

CENTER FOR NEWCOMER ONBOARDING

AT WEST CHESTER UNIVERSITY

By: Lauren Anderson

In 2021, I conducted 20 interviews with volunteers and organizations that rely on volunteers about onboarding. Here is what I heard.

What volunteers said about their own onboarding and why they stay (or quit)

- Volunteers stay at organizations when they feel respected and their time is valued.
- Feeling micromanaged or repeatedly performing low skill tasks deter some people.
- A clear mission statement is key—Many decide where they volunteer based on the mission statement alone.
- Volunteers appreciate thorough training and feel that it sets them up for success. Being in a disorganized environment makes them feel that they are not being as effective as they would like.
- Volunteers want to feel appreciated (even a simple “thank you”) and dislike being judged if they can only commit to a finite amount of time.
- Disorganization from an organization or unfriendly fellow volunteers are the biggest deterrents.
- Volunteers generally like being on the front lines where they see their impact the most. However, people who volunteer at numerous organizations seem to enjoy anything from mundane tasks to sitting on the board.



What organizations said about onboarding and retaining volunteers

- Thorough onboarding and training makes volunteers more devoted, but not all coordinators have the time and/or budget to implement such programs.
- A lot of young people (high school and undergraduate aged) stepped up to fill gaps during Covid, but it’s too early to tell if they will be as dedicated long-term as prior generations. Historically this age group can’t commit.
- Soft speed bumps (phone screenings, online forms) can help weed out volunteers who are not ready to make the necessary commitment.
- Volunteers can be scarce in less populated places, and there’s no good solution to combat this.
- Organizations know they should be collecting feedback from volunteers, but this falls to the bottom of the priority list.

Other things I learned during the interviews

- Some organizations offer perks that can be inexpensive but entice volunteers to stay engaged: free health screenings, annual parties, gift certificates, branded merchandise, museum passes.
- Organizations that solicit volunteer feedback (through periodic surveys or exit interviews) generally have more dedicated volunteers.
- When people experience major life transitions, they usually let go of volunteering.
- Innovative ways for volunteers to bond with each other: book clubs, continuing education, support circles.