

CAREER RESEARCH – Strategic Volunteering

Volunteering is about sharing your skills, time and knowledge without being financially compensated. It may include providing a service to an individual or a cause close to your heart. It is a great way to meet new people, connect to the community and do good. Strategic volunteering is looking for ways volunteering opportunities may help prepare you better for post graduate work.

Strategic Volunteering Benefits

- Explore careers, occupations, work environments and possible client groups
- Gain relevant work experience to add to a resume
- Develop new skills or apply skills from school to different real-world settings
- Grow your network and professional connections
- Cultivate prospective references who can speak to the value you bring
- Identify specific skills, strengths and personal values you want to use
- Build self-confidence and leadership experiences

Volunteering Tips

Do your research

Volunteering requires a personal commitment of your valuable time. To ensure you make the most of your experience and enjoy your time, it is important to do your homework. A small amount of research and reflection can help you choose options that will have a positive impact on your commitment and success.

Your performance and commitment can impact future employment. Keep in mind that an organization's commitment to take on a volunteer often requires investing staff and resources.

Volunteering can launch your career, so it's important to treat the experience with the same professionalism as you would a job. This includes meeting outlined time and performance expectations whether the duration is casual, short/long term, or an on-going commitment.

- Be realistic and clear about the time you can commit. Expectations vary dramatically between organizations and volunteer roles. It is better to start small and increase your commitment than to back out because your schedule becomes overwhelming later in the semester or year.

- Find out what the organization’s purpose is and how your role would contribute to their mission.
- Consider visiting the organization before you commit. Get a sense of the staff, visitors, clients and the overall environment you will be working in.
- Take time to carefully select the opportunity that fits you. This may include assessing your own needs, skills and interests, and weighing them against the organization’s requirements.
- Ask for a job description of the volunteer opportunity. It can help determine whether the opportunity is appropriate for you and provides a set of standards and expectations.
- Ask about training and supervision. If an organization is asking you to complete specific tasks, will they provide the necessary support for you to be successful?
- Volunteering should be an opportunity for your personal growth. Be proactive: don’t wait until the completion of the volunteer opportunity to inquire about an evaluation of your performance – ask for feedback throughout your role. If you would like to include your volunteer experience on your resume, consider who might be able and willing to serve as a future reference or secure a letter of reference before the completion of your volunteer role.

Know your goal

Identify your goals, and identify which points are:

1. Important to you
2. Preferred and/or required by organizations for volunteer positions you are seeking
3. Key areas to consider, including motivation, location, time commitment, training and qualifications

TIP:

Construct a list of the volunteer options that may be right for you using the *Strategic Volunteering – Worksheet* available at Career Services, and check out the [Get Connected](#) listings on mtroyal.ca/careerservices. Click on Students >> Online Resource Centre >> [Volunteer to Gain Experience](#).

Assess your skills

The best volunteer opportunities align with your personality, skills and interests. Book an appointment with a Career Development Professional in Career Services to get further assistance and answer questions on how to find good-fit volunteer opportunities.

Consider the following questions to help you make informed decisions:

1. What are your interests and skills?
2. What location are you considering (local, national, international)?
3. How much time can you realistically commit to volunteering?
4. Do you want to do something related to your program of study or close to your heart?



5. Why are you considering volunteering and what do you hope to gain or learn?
6. How much responsibility are you ready to take on?
7. Would you like to work with others or in solitude?
8. What would you like to contribute to a volunteer role?

Explore your options

Volunteering can take place in a range of fields and professions, working with different client groups, areas of interest, and participating in a number of projects. Enthusiasm is key! If you are not excited about the opportunity, then you are less likely to be thrilled with giving up your time. Key areas to consider include industry, focus or client groups, and opportunities or projects.

Apply for volunteer opportunities

Organizations look for specific things when recruiting volunteers. Qualifications required by organizations may vary dramatically. Identify which of your relevant role-specific skills, knowledge and personality traits align with the opportunity.

Analyze the volunteer position, identify the job requirements and qualifications, and note the application method and deadline. Follow all instructions carefully.

It is common practice for organizations to ask for a cover letter and resume when applying for volunteer opportunities. Consider including the following when creating your application materials:

- Objective which clearly states the volunteer role(s) you are targeting
- Proof and/or demonstration of soft or technical skills
- Work experience
- Relevant education, professional development, training, certifications, achievements and awards
- Previous volunteer experience
- Communication skills (including any second language proficiency)
- Specific examples that demonstrate:
 - » Eagerness to work and contribute
 - » Ability to work with others
 - » Integrity, initiative, judgment and reliability
- References: a list of references should be prepared separately and taken to the interview/meeting



The same methods used for job search can be used to source out and secure volunteer opportunities. Connecting with organizations face-to-face at networking events, fairs, researching online postings through organization links, direct submission of your resume, as well as contacting organizations independently to source out their volunteer needs can give you an advantage.

- Learn about the organization before you contact them (their purpose, location(s), size, programs, services, achievements, community connections)
- Prepare a current resume, cover letter and your references
- Make a list of questions to ask the volunteer recruiter
- Dress respectfully when making direct contact – you don't have a second chance to make a first impression

Get assistance

Taking time to organize your volunteer search will make the process easier. Take full advantage of tools and resources at Career Services to plan and manage your volunteer search. Connecting with a Career Development Professional will start your search in the right direction and provide resources to keep you on track.

TIP:

To get maximum benefit, discuss your completed worksheet with a Certified Career Development Professional at Career Services. They can help point out patterns or themes and help synthesize information with your unique academic, volunteer and work experiences to make the most of your potential.

Book an appointment with Career Services to:

- Explore your volunteering options on campus, locally, nationally and internationally
- Prepare your resume, cover letter and references (tip sheets and samples are available in the Career Resource Centre in A200 Kerby Hall and online at mru.ca/careerservices/tipsheets)
- Submit your cover letter and resume targeting volunteer opportunities for professional critiquing
- Connect with non-profit organizations offering hundreds of off-campus volunteer opportunities
- Prepare for interviews

For additional volunteer opportunities, including on-campus opportunities, go to www.mtroyal.ca/careerservices and click on Students >> Online Resource Centre >> [Volunteer to Gain Experience](#).

CAREER SERVICES

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