

Subscriber Social January 2023: The Problem with Screening

Volunteer Managers are leaning into the idea that we need to reassess our volunteer engagement practices, to meet the challenges and motivations of volunteers navigating the realities of pandemic recovery. Following our previous discussions about **Recruitment and Recognition**, January's Social narrowed in on evaluating and interrogating our processes for screening, identifying barriers and biases in our designs, and imagining possibilities for new and adapted screening approaches.

How Are We Screening Volunteers?



Volunteer managers continue to utilize tried and true forms of screening, with application forms and interviews being most common. Police checks for roles involving elevated risk and vulnerable community members continue to be prevalent, and their necessity in certain roles continue to be contested and debated.

Attendees pointed out that orientation, training, and volunteer shadowing were integral to their screening process, as opportunities to provide clarity on the role, and assess volunteers' fit for positions. Skills testing for volunteer was identified as the least utilized screening tool.

Interrogating Barriers to Screening

Police Checks and Vulnerable Sector Checks: while essential for certain roles (where risk to vulnerable persons, and risk within the role are high) the time and money required to complete them can cause certain potential volunteers to become dis-interested and opt-out before they are onboarded. These checks are also potentially uncomfortable steps for persons who have had contact with the legal system but are otherwise qualified and interested in volunteer roles.

Reference Checks: certain volunteer demographics, like Newcomers or Youth, are new to volunteerism, work, or life in Canada, and may not have references to provide. Requiring this step without exception or alternative opportunities limits participation from these groups. Additionally, some volunteer managers found that this step prolonged the screening process and volunteers could be lost to dis-interest or changing circumstances.



Technology: Many volunteer managers indicated that application forms and interviews were virtual, especially since the start of the pandemic. For potential volunteers who struggle with access or literacy with technology, online forms and Zoom interviews present barriers to becoming volunteers. Volunteer responses to virtual roles have been mixed, with some persons enjoying the flexibility, and others asking specifically for in-person engagement to avoid technology.



Language: Some attendees pointed out that the use of industry-specific jargon (e.g., what does VSC mean?) and complicated language about volunteer roles and the screening process can limit volunteer engagement. Persons who are unfamiliar with Canadian volunteerism systems, have never volunteered before or speak a non-English native tongue may struggle to understand what screening steps require of them and why. This confusion can lead to disinterest or distrust in the volunteer role.



COVID-19 Policies and Protocols: As the landscape of the pandemic shifts to recovery and reopening of volunteer programs, some volunteer managers described mixed expectations and concerns from volunteers around vaccination, masking and PPE. There are those who will refuse to volunteer if there are NO COVID-19 protocols, and those who will refuse if there are ANY protocols. Volunteer managers are being caught in the middle of these opposing views, and choices around this screening step will limit participation for one segment or another.



The Screening Process: Some volunteer managers are finding that the number and layers of screening steps are themselves barriers to participation. The time between someone reading a position description and volunteering, is so long for certain roles that many potential volunteers are lost in the interim.



Re-Evaluating Screening for 'Best Fit'

When asked about determining 'best fit' for volunteer roles, many volunteer managers referenced soft skills like flexibility, reliability and passion during the discussion. Many of these skills are difficult to measure and often leave room for (mis)interpretation. Helpful questions raised were:

- How can we ensure our interview questions really help us assess the skills we're looking for?
- How do we manage our own biases during the screening process?
- How are we considering experiences potentially outside of our own during screening design, such as cultural/national differences, neurodivergence, and anxiety?



Recommendations and Screening Adaptations

One of the greatest benefits of the Subscriber Social space is the opportunity to learn from the experiences of other volunteer managers, and brainstorm solutions and adaptations to our collective challenges. When it comes to screening, here are some things attendees were already doing or recommending:

- Streamlining and building multiple touchpoints with volunteers during screening can alleviate some of the length and complexity in the process.
- Using clear language, symbols and providing opportunities to answer questions can be helpful in reducing barriers.
- Providing multiple formats for application forms: printed, online, fillable PDF.
- Printing copies of Vulnerable Sector Checks (as needed), using a fillable PDF version, and hands-on support for completing forms.
- Having volunteers sign a declaration so they can begin volunteering before the police check comes in is a possible option for some roles.
- Hosting monthly information sessions that explain the screening process and providing in-person support for completing forms.
- Creating a "How To" short tutorial video that explains the organizations application and screening process.
- Providing examples and exploring options for character references, emailed references, and reference letters can be a flexible alternative and reduces barriers.
- Inviting another staff person to support interviews to reduce personal biases.
- Creating interview formats that are more conversation-based and less formal/structured. Ensuring that potential volunteers also have a chance to screen your organization/the role for their fit
- Examining and re-evaluating interview questions that are meant to measure/test soft skills to ensure clarity.
- Allowing volunteers to transfer to new roles without re-starting the screening process.



Resources

[Screening Online Course](#)

[Screening Live Webinar \(May 2023\)](#)

[Requesting Police Checks](#)

[Next Subscriber Social: Volunteers and Mental Health \(March 2023\)](#)