

Many people are confused about the difference between a volunteer and an intern or whether there's even a difference at all. While it's true that both may have similar experiences and get similar benefits from their role, there are a few differences between a volunteer and an intern which require us to separate them out as positions.

Motivation

Our research shows that the majority of volunteers give up their time for altruistic reasons. They volunteer because they want to help, they want to support their local community or they're passionate about a particular cause. Interns on the other hand tend to undertake an internship to further their professional development. They intern because they want to get experience in their chosen field, develop skills and make important contacts. That's not to say that a volunteer won't get all of these benefits too but that is not typically their primary goal when they choose to volunteer.

The nature of the role

Volunteering covers a wide array of roles from skilled volunteering in areas such as communications and IT to more general volunteering in areas such as befriending or gardening. Anyone from any background with any type of skillset can find a volunteering role. Internships are generally skilled roles with a view to professional development. They generally have specific learning outcomes identified at the beginning which should be achieved when the term of the role is complete. The intern has a specific person within the company who they can shadow and will act as their mentor. Volunteers are typically only taken on by not for profit companies whilst both not for profit and for profit companies offer internships. Something else to bear in mind is that whether you label a role volunteer or intern can have a significant impact on the type of applicant you will get.

The timeframe

Volunteers can volunteer for anything from an hour a week to a few days a month. They might only give their time one day a month or they might do all of their volunteering virtually. Volunteer roles are generally much more flexible than internships in terms of time and sometimes even location. Some volunteer roles require a commitment for a specific length of time but many do not. It's common to come across volunteers that have volunteered for 20 or 30 years. Internships on the other hand generally have a more rigid timeframe. They often require the intern to commit to between 3 and 5 days a week for a fixed period of time, usually between 3 and 9 months.

There are many similarities between a volunteer and an intern and in some cases it can be hard to differentiate the two. At their core, volunteering and interning are both unpaid learning experiences which allow someone to develop skills and be exposed to new environments. However, when you drill down further there are still a number of differences between the two.

When advertising for an unpaid position, it's important to be clear from the beginning about what exactly you're looking for from a candidate and also what they will get out of the experience.

