

VOLUNTEERING BY PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

**a route to
OPPORTUNITY**

Filiz Niyazi

 *the
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volunteering*

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FOREWORD

A route to opportunity

This series of booklets is based on a year-long research study carried out by The National Centre for Volunteering with funding from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The aim was to identify organisations that had succeeded in involving volunteers from one of five groups traditionally under-represented in formal volunteering, and to examine the reasons for their success.

The five groups are young people, older people, unemployed people, disabled people and people of black and ethnic minority communities. National surveys have shown that members of all these groups are disadvantaged when it comes to access into volunteering. Where black people are concerned, however, this under-representation only applies to 'mainstream' organisations; volunteering is a widespread and vital feature of black community life in Britain.

The organisations we studied were chosen with a view to providing a representative sample in terms of geography and field of activity (social welfare, education, environment and so on). For each of the five groups, we also tried to find an organisation that because of its interests might be thought unlikely to succeed in recruiting volunteers from the under-represented group – a youth group involving older people, for example – but this search met with only limited success.

We are not suggesting that the organisations we chose are the best at recruiting particular types of volunteer, or that because they have managed to recruit from one group, they will necessarily be successful with the other four. What they have in common, however, is that they have each tried in their own way to make volunteering accessible to people who have not traditionally been involved.

Who are the booklets aimed at? At every organisation that currently involves volunteers (as well as those who don't do so yet but would like to) and wishes to explore new ways of reaching out to potential recruits. The booklets also contain useful lessons for those who make

public policy – and, of course, for the volunteers and would-be volunteers themselves.

The series is intended to be read as a whole. Although some organisations may, because of their circumstances, be drawn to one booklet in particular, we hope they will eventually be led on to read the others as well. In fact, although the booklets are presented as separate texts in their own right, and can of course be read as such, the many common themes that emerge across the five can best be understood by a thorough reading of the whole series.

We would like to thank the following for their assistance to this project: Derek Williams of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, who chaired the steering group (see page 00); Alan Dingle, who edited the booklets; and the volunteers and staff of The National Centre for Volunteering (see back page). But our greatest debt is to the staff and volunteers of the organisations who participated; without their willingness to share their experiences, there could have been no booklets. However, the author takes sole responsibility for the information and views expressed in these booklets.

Filiz Niyazi

Cared-for or caring?

The starting point of any discussion about disability and volunteering – especially volunteering in the field of social welfare – must be the tendency for society to perceive disabled people as the cared-for rather than the carers. There is no expectation among the general public that disabled people can do very much for themselves, let alone volunteer.

This may explain why, at a time when volunteering in Britain has become a major social movement involving around 23 million people a year, it does not appear to be attracting many disabled people as recruits.

So this booklet will be seeking the answers to two key questions. Why don't disabled people volunteer as much as they could? And how can volunteering be made more attractive to them?

Isolation and segregation

Being a disabled person can be very isolating. We live in a world that still ignores the needs of disabled people: for example, much of the 'public domain' of our towns and cities – offices, shops, public transport, cinemas and so on – is inaccessible to anyone with a mobility impairment. They often find themselves dependent on family and friends for what mobility they do enjoy. This dependency can be deeply frustrating for someone whose body is incapacitated but whose intellect may be needle-sharp – especially if they encounter the 'Does he take sugar?' approach of the well-intentioned but ill-informed. Of course, the 'public domain' may not be inaccessible to people who are, say, deaf or have a visual impairment – but they have their own brand of isolation to cope with.

The isolation is exacerbated by a deliberate segregation of disabled people from mainstream society. This usually begins in childhood: though there have been attempts to integrate disabled children into

the state education system, too often they are sent to special schools, kept apart from non-disabled young people of the same age, and receive a second-rate education from a system that clearly expects very little from them. So begins a lifetime of learning how to live as undemanding members of society. Even those who manage, against all the odds, to obtain some useful qualifications will leave school completely unprepared for life in an integrated world.

In her book, *A Lot of Experience: Disabled people's views of volunteering*, disabled volunteer Dorcas Munday points out that, although in academic terms she was well-educated for a disabled person, her social education was practically non-existent. Protected on all sides by school and family, she met few people from the outside world. Julie Wilkinson tells the same story: so little was expected of her, certainly not finding a career or receiving higher education. 'No one gave you the self-confidence you needed,' she says. As a consequence of the excessive protectiveness of others, many disabled people face a daily struggle to make independent decisions about even the simplest aspects of their lives.

This can mean that making friends and getting close to other people becomes difficult. It is a skill that has to be learned by actually going out and meeting people – but if you have a disability, you are kept at home not only by all the obstacles in the environment but also by the attitudes of society. As you miss out on opportunities to meet other people, so you may find it even harder to make friends. A vicious circle is often established; the less you go out, the more you may feel defensive and depressed about meeting people.

Prejudice and poverty

It is equally depressing that today disabled people are still fighting to be recognised as the equals of non-disabled people. In an article entitled 'Dignity and Disability', Peter Geoffrey summed the situation up by stating that 'your attitude is my biggest problem.'

It is prejudice among employers, combined with the lack of disability-friendly environments of so many workplaces, that also makes it very hard for disabled people to find a permanent paid job, let alone hold it down. Many are condemned to a life of benefit dependency, which in practice means a life of poverty.

Although there have been government regulations insisting that firms employ a certain proportion of disabled people, there has been

employment service for disabled people. Well-meaning national charities operate work schemes for disabled people: demeaning manual labour in exchange for a pittance, for people who, were they not disabled, could probably hold down much more demanding jobs.

And, as if they didn't have enough to put up with, disabled people in receipt of benefits who decide that they want to do voluntary work have to reckon with official hostility to the idea of claimants volunteering. Although the Department of Social Security's national guidance is positive about volunteering, there are too many local officials whose view seems to be that 'if you're fit enough to volunteer, you're fit enough to do paid work' – a view that completely misses the point about the attractions of voluntary work to disabled people.

Equal opportunities and civil rights

The non-disabled Establishment prefers to adopt what is called the 'medical model' of disability, which defines it as an individual problem rather than as a social restriction. This medical model is disempowering because it ignores disabled people's own view of their situation and their ability to manage their own lives. It is also institutionalised, and therefore does not change as fast as individual awareness. Disabled people may have medical conditions that hamper them, and may or may not need medical treatment. However, access to modern technology and adequate resources can ensure that physical and mental impairments do not prevent disabled people from leading perfectly satisfactory lives.

By contrast, the 'social model' makes disability the collective responsibility of society as a whole. Society's prejudices about disabled people act as barriers to their greater involvement. These barriers include the physical inaccessibility of buildings and transport, the lack of structures through which disabled people can represent themselves, and the inaccessibility of information. The social model is more fruitful than the medical model as it makes prevention of discrimination a priority, and links the struggles of disabled people with those of other oppressed groups seeking to remedy political and social injustice. It gives disabled people a positive role to play in challenging society's attitudes.

The issue for disabled people is to reject other people's views of how they should behave and what their needs are. They do not necessarily want to be the same as anyone else, but they want to be *equal* to anyone else: they want to gain an identity as a disabled person.

Disability awareness helps non-disabled people to help disabled people to do what they want to do.

One way in which disabled people can demonstrate their independence is by taking up voluntary work. The problem is, however, that voluntary organisations are not always ready to receive them. Their premises are not always physically accessible. Their advertising does not always make it clear that disabled people are as welcome as anyone else. Despite their much-vaunted equal opportunities policies, they are not always prepared to foot the bill for the extra support disabled volunteers sometimes need (there are not *always* extra costs involved). And the kind of training they provide for their volunteers rarely takes account of disabled people in its design, content and delivery.

Disabled volunteers have much to offer to voluntary organisations, and involving them as volunteers will greatly enrich an organisation:

- **Time.** A high proportion of disabled people are unemployed and claiming benefit, and so may well have time to spare.
- **Motivation.** If they can be persuaded that volunteering will reduce their isolation, disabled people will realise that they have nothing to lose and everything to gain from taking it up.
- **Skills and interests.** Disabled people are well-equipped to give advice on tackling such problems as poverty and isolation, because so many of them have first-hand experience.

The big issues

In practice, then, anyone trying to encourage disabled people to volunteer will need to offer them the following:

1. **A chance to achieve something on their own initiative.** Instead of making assumptions about what disabled people can and cannot do, voluntary organisations should try asking them what skills they can offer, and how they want to use them.
2. **Opportunities to get out and meet other people.** Volunteering can break the isolation so often characteristic of disabled people's lives by enabling them to visit previously-inaccessible places and make new friends.
3. **Plenty of support and training.** Sensitive support means disabled volunteers are not at a disadvantage compared with non-disabled volunteers. And good-quality training can help to compensate for the second-rate education many disabled people have received.

4. **An awareness of their financial status.** Because, through no fault of their own, disabled people are often poor, organisations should (a) reimburse the out-of-pocket expenses they incur by volunteering, and (b) ensure that those claiming benefits are not penalised for volunteering. Some disabled volunteers may not have the money 'up front' to pay their fares, for example, so organisations may have to think about paying these expenses in advance. This should be done in the context of a well-defined expenses policy.

Some who got it right

In this booklet we shall be looking at the experiences of five organisations that in their different ways have succeeded in addressing these issues.

- The **Rhondda Volunteer Information Centre (RVIC)** in Tonypanyd, South Wales, is a self-help organisation set up in 1980 to provide local people with advice on benefits, debt, marital problems, tax, housing, etc. Funded by Social Services, it is entirely managed and run by a group of 10 volunteers, of whom six are disabled people.
- The Hull-based **DUET** offers advice, support and training for unemployed people with disabilities. Originally set up to provide a stepping-stone to employment, further education or training, it has recently changed its focus to empowering people both with and without disabilities. It currently has nearly 100 volunteers on its books, of whom only 12 do not consider themselves to be disabled.
- **Brookfields Hospital** in Cambridge involves around 30 volunteers to provide a befriending service for up to 100 older and disabled residents across four wards. Four of the volunteers are themselves disabled people.
- The **Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People (GMCDP)** aims to promote the independence of disabled people and their integration into society. It recruits only disabled people as paid staff or volunteers. There are currently 10 active volunteers.
- The **Halton Disability Information Service (HDIS)** was set up in 1993 to provide information on a wide variety of disability-related subjects to disabled people, their carers and professionals in the Runcorn and Widnes area.

CHAPTER TWO

The main attractions of volunteering

Voluntary work is probably the nearest thing to paid work currently available to most disabled people. With the exception of a wage, it offers many of the same benefits: the chance to make decisions and shoulder responsibilities, to regain the self-esteem lost through unemployment and incapacity, to develop existing skills and acquire new ones. For disabled people in particular, it offers a chance to do something they themselves have independently chosen to do; for once, control of their lives has not been taken out of their hands by others.

Organisations wishing to recruit disabled people as volunteers must first find out what their needs are, but often do not know how to go about this task. One way would be simply to *ask* them – and then to act upon what they say. Organisations should also make the effort to target disabled people in their recruitment campaigns.

People volunteer for a variety of reasons, usually a mixture of altruism and self-interest. Disabled people are no different in this from non-disabled people: they want something in return for their volunteering. Voluntary work offers them a chance to make their own decisions, to be appreciated by others, to experience job satisfaction (which is especially crucial if you're not earning a wage)

Selling points

In general terms, the five organisations we studied target disabled people by describing volunteering as

- important and useful work
- an interesting and sociable activity
- a way in which skilled disabled people can share their knowledge with the whole community
- a way of acquiring skills or training that will help in the search for paid work.

In addition, all the organisations have a policy of non-rejection; they will refer people elsewhere if their programme is full, or if the individual concerned is not suitable for the programme. The five organisations also reimburse all the out-of-pocket expenses of their volunteers.

What of the recruitment methods? The five organisations have successfully recruited disabled people by a combination of the following methods:

- Word of mouth.
- Advertising through the local media and the specialist disability press
- Through contacts at day centres (community nurses, social workers, etc)
- Through special schools, colleges, youth clubs
- By giving talks to disability organisations and forums of workers and volunteers
- Through job centres and volunteer bureaux
- Recruitment posters in waiting room

Brookfields Hospital estimates that it recruits 50 per cent of its volunteers through schools, colleges and youth clubs, 40 per cent through job centres and volunteer bureaux, 7 per cent through advertising and 3 per cent by word of mouth.

DUET, by contrast, recruits 38 per cent of its volunteers through job centres and PACT (Employment Service) – referred for training in the hope that they will emerge ‘job ready’ – 23 per cent by word of mouth and through volunteer bureaux, 19 per cent through social services, 13 per cent through vocational guidance agencies, 5 per cent through the education/careers service and 2 per cent from the health authority.

Getting their real views heard

As we have seen, benefit agencies seem to regard volunteering only as something that disabled people can use as a stepping-stone to paid work: if they are well enough to volunteer, in time they will be well enough to work.

However, of the five organisations we studied, there was only one – the GMCDDP – where the volunteers explicitly hoped that their voluntary activities would lead to paid employment. This was perhaps

due to the fact that this particular organisation recruited only disabled people for both its paid staff and volunteers.

Clearly, there are other reasons for volunteering besides the possibility that it will lead to a paid job. As the case of DUET illustrates, disabled people are increasingly using voluntary work to give themselves a voice. Volunteering provides them with a platform to express their real needs – not what other people *think* their needs are.

When DUET was formed in 1992, its original aim was to provide support, guidance and training for unemployed people with disabilities to help them towards employment and TEC-funded training schemes. Funding came from the European Social Fund, the local Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs), Hull Task Force (i.e. central government) and from the Employment Service.

When the original pilot project was completed, a meeting was held between the disabled participants, the funders and local community groups. It was agreed that DUET's aims should be broadened: rather than focusing narrowly on preparing people for paid work or further training, it should be regarded as a way of empowering disabled people in all areas of life, focusing on building confidence and making choices.

The wishes of the users were acted upon, and the new DUET was born. It was quickly inundated with recruits who identified with the new, broader aims and the services on offer. DUET is now open to anyone – disabled or non-disabled – who feels that they can benefit from the unique personal and volunteer training programmes and the other support services on offer. The programmes have taken three years to develop, thanks to the extensive feedback from the users, who wanted to benefit from volunteering for its own sake, without being pressurised into paid work and thereby losing benefits. Volunteer Claire said: 'People don't just want jobs – they want the satisfaction of being useful when they can. If money comes into play, the choice and freedom to volunteer is gone. Being paid creates pressures that can lead back to ill-health.' (Of course, Claire's final comment does not apply to disabled people who are not 'ill' but have stable conditions.)

Obviously, since changing its focus so drastically, DUET has had to be very creative in order to keep its original funders and find new ones. Training/volunteer co-ordinator Bob Daniels feels that the best funders are those who understand the needs of disabled people and are realistic about how far you can measure outcomes. So far, DUET has managed to get all the original funders listed above on its side, and more recently the Department of Health's Opportunities for Volunteering scheme as well.

A cause for satisfaction

People who have been on Incapacity Benefit for a long time often feel very isolated, and their self-confidence suffers as a result. Volunteering can help to break this isolation, as it offers plenty of opportunity for meeting people and forming relationships. Moreover, the satisfaction obtained from a job well done – not to mention the appreciation of clients, colleagues and the community as a whole – can do wonders for low self-esteem.

All the organisations we studied explicitly stressed these attractions of volunteering in their recruitment literature and their networking, as well as in communications by word of mouth.



**Sheila Rees, volunteer
co-ordinator, RVIC**

The RVIC volunteers all agreed on how much satisfaction they gained from helping the community. As volunteer co-ordinator Sheila Rees put it, 'When you get a youngster putting his arms around you and saying, "Thank you, you've saved my life", it makes you feel so good.'

Volunteers at the HDIS gain their particular satisfaction from giving people useful information about disability. In response to the Disabled Persons (Consultation and Representation) Act 1986, which requires local authorities to provide a range of information for disabled people and their carers, Chester County Council social services made available funding for the setting up of information services to be run by disabled people. As a result, existing members of the Bridgewater Day Centre were approached and asked if any of the Centre's clients were interested in starting a disability information service. A core group of eight or so people volunteered – and the HDIS was born. Founding volunteers Norah, Paul, Chris told us how gratified they felt at being able help people like themselves. 'You feel you've got so much to offer,' Chris said. 'We're intelligent people, after all.' Paul added, 'It's so worthwhile: we know most of the problems disabled people are facing, and we have the resources to help them.'

For the young volunteers active in the Young People's Forum of the GMCDP, the main attraction was getting involved in a disability organisation and meeting people. 'It was something I was really into, meeting new people,' said one volunteer. 'I am busy now, so I feel more

confident and valued.' Another said, 'It was the easiest way for me to find work. I'm now working with people on my own wavelength and I really enjoy it.'

At Brookfields Hospital, volunteers Charlie and Paul told us about the satisfaction they derive from helping each other as well as the patients in the hospital. 'Paul has learning difficulties and Charlie is a retired volunteer,' Glenda Rapaport, the hospital's co-ordinator of volunteers, told us. 'They came to us through the Joint Support Scheme, set up a year ago to enable disabled people to volunteer by pairing them with a non-disabled volunteer.' Paul explained, 'I like to work with other people. I'm doing well in my job because I'm supported well by Charlie.' Charlie viewed volunteering as an opportunity to do something for the community after his retirement. When asked what he got out of helping at Brookfields, he said, 'Pure satisfaction: meeting people from all walks of life, helping them to have a better existence.'

Skills and confidence on offer

When meeting would-be volunteers for the first time, the volunteer co-ordinators of all the five organisations we studied make a point of explaining that they will be trained in useful skills. Good-quality training enables volunteers to become more competent and to take on even more fulfilling work in time. Paid staff see themselves as facilitators, enabling the volunteers to realise their potential, both as individuals and as members of a group.

Sense of achievement

A volunteer at Brookfields hospital told us that, although he has life skills, academic achievements and past experience of voluntary work, the nature of his disability often made him feel negative about himself. 'But after two years here,' he said, 'showing myself to be dependable in my work with elderly people, trying to be a sensitive and caring man – this has helped me to feel more confident. I can get a reference from the hospital, and perhaps even take up suitable paid work in the future.'

Volunteers from HDIS told us that when the group first started up, they were left to get on with things without much training. But ever since they asked for a volunteer co-ordinator – Stephanie Lloyd – to be appointed, they have been able to attend training courses on subjects such as dealing with aggression, the benefits system for disabled people, computer training, communication skills and HIV/AIDS awareness; this has been in conjunction with in-house training requested by the volunteers on and around subjects such as personnel and office procedures – which enables the group to work towards the development of their equal opportunities policy.

The volunteers greatly appreciate having a volunteer co-ordinator, not only because she has organised all this training but also because she has recruited more volunteers. Some of the volunteers have

learned useful job skills. Paul, Ron and Norah, who have been with HDIS for three years, told us that they had been given the opportunity to answer phones and take messages for the first time in their lives. Paul learned to write with a pen; Ron learned to write with his left hand, after a stroke had deprived him of the use of his right hand; Norah, who has arthritis in her hands, learned to use a computer. 'People can read my writing now,' says Paul. 'That gives me a real sense of achievement.'

All the volunteers we talked to have acquired useful technical knowledge about disability. Volunteer Dave said, 'Before I came to the centre, I thought I was the only person with a disability. I really thought I was going to crack up. But after three weeks here I was 75 per cent better.' Volunteers Janet and Paul explained that they only knew about their own disabilities because they were isolated and never met people with other kinds of disability. Through working together as a team, they have taught each other about their disabilities, both informally and through training sessions.

Good-quality training

Over the past sixteen years RVIC has developed its own training materials; they have been recognised as comparable with a university course, and they have received coverage in the *Times Educational Supplement*. Co-ordinator Sheila Rees has been with the organisation for seven years, and during that time has become an expert on the benefits system. This has equipped her to write the training materials and to give highly professional training to volunteers. 'We use our training materials as a recruitment aid,' Sheila told us. 'They also help us to network with other organisations.' In the 16 years the Centre has been open, it has attracted more than 100 volunteers.

Neil, a recent recruit, said that he was attracted to volunteering for RVIC because he knew he would receive proper training. 'The other reason is that I can empathise with people on benefits. I know how hard that life is, because I live it too.'

DUET also actively promotes its training. Volunteer co-ordinator Bob Daniels explained that the centre offers one of the most comprehensive programmes of formal training for disabled volunteers: 'Instead of just landing them in an organisation as a paid worker or a volunteer, we offer some unique training to prepare them for the experience.' DUET has even had to maintain a low profile over its personal development course, such is the overwhelming interest it

has aroused. The course, which takes up one day a week for ten weeks, covers disability issues, confidence building, stress management, health, communication, relationships, assertiveness and general personal effectiveness. Other courses available include computer training, which covers basic word processing, databases, spreadsheets and some desktop publishing.

One day a week is designated for jobsearch training, for both paid and voluntary work. This covers compiling a CV, interview skills, occupational health, disability in the workplace, application forms, job descriptions, and occupational choices. Most students eventually feel confident enough to take up employer placements that give them work experience as voluntary or paid staff. 'People with disabilities and confidence problems can start by selecting the courses appropriate to their own needs,' Bob Daniels explained. 'They may then progress through other programmes over a period of time, and finally go on to voluntary or paid work or into further training or education.'

The volunteers were full of praise for the personal development training, and several said they'd do it again if they could. 'It's just what disabled people want,' said volunteer Mandy, 'good-quality training with plenty of options.' Phil and Mandy were so inspired that they have themselves become volunteer support workers assisting the trainer on the personal development course. 'Within an hour of the training coming to an end I knew it was for me,' said Phil. 'I've really gone forward, and the skills I've learned I can now share with others.' After training at DUET, many disabled people have gone on to other organisations as volunteers or as paid employees.

Empowering the volunteer

Most people volunteer for a mixture of reasons. A desire to help the community may go hand in hand with, say, a wish to meet new people, to learn new skills or to obtain 'job satisfaction'.

Devising voluntary work that can satisfy all these various needs is a tricky but essential task, especially where disabled people are concerned. As we have seen, because of society's patronising attitudes they may be lacking in self-confidence, unsure that they can achieve anything concrete.

Our five organisations have coped with this complexity of motivations by following one general rule: empowering the volunteer. Providing challenging work is fundamental to the culture of these organisations. Their aim is to give volunteers a chance to experience a variety of activities within a 'career' structure similar to that enjoyed by paid workers. More importantly, these organisations ensure that the volunteers really do enjoy the benefits they are promised.

Demanding roles

Volunteering at HDIS is particularly empowering. Giving information and advice to local people involves a variety of demanding roles, including staffing the telephone helpline, carrying out research, maintaining the database, and networking and publicising the service.

After receiving numerous calls from disabled people who were worried about how their benefits would be affected by part-time work and voluntary work, HDIS volunteer Janet attended a training course on the benefits system. Knowing that she had the latest information at her fingertips made her feel especially confident in her work. 'Before I went on the course, everyone was helping me all the time,' Janet said. 'But the training was so good that now I can help people too.'

Paul, who has been a volunteer for three years, added, 'When you do the training, you get to know things about disability that are

beneficial to you personally, but more importantly, you become someone who has to be taken seriously because you are skilled.'

Dave told us, 'When you work here you make friends. At first I was quite shy, but not for long – the atmosphere is so good, so full of team spirit, that now I'm quite cheeky!'

RVIC has an impressive record of achievement too. Enid, a volunteer since 1994, explained how, over the last sixteen years, the organisation has given disabled people both the self-confidence and the practical experience to go on to paid employment and higher education. This is a real achievement in South Wales, where poverty is widespread and job opportunities are few. The voluntary work is valued not only because of the high-quality training but also because the volunteers acquire experience of working in a stressful environment. RVIC is always busy, handling 400 queries a month; moreover, it must be one of the only information services that actually makes home visits as well as receiving clients in its own small premises.

Disabled people in charge

The GMCDP succeeds in recruiting volunteers because it visibly promotes equality for disabled people. The volunteers stay because they can see that from the top down, disabled people are running the show. There's a lesson in this for mainstream organisations: disabled volunteers want to know that they will be taken seriously, that people like themselves will be making the big decisions as well as doing the hands-on work.

Volunteers are particularly attracted to the Young People's Forum because it gives them a chance to make their own decisions, to speak in public and generally to help people like themselves have a voice in society. Two of the young volunteers told us how they now feel valued and therefore much more confident; they know that they will acquire skills, friends and references from volunteering. One said, 'I wanted to get more involved in designing adaptations and aids for disabled people, and I'm also learning desktop publishing.'

Volunteer Mark from Brookfields Hospital told us, 'It's not the actual tasks that appeal – I've done paid work that is far more demanding – so much as the fact that after not working for so long, volunteering has given me back my self-esteem.' Mark has excelled at the role of supporting elderly and disabled people, for example by accompanying wheelchair users on outings. 'Instead of spending every day at home getting bored, or at a day centre getting depressed with the other

mental health patients, I decided to volunteer,' he said. 'Volunteering has given me an insight into other areas of life, as well as a feeling of being needed at the times in my life when I've been negatively perceived.'

Creating a culture of equality

Most disabled people will have spent their lives trying to cope with the prejudice that comes at them from all sides, so they are quite likely to be sceptical about the extent to which a mainstream voluntary organisation will treat them as equal to its other volunteers.

Here, based on our conversations with the five organisations, are some measures that help to reassure disabled people of the firmness of your intentions.

Draw up an equal opportunity policy

Do this *before* you start recruiting disabled people as volunteers. Then mention it in your recruitment literature; stress the organisation's commitment to equal opportunities at the interview; demonstrate this commitment in the way the organisation does things; and monitor the policy in action. Most importantly, do not treat your equal opportunities policy as a mere 'add-on': unless the concept of equality – the idea that everyone deserves respect, that difference is something to be celebrated – is deeply rooted in the culture of your organisation, you will never achieve equality in practice.

As HDIS has developed and grown, the group members have worked positively to create an environment that is non-discriminatory, but they recognise that working in isolation creates discrimination against non-disabled volunteers who might be able to share their skills within HDIS. As a result, HDIS's equal opportunities policy reflects its willingness to work in partnership with other members of the local community.

Train your existing staff

If you have never recruited disabled people as volunteers before, and you wish to avoid embarrassing 'Does he take sugar?' situations,

arrange for your existing staff and volunteers to receive training in equal opportunities and disability awareness. Thereafter, offer ongoing advice and support to anyone who is working with disabled volunteers.

Make a good first impression

Aim to create an atmosphere that is friendly and informal but at the same time organised and businesslike; disabled people will want to feel confident that you can deliver what you promise. Make sure that your organisation's commitment to equality is fully described in all written material and fully discussed during interviews. Try to make the interview fairly relaxed – but remember how important it is to find out about the motivations of the volunteer and the skills they already possess.

Find out about the volunteer's needs

Take the time to ask each new recruit about the support and aids they will need in order to be able to carry out the tasks expected of them. This will not only make them feel confident they will receive proper support, but also help you to make a realistic assessment of their capabilities.

Provide proper induction and training

Ensure that there are procedures in place for introducing new recruits to the aims of the organisation, their rights and responsibilities as volunteers, the grievance procedures and expenses policy, etc. And as we have seen, organise good-quality training for them.

Put new volunteers to work immediately

Taking up references or waiting for the results of police checks can take several weeks, so to prevent your new volunteers from losing their enthusiasm or their nerve, give them something to do immediately. To safeguard your clients, make sure the new volunteers are not working unsupervised until all checks have been made.

Be flexible about timetables

Some disabled volunteers have 'good days' when they can cope reasonably well – but they also have 'bad days' when volunteering is clearly out of the question. It is therefore unrealistic for voluntary organisations to expect such volunteers to stick to a rigid timetable. If possible, they should be given the freedom to volunteer when they feel up to it. There are various ways of building in this flexibility: for example, by recruiting enough volunteers to cover all conceivable eventualities; by making sure that individuals only volunteer for a few hours each week; by drawing up a rota each week of those people who are definitely available to volunteer that week; or identifying an efficient system of communication for last-minute changes.

You should try to keep in touch with volunteers when they are unable to come to work, and provide them with up-to-date reading material. As a result, the volunteers should need only minimal retraining when they return to work, even after quite a long absence.

Obviously, those disabled people who have stable conditions and are without mental health problems will be as capable as non-disabled volunteers of keeping to a work schedule.

Reimburse out-of-pocket expenses

The travelling expenses of disabled volunteers tend to be much higher than those of non-disabled volunteers because disabled people have to rely much more on private cars rather than inaccessible public transport. Disabled people also tend to be poorer than the general population. For these two reasons, it is absolutely essential for voluntary organisations to reimburse the out-of-pocket expenses of their disabled volunteers.

Give advice about benefits

For disabled volunteers who also happen to be unemployed, organisations should give up-to-date guidance on the law relating to volunteering and Incapacity Benefit and other benefits.

The problem of official attitudes

During the past few years there has been controversy between the government and the voluntary sector about whether disabled people in receipt of benefits should have restrictions placed upon their volunteering.

The government argues that disability benefits should only be paid to people who are, by definition, incapable of work. It therefore claims that *any* work, paid or unpaid, undertaken by claimants must be taken into account when determining their capacity to work.

Restrictions have therefore been placed upon claimants who wish to volunteer: the 'therapeutic rule' allows them to volunteer if a doctor advises that it is beneficial to their disability or condition; the '16-hour rule' places a time limit of 16 hours per week on their volunteering.

The catch is that both these regulations contain a clause allowing the government to reassess a claimant's capacity for work at any time. If a claimant volunteers regularly under either rule for any length of time, the government argues that this may indicate they are capable of work, and thus no longer eligible for disability benefits.

Fear of losing benefits

A recent survey of organisations that involve volunteers claiming benefits clearly showed that the government's attitude is discouraging claimants from doing voluntary work: 28 per cent of respondents reported that volunteers had resigned because they were afraid of losing their benefit, and 15 per cent had actual first-hand experience of volunteers either losing their benefit or having to submit to a further medical examination.

Most of the organisations who took part in the survey felt there should be no limit on the amount of time a claimant can spend on volunteering each week, on the grounds that voluntary work benefits the volunteer, the voluntary organisation and society in general.

To make matters worse, the government has now introduced Incapacity Benefit to replace the previous benefits. This has come under attack from disability and welfare rights organisations, who see it as a crude cost-cutting exercise. They are particularly concerned about the new medical test, which it is feared will disqualify more than 300,000 new and existing claimants over the next two years. The test takes into account only medical factors, and ignores a claimant's age, experience and education, as well as the social consequences of their impairment.

Ways of coping

The organisations we studied for this booklet have had some success in tackling such problems.

Volunteers with HDIS have been sheltered from the threat of having their capacity to work reassessed, mainly because HDIS is only one element of the services offered by a day centre to which social workers refer disabled people for therapeutic reasons. Anyone referred to the centre can choose to work for HDIS if they wish, but since voluntary work is only one of the activities on offer, they can also attend the centre simply for relaxation and social contact.

The day centre is recognised by social services and the DSS as being therapeutic. The HDIS volunteer co-ordinator and the co-ordinators of the day centre make sure that the volunteers observe the '16-hour rule', and also take care to maintain a good working relationship with the DSS. As a result, no one has ever been reassessed for their capacity for work because of having volunteered for HDIS.

Opposite effects

The RVIC has a different story to tell. Despite having a close working relationship with the DSS, it does not operate from a setting to which people are referred for therapeutic reasons. So over the last 18 months RVIC has lost six volunteers who are afraid of losing benefits.

One of the objectives of RVIC is to advise local people about their entitlement to benefits. The result is close and constant contact between the volunteers and the DSS. This high level of exposure can have diametrically opposite effects on volunteers.

Some are put off volunteering because they realise that their own eligibility for benefits will come under far closer scrutiny than that of someone volunteering in another capacity. Gerda, a welfare rights

worker who started her career as a volunteer with RVIC and now acts as a consultant to the Centre, told us that 'some people just cannot take the financial risk of getting their benefits cut, but we have nevertheless had some success with recruitment'.

RVIC's response has been to give would-be volunteers fair warning of this unsatisfactory situation. Long-term volunteer Sheila Rees has been nominated as co-ordinator of the service, and she always tells new recruits about the risks involved in volunteering (but assures them that in case of difficulties they will receive RVIC's full support).

In addition, the volunteers – who work as a co-operative – give each other much support and encouragement. Brian has been volunteering for several years; he keeps strictly to his 16 hours per week, well aware that doing any more hours would jeopardise his entitlement to benefits. Even if, having kept scrupulously to the rules, he were to be questioned about his voluntary work, he knows he would have the full support of his fellow volunteers.

Neil, a recent arrival at RVIC, told us: 'After three months of waiting for clearance from the Benefits Agency – even though I had a letter from my GP stating that this type of voluntary work would benefit me – I'm now a volunteer with RVIC, thanks mainly to the support of all the existing volunteers.'

The GMCDP has also developed a good relationship with the DSS. Alison Blake, co-ordinator of the coalition's Young People's Forum, told us, 'We explain to benefits agency staff that most disabled people have attended segregated schools and have therefore received very little careers advice. It's important for disabled people to acquire skills and training: it may help them find paid work, or it may be therapeutic because they are meeting other people and learning to become more independent and confident people.' Thanks to this constant briefing of benefits agency staff about the importance of voluntary work, few GMCDP volunteers are ever questioned about their right to volunteer.

The GMCDP also produces fact sheets about benefits, including a recent one on Incapacity Benefit. Alison Blake explained, 'The fact sheets keep our volunteers up to date with the latest developments in benefits and how they relate to volunteering. Every volunteer receives one in their information packs.'

A real risk

DUET involves anything up to 60 volunteers at a time. Yet several of them told us they feel that by volunteering they're running a real risk



**Mandy Sewell, volunteer
at DUET**

of losing their benefits.

Volunteer Mandy Sewell explained, 'Just because I sometimes volunteer doesn't mean that I'm fit for work *every* day.' The rest of the group agreed, saying that disabled people should have the same right to volunteer as anyone else, free from the fear of losing benefit.

But the fear is real – so how has DUET's training/volunteer co-ordinator Bob Daniels been so successful in recruiting? He not only tells would-be volunteers about the risks involved, and offers support should any volunteer's benefits come

under threat, but also sensitively listens to the needs of disabled people and offers them volunteering opportunities that will build up their confidence: as a result, they feel it is worth taking the risk of volunteering whilst on benefits.

A final word

The Disability Discrimination Act was passed in November 1995. The Act bans 'unjustified' discrimination against disabled people in the field of employment and in the provision of services. Unfortunately, the Act does not extend the right to fair treatment to volunteers, but good practice, as well as an increasing number of funding bodies, require organisations to develop and implement equal opportunities policies which take account of the needs of disabled people. Regardless of legal requirements, volunteer-involving organisations should be adopting best practices. As the organisations throughout this book have shown, it is important to consider the full range of disabilities and many improvements incur little financial cost but enormous benefit to disabled volunteers and the organisations which involve them.

The lessons for organisations

- Involving disabled people as volunteers is a two-way learning process. Organisations learn from disabled people and the special talents they bring. Disabled people may do things differently, but this difference is enriching.
- Disabled people need an accessible environment. This involves improving the access to buildings and information, but more importantly, changing the attitudes of other people towards people with mobility impairment, visual impairment, learning impairment and/or learning difficulties. Disabled people must not be treated in a patronising or tokenistic way.
- Disability awareness enables non-disabled people to learn more about how to treat disabled people and how to develop good practice. Valuing people as people will help an organisation to create a caring environment, with all the benefits that brings.
- Mainstream voluntary organisations can learn some useful lessons from disability organisations about how to recruit and retain volunteers, disabled or not.

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The National Centre for Volunteering is an independent voluntary organisation which promotes, develops and supports volunteering in England. We campaign on public policy and challenge obstacles to volunteering.

As a development agency we work collaboratively with other organisations. We are in a unique position to act across the public, private and voluntary sectors to improve the quality and range of volunteering.

The Centre believes that volunteering plays a distinctive and important part in society. It is a powerful force for change, for volunteers themselves and for the wider community.

We seek to make volunteering more accessible, particularly to people from under-represented groups and by working with volunteer-involving organisations to create new, exciting and innovative opportunities.

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