special needs. More than half of all re-entry volunteers have been through one or more recent traumatic events in their lives. Divorce or other loss of a spouse or child, accident or illness, any sudden reversal of financial or emotional security, can send an individual back to work. Even if finances are not the issue, there is an excellent probability that your new volunteer is in great need of added self-esteem and confidence.

Are you able to offer your volunteer flexibility in her work schedule? She may be dealing with transportation or childcare problems that require her to adjust her schedule at a moment's notice. Can you offer transportation assistance (free bus passes, etc.) in case of an emergency?

Chances are, your REV needs to be able to talk out the issues that have brought her to this point in her life. Ongo-

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ing conversation which might, under other circumstances, be considered disruptive in an office setting, is essential to the volunteer's development. It is important to address this need in developing an appropriate volunteer placement.

Re-entry volunteers bring with them all the fears that are part of their new life. In many instances, this will be evident only as the volunteer begins to feel "at home" in the placement. It is very possible that you may never see the fear. Rest assured that *it is there!* A nurturing, supportive environment will go a long way in easing the transition back to work.

Starting Up a Re-entry Program

Before beginning your re-entry program, you will need to determine your level of involvement by evaluating how much time and energy you are willing to commit. Your program may be as fundamental as simply understanding and being sensitive to the volunteer's needs or as complex as developing a formal, comprehensive program, complete with workshops and job placement assistance.

Every REV position must have a clear job description/plan for achievement. The job description should clearly state:

- The position title (your REV will need this later for her resume)
- Name and position of the person to whom REV will report
- Skills required before starting the placement
- Minimum performance standards (realistic standards based on workforce expectations)
- Hours required/amount of flexibility available
- Length of commitment (in weeks or months, keeping in mind that the goal is to push the volunteer out of the nest)
- Level of autonomy. (Will the volunteer make decisions and will you back the decisions she makes?)
- What specific training will be provided
- What will be the volunteer's tangible reward on completion? (Important: certificate, job placement assistance or ???)

As you develop positions that are specifically geared to re-entry workers, ask yourself:

1. Has a volunteer succeeded in this position before? If not, you will need to make sure that your expectations are reasonable and that success is really possible. Ideally, the position will allow for a series of regular (daily or weekly) identifiable successes.

2. What type of REV motivation best

VOLUNTEER INITIATIVE PROGRAM RE-ENTRY PLAN

The Volunteer Initiative Program, which provides volunteers to the Santa Cruz County (CA) government, follows the plan outlined below in orienting its re-entry volunteers.

1. INFORMATIONAL APPOINTMENT

- Identify current goals.
- Find appropriate volunteer placement.
 1. Interview with potential supervisor.
 2. Accept placement, sign contract.

2. FIRST WORKSHOP (approx. 2 weeks after placement begins)

- "Finding a Job/Career You'll Love"
- "The Need for Accurate Self-Assessment"
- Homework: Read and complete first section of packet: Job Awareness and Development. (Packet includes skill and interest evaluation, goal setting exercises, discussion of work values, preliminary job search planning, elementary time management.)

3. SECOND WORKSHOP (approx. 1 week later)

- Review homework assignment.
- Reassess goals.
- Evaluate plan to attain goals.
- Discuss types of resumes.
- Homework: Read and complete second section of packet: Techniques and Strategies of Job Seeking Skills. (These materials include assistance in writing effective resumes, tips on completing job applications, surviving job interviews.)

4. THIRD WORKSHOP (approx. 1 week later)

- Prepare resume.
- Discuss interview skills.
- Homework: List possible employment to meet job objective; review balance of packet materials: Skill Enrichment Through Volunteer Participation. (Materials include information on succeeding as a volunteer, listening skills, additional topics specific to the individual situation.)

5. FOURTH WORKSHOP (approx. 1 week later)

- Review materials.
- Plan job seeking strategy.
- Homework: Begin search, prepare information for report back.

6. FIFTH WORKSHOP (2 weeks later—repeated as necessary)

- Review job search.
- Evaluate.
- Additional assistance as needed.
- Homework: Continuation of job search.

suits this position? Will the position allow the volunteer to *earn* increasing responsibility? Is the position oriented to technical skills or socialization? Recognizing the potential in the placement is the first step to a great match.

3. What technical skills will REV build in this position? Every re-entry position should build specific skills. If you cannot

identify precisely what skills will be acquired, proper placement is unlikely. Develop a list of skills relevant to each position to help you determine if the REV is progressing toward her goals. Keep this checklist in the volunteer's file and review it at regular intervals with the volunteer.

4. What social skills will REV gain by successfully completing this job? For

some volunteers, acquisition of social skills may be just as important as learning to operate a computer. For example, if your REV is a young mother who hasn't worked in four or five years, her first priority may well be to regain her interpersonal communication skills.

5. Who is the appropriate buddy or trainer? Assigning a staff member to work one-on-one with your REV greatly increases the probability of success. Don't be afraid to switch trainers if your first match isn't effective. You may want to change trainers regularly as the volunteer's responsibilities increase.

6. What is the next level REV can attain? Earning increased responsibility will help your volunteer see the progress she is making. Honest feedback about her successes will do a great deal to increase your REV's self-esteem and will help her to view her abilities more objectively.

7. How will this position challenge the volunteer? Challenges are necessary to test your volunteer's abilities. If no challenge exists, determine what duties can be added to build in meaningful growth opportunities.

8. Will REV be expected to handle crisis situations? This question must be addressed *before* a re-entry volunteer is placed. The volunteer may already be handling more than her share of crises every time she enters her home.

9. When finished with this placement, will REV be ready for paid employment? This is often the most difficult question to answer honestly. Your REV may need encouragement to seek counseling and/or additional educational opportunities. Occasionally a change in tasks is all that's needed to prepare the volunteer for work.

10. Is paid (or other volunteer) staff prepared to help REV succeed? Each staff member is an integral part of your "re-entry team" and should be well prepared to work with the new volunteer before the placement begins. While it is not necessary to share details of the REV's personal situation, general training in your agency's re-entry plan should prepare staff to be of assistance and enlist their commitment to the success of the program.

Recruiting: The Next Step

Re-entry volunteer recruiting can be summed up in one four-letter word: MORE! The *more* variety in the positions available, the *more* assistance you give the job seeker, the *more* information you provide about your services—the *more*

GUIDE TO GOAL-SETTING FOR RE-ENTRY VOLUNTEERS

Everyone has a different set of priorities—different values that are important in making your life happy and complete. Some of your neighbor's values may be similar to yours, but others would be completely opposite. The priorities you decide on for your life should be important enough for you to build a goal around.

Think about your everyday activities. Which ones are most important to you? They might include things like spending more time with the kids, raising your income, exercising, or taking a long-awaited vacation. The activities that are the most important to you are the things that you will want to spend most of your time trying to fulfill. It may be that part-time or temporary employment would best meet your needs.

As you complete the following statements, think about the underlying meanings of your answers. You may want to repeat this exercise again in six months if you are currently in a transitional stage of your life.

1. I enjoy the time I spend alone when I _____

2. I spend the majority of my day _____

3. I feel most relaxed when _____

4. If I didn't have to worry about money, I would _____

5. I expend the greatest part of my energy _____

6. I waste my energy most often by _____

7. When I am tired or depressed, I recharge my battery by _____

8. To me, success means _____

9. The one thing that would make me feel more successful is _____

10. The aspect I most enjoyed about my past jobs was _____

11. To get what I want out of life, I am willing to sacrifice _____

Looking back on your statements above, ask yourself what the priorities are in your life at this time. Think of whatever you feel is important to you now, and write it down.

Consider your priorities and rank them from 1 to 10 according to their importance to you (1 being most important).

List these priorities by rank in the space below. To the right of each, indicate the last action you took toward this priority.

Priorities	Action Taken
1. _____	
2. _____	
3. _____	
4. _____	
5. _____	
6. _____	
7. _____	
8. _____	
9. _____	
10. _____	

It is important that your priorities harmonize with the goals you set or you will become frustrated. List three or more characteristics which should be present in the position you are seeking to ensure that you will be happy in the job.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

volunteers you'll have eager to participate.

Word of mouth from happy re-entry volunteers is, of course, your best advertisement. After that, the following aids have proven themselves time and time again:

■ **Help wanted classifieds** are an excellent place to begin as you are targeting the exact market you want to reach. Often, a re-entry candidate will scan the help wanted section in the daily newspaper to determine what skills are needed before actually applying for a position. By establishing a regular pattern of advertising (first Sunday of each month, every other weekend, every Sunday, etc.), volunteers will quickly learn to look for your ads. Sunday and Monday editions will probably bring you the largest return for your dollar.

■ **Display advertising** attracts "professional" re-entry candidates: college graduates with degrees ranging from Advertising to Zoology. If you have a special project that requires a high-level volunteer, by all means try this approach.

■ **Contact local career and vocational rehabilitation counselors** to discuss your re-entry program. You may want to provide them with regular updates about specific positions for which you are recruiting, including time commitment and skill-building opportunities.

■ **Send this same information to agencies serving special needs**, such as community service organizations and independent living centers for the disabled. These groups may want to see proof of your success before referring their clients to you for assistance.

■ **Colleges and universities** frequently have re-entry programs of their own and can refer many motivated volunteers. **Private business schools** can provide excellent candidates with newly learned skills. Depending on the structure of their programs, a REV position might be an acceptable replacement for some of the students' required lab time. Most schools will be happy to post a listing of your available positions.

■ **Even the simplest, photocopied recruitment flyers** posted on community bulletin boards in laundromats and grocery stores throughout your community will bring good results.

Developing a re-entry volunteer program is perhaps one of the most complete forms of volunteer recognition imaginable. You won't think about that, though. As soon as your first re-entry volunteer leaves for paid employment, you'll be ready to start the cycle all over again.