

# Don't Neglect Your Departing Volunteers

Former volunteers can be your best champions. Stay in touch, and be ready to welcome them back.

By *Melanie Lockwood Herman*

**H**ow do you handle it when your volunteers leave? Do you let them go without a backward glance and then forget about them? Or do you celebrate them, urge them to keep in touch, and make an effort to stay connected?

There are great benefits to having volunteers leave on a positive note, keeping track of them afterwards, and encouraging them to volunteer with you again. In “The Alumni Advantage” (*HR Magazine*), Geri Tucker describes some of these advantages. They include:

**Good news travels fast.** Volunteers who have been treated well can be ardent ambassadors for your organization. Volunteers who had fun and were fulfilled serving your mission will share that experience with potential volunteers. They can be your best recruiters.

“Returning volunteers don't have to be sold on your mission.”

**Onboarding will be more efficient.** Bringing comeback volunteers up to speed requires less time and resources than onboarding brand-new volunteers. You don't need to sell returning volunteers on your mission, and they're likely to remember key values and policies as well.

**Commitment will be greater.** Returning volunteers tend to stay longer and be more committed than other volunteers. That's because they know what they're signing up for – and they've seen that the grass isn't greener in other pastures.

## How to Handle Departing & Former Volunteers

**Use gentle candor.** Of course not all former volunteers are eligible to rejoin your workforce. If they're not, the best course is to be truthful but still encouraging. A former volunteer may not be a good match for a service role but could be a dedicated and generous donor. When an ineligible volunteer asks to return, use gentle candor. Don't string along would-be boomerang volunteers and turn them into mission detractors in the process.

**Host alum activities.** Consider cost-effective ways to send the message that you still care about former volunteers.





# We ♥ Our Volunteers

Ask them to sign up for your mailing list. Invite them to holiday gatherings. Use a calling tree to say hello from time to time. Alumni in positions of influence can align their organizations and social spheres in support of your mission.

## How to Treat Returning Volunteers

**Don't skimp on safety.** Although a returning volunteer has already heard your safety speech, the importance of your mission and the well-being of everyone at your organization warrant taking the time to reiterate key safety messages. Express appreciation for a returning volunteer's valuable know-how, and emphasize what's changed – and *why* – since their last period of service.

**Don't assume a stale (or a single) skill set.** Boomerang volunteers have acquired new skills and fresh perspectives while away. Ask them about their experiences since leaving your nonprofit, and show appreciation for those skills when matching them to new roles.

**Ask questions, and invite stories.** Ask returning volunteers why they chose to return to service at your nonprofit instead of seeking service opportunities elsewhere. Invite them to tell their stories to current and prospective volunteers, perhaps in a social media spotlight. They can also serve as team leaders who help onboard and supervise other volunteers.

You'll come full circle when your mission benefits from the renewed support of a comeback volunteer. 

“Use a calling tree to say hello from time to time.”

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## Maximize the Value of Your Volunteers

Keep your current, former, and returning volunteers happy with tips from articles at [NonprofitWorld.org](http://NonprofitWorld.org):

**Exit Interviews: When Board Members Say Good-bye** (Vol. 36, No. 2)

**Inside Out: A Fresh Perspective on Finding Volunteers** (Vol. 36, No. 2)

**Mistakes to Avoid when Building Your Volunteer Handbook** (Vol. 34, No. 3)

**Building Trust with Your Volunteers** (Vol. 34, No. 4)

**Where Are Your Volunteer Leaders?** (Vol. 30, No. 6)

**Volunteers: Recruit, Place, & Retain the Best** (Vol. 29, No. 6)

Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Volunteer Management ([snpo.org/li](http://snpo.org/li)).