

Giving Back: Tips for Volunteering

About 25 percent of the population volunteered for an organization at least once between September 2007 and September 2008, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the U.S. Department of Labor.

Volunteering is certainly not a new concept; however, its benefits are being increasingly appreciated—by the volunteer, the receiver and the greater community. If you've thought about volunteering, consider the tips below to help guide you toward a positive experience.

Identify your interests. Are you passionate about the environment? The local art scene? Mentoring youth? Once you've identified an area that you are interested in volunteering for, consider the skills you have to offer. For example, if you love animals and are a skilled writer, you can seek out a volunteer opportunity to write a newsletter or monthly article for the local animal shelter. Alternatively, you can seek out volunteer opportunities that can help you gain experience in a new field or practice a new skill. Have you always pondered a career in the medical field? Find out about volunteer opportunities in your local hospital or clinic. You can also group your interests with personal goals, such as volunteering in a local park as a way to pursue your gardening interest and weight loss goal.

Search for opportunities. If you don't really know specifically what you are interested in volunteering for, or what opportunities exist, there are a number of ways to find out. First, check with civic institutions, churches, food banks, workforce center or the nonprofit network in your community to locate different volunteering opportunities. Some newspapers list volunteer opportunities in the classifieds section. Also, the Internet is a very useful tool for nonprofits and volunteer seekers. There are a number

of websites such as <http://www.volunteermatch.org> and <http://www.serve.gov/> that list resources for volunteering, including the capability to search volunteer opportunities depending on your location and interest. If you can't find any local opportunities that work for you and have general computer competence, virtual volunteering now exists! Or, if you see a need, why not start up your own volunteer opportunity? Rally your neighborhood to cook dinner for an elderly neighbor, or clean up the empty lot down the street.

Make sure it's a good fit. Once you find an opportunity, don't be surprised if the organization asks you to fill out an application or have an interview since they also need to make sure that it's a good match for them. This is especially important in programs where children are involved, such as a mentoring program, which can involve legal ramifications for the organization. When it comes time to schedule your volunteer hours, don't over-commit. Be sure the hours will work into your schedule so that you don't burn-out, build up resentment, and/or short-change the organization you are helping or the other people and responsibilities in your life. Instead, it's better to start small, see how it works and then commit to more time or duties.

Volunteer with heart. Finally, nothing instills a sense of community, gratitude, and humility like volunteering. Remember, when you volunteer with enthusiasm, patience, humor and kindness, you receive immeasurable gifts in return.

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or visit www.apshelplink.com (company code: UW)

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