

Free Professional Services – an introduction

Our thanks to Business Community Connections for permission to use this guide – one of many excellent resources to be found on their website www.bconnections.org.uk

The Basics

Everyone working in the voluntary sector is aware of the perennial problem of limited resources. There are times, however, when budgetary constraints can be particularly frustrating: your organisation needs to update its IT systems or to develop an HR policy, or you're moving premises and are flummoxed by the complicated legal procedures. You don't have the necessary skills in house and, although you know there are professionals who could help you with this, you just can't afford them.

If this sounds familiar, don't give up yet. Many professional people donate their time and skills to groups and individuals that need help but are unable to afford their fees. Originally known as Pro Bono work, this is now more commonly referred to as Free Professional Services. This work can be offered in a variety of different ways. It can be a very informal arrangement between an individual and an organisation, or it can be much more complex, stemming from an employer's corporate community involvement programme. Although there is no generally accepted definition of what constitutes Free Professional Services they are all provided free of charge, with no commitment or expectation of further paid work. They also tend to be project-based, and short-term.

In the past, such services were limited to the traditional professions of law, accountancy and architecture. These days you are as likely to find offers of assistance in IT, business planning, human resources, website development, public relations and marketing.

Pros and Cons

Pros

1. They are FREE! This enables you to take advantage of skills, knowledge and expertise that would otherwise have been unobtainable.
2. As with any volunteer, someone providing free professional services can bring freshness and vitality to your organisation and a new approach to existing problems.
3. If the project is managed well, it could be the first stage in a longer-term relationship with the professional, which may even extend to his or her employer.

Cons

1. As the work is free it can, understandably, be lower in priority for the professional or their employer than that for their other, fee paying clients. You may have to accept some slippage in terms of timing, but it is well worth clarifying your expectations, including timings, at the beginning. If your deadlines are immovable (such as the date by which you need to have completed your annual return) then make sure that they are aware of that from the start.
2. Sometimes the voluntary organisations receiving the free work feel unable to comment on its standard, feeling that they should be grateful for whatever they receive. This is counterproductive in two senses. Firstly, you have an obligation to your charity to ensure that the work is as good as possible, and secondly, the professionals carrying out the work are more likely to feel rewarded if they know that their work has been of value. Honest, yet tactful, feedback is essential.
3. Some voluntary organisations have felt that when work is offered on a pro bono basis that the least experienced members of staff carry it out, and it can be of a lower quality. Whatever the situation, it is imperative that you assess your volunteer in the same way that you would any other provider of professional services. Create a brief and monitor their work against it frequently and thoroughly.

How to go about it

You have three main options when it comes to accessing these free services. You can contact individuals directly, approach them through their employer, or you can work with a broker.

1. If contacting individuals directly, the best way is to do this using your existing network. Although this can be the fastest option, do make sure that you are both clear about the scope of the project to avoid confusion and possible conflict later on.
2. Many of the large professional firms have in house brokerages and actively encourage their employees to donate their time or even offer them time off to do so. They may well have a structured application process and any of their branches should be able to provide you with details. Smaller firms may not have such systems in place and may even be new to the idea. If so, it is your responsibility to convince them of the benefits they may accrue as a result.
3. You may feel more comfortable using an intermediary, or broker, to help you find a match. If you are considering using a broker, the National Centre for Volunteering's Brilliant Brokerage Guide <http://www.employeevolunteering.org.uk/resources/brilliantbrokerage0.htm> offers practical advice. BCCConnections' Broker Bank will help you identify a broker in your area – see www.bconnections.org.uk or you can use the national ProHelp network, which brings together free services from a range of different professions.

Other issues to consider

- Involving a professional, whether free or otherwise, is not a decision to be taken lightly. They may make recommendations that need to be approved at the most senior level. Inform senior management and trustees in advance and get their commitment.
- Make sure you approach the correct person or organisation for assistance. One of the most commonly voiced complaints from professionals is that they are asked to provide help for which they are not qualified. Ask around, or contact your local CAB to clarify this in advance.
- As the majority of Free Professional Services are short-term, plan how you will cope once they have gone. If, for example, your volunteer is developing a website, will you be able to maintain it after their project is completed?