

Top 10 reasons to volunteer

Did you know that the week of April 6th through 12th is National Volunteer Week? This year's National Volunteer Week is Canada's 11th year celebrating volunteers. If you're one of the 13.3 million Canadians who volunteer, you may already know that volunteering is as beneficial to you as it is to the causes you care the most about. If not, here are ten reasons to volunteer:

- 1. Volunteering is good for your mental health.** According to *Doing Good is Good for You, 2013 Health and Volunteering Study*, volunteering helps people manage and lower their stress levels. 94 per cent of those surveyed reported that volunteering also improves their mood. Volunteers also scored higher than non-volunteers on emotional well-being measures including overall satisfaction with life.
- 2. Volunteering is good for your physical health.** This same study showed that 80 per cent of volunteers feel that they have greater control over their health. Volunteers tend to be more engaged health care consumers who make better informed decisions about their health. Volunteering also keeps you active and has been shown to reduce chronic pain and heart disease symptoms.
- 3. Volunteering is good for your self-confidence.** Want to feel better about yourself and what you can do? Want to feel more satisfied with your life? Volunteering can boost all of the above and instill a greater sense of pride and identity.
- 4. Volunteering can fight depression.** Social isolation is a risk factor for depression. Volunteering helps you to develop relationships and a support system, both of which can help you overcome obstacles and fight depression.
- 5. Volunteering expands your social network.** Volunteering can help you make new friends and expand your social network. Personal connections, socializing and numerous opportunities to get together to pursue a common goal can also lead to a deeper sense of community.
- 6. Volunteering can help you develop new skills.** From interpersonal skills to teamwork, time management, organizational and other professional skills, volunteers must often acquire new skill sets as part of their volunteer work. These are also valuable to employers.
- 7. Volunteering can help you put existing skills to work.** Many volunteers appreciate being able to contribute their talents in a meaningful manner. Whether you have business skills the organization needs or have a unique talent that needs an outlet, volunteering is a great way to put your existing skills to work.
- 8. Volunteering can advance your career.** 71 per cent of the *Doing Good is Good for You* respondents felt that volunteering provided them with networking opportunities and job-related contacts and 49 per cent of new volunteers said that volunteering had helped them in the paid job market.
- 9. Volunteering can expose you to new career options.** Volunteering is a great way to try out different job roles and industries. Many people have found their true calling after volunteering.

10. Volunteering can make a difference in causes that are important to you. In addition, volunteering can help you to contribute to causes that are close to your heart. Whether you've lost a loved one to a devastating disease or have been moved to do something to ease the pain and suffering of others, your volunteer work can improve the lives of others while simultaneously delivering all of the above benefits.

How to pick an organization to volunteer for

Volunteering has been shown to be as beneficial to volunteers as it is to the beneficiaries of all that hard work, but where do you start? In order to reap the most benefits and feel truly satisfied, you need to find a good fit. Use the tips below to find a meaningful volunteer opportunity.

Where to begin

Start with some soul-searching and a self-assessment. What are you passionate about? Who do you want to help?

For some, the answer is obvious; for others, it's hard to focus. For example, if a family member has been affected by disease, you may be passionate about volunteering for an organization dedicated to finding a cure. On the other hand, you could be passionate about the plight of disaster victims, the environment, or abused animals.

It gets easier once you pick a cause, but you will still need to choose an organization among many. One way to narrow the field is to decide whether you want to get involved at the local, national, or international level.

From there, it's time to start researching the various organizations that match. Start with the Internet; AllforGood.org can help you find volunteer opportunities that match your specific interests and location. In Canada, the Volunteer Centre Network at Volunteer.ca is a great place to start. Next, check out your top charities' websites and Facebook pages to learn about their cultures and determine if any are a good fit for you.

Determining where you fit in

By now you should have narrowed the field down into several possibilities, all of which serve causes that are near and dear to you. Which one could use your unique talents?

The key now is to find a volunteer position that you would enjoy and that you have the capacity to perform, both in terms of skills and time. You'll need to also understand the organization's needs. For example, if you want to contribute web design skills and the organization has that covered but needs people to answer the phones, are you willing to shift gears and answer phones or would you prefer to keep looking?

A few other considerations can influence fit as well. For example, do you want to work in a team environment or in solitude? Do you want to be behind the scenes or in a higher profile role? How much responsibility do

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you want? How much time do you have to give? Another consideration involves fitting volunteering into your busy schedule. Some companies encourage their employees to volunteer and may even allow you to do so while on the clock.

Finding the right cause and a good fit are essential ingredients to a successful and fulfilling volunteer experience. Conduct a self-assessment and research your options, and check with your employer about any formal volunteer incentives it may have in place.

Resources:

http://www.helpguide.org/life/volunteer_opportunities_benefits_volunteering.htm

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