

CATE BENNETT describes how voluntary experience can be invaluable when it comes to getting a job

Why volunteering is very good for you

2005 has been designated the Year of the Volunteer, a time to celebrate the amazing work volunteers do and encourage more and more people to give time to volunteering. The Home Office, the government department with responsibility for encouraging active citizenship, is working in partnership with two established volunteering organisations, Community Service Volunteers and Volunteer Development England, to co-ordinate the year. To find out more visit www.yearofthevolunteer.org

Volunteering can be described as a complimentary partnership between an individual and an organisation, where commitment, energy, knowledge and current skills are given free, in return for an introduction to new people, environments and opportunities and the chance to acquire new skills and pursue personal interests. It is definitely not a one-way process!

Did you know that ...?

- Over 70 per cent of employers would hire a candidate with volunteering experience over someone who has never volunteered (www.yearofthevolunteer.org).
- If you want to apply for degrees, for example; veterinary science, medicine, teaching, physiotherapy and nursing you will need experience relevant to your vocational choice. Volunteering offers tremendous opportunities to enhance your knowledge, develop

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your skills and introduce you to a wide variety of career areas.

- It's a fact! A degree is no longer enough for entry to graduate careers, work experience paid or unpaid is sought after by employers. You need to stand out from the crowd, show your leadership skills, team work prowess,



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organisational, IT and analytical skills. The following are just a few examples of questions graduate recruiters ask on their application forms:

- What would you be able to contribute to this business as a leader? How have you been able to demonstrate this in the past? (Please complete in a maximum of 250 words) – United Utilities Graduate Recruitment Scheme
- Please describe the most significant achievement you have attained whilst working as part of a team. Specify the role you played within the team– The Bank of New York Graduate Recruitment Scheme
- In terms of experience and/or ability, what strengths are you bringing to this career? – Pfizer Graduate Recruitment Scheme
- Graduate recruiters are keen to see examples gained from outside of academic life and, in some instances, for example conservation, the experienced gained can only be attained through voluntary work:
- It is not always what you know, but who you know! Volunteering can introduce you to potential contacts that may be able to enhance your career through their knowledge and networks. Some volunteers have been offered full-time paid employment in positions they would have found very difficult to obtain if they had not volunteered.
- More and more opportunities are now becoming available to obtain recognised qualifications through volunteering. For example, Lancashire Sport, through the Millennium Volunteer Programme, will help volunteers to gain qualifications in sport, such as coaching awards and access to courses on issues such as child protection and equality.

VOLUNTARY WORK

Millennium volunteers

Volunteering opportunities are extensive; if you are still at school or university you may wish to consider Millennium Volunteers. Millennium Volunteers (MVs) are young people, aged 16-24, who give up their free time to help their local communities. The MV website provides detailed case studies of both previous and current volunteers and access to your local volunteering opportunities: www.millenniumvolunteers.gov.uk

Alternatively you could consider engaging with hospital volunteering. A particularly useful experience if you wish to explore health and science careers, develop key skills and show to both admissions tutors and employers just how motivated you are. The Volunteering England website

'To explore volunteering opportunities visit www.do-it.org.uk'

(www.volunteering.org.uk) provides access to a substantial number of volunteering opportunity websites within the health and social care sector, including hospital radio, hospices, St John's Ambulance and Hospital and Community Friends.

To explore volunteering opportunities across a breadth of sectors, including working with offenders, environmental regeneration projects, website design, IT training, media, administration, conservation and global awareness, visit: www.do-it.org.uk, which is a vast database of volunteering opportunities across the UK.

Alex – a degree in physiotherapy

Alex had already gained experience of working with people in a caring environment by working as a volunteer in a home for the elderly. She had started this placement whilst working towards the Duke of Edinburgh Award and soon found that she enjoyed the contact with the elderly residents and carers, which helped to reaffirm her desire to enter a caring profession.

Whilst researching various physiotherapy courses, Alex discovered that universities not only valued but felt that real experience of the career was essential. She therefore managed to find two placements in physiotherapy departments. The first was arranged through her school but the second she managed to secure by approaching her local hospital. Although not able to carry out treatment, by watching the physiotherapists and talking to patients she gained a real insight into the profession.



BIOSPHERE EXPEDITIONS

Alex found that both the voluntary work with the elderly and the voluntary work experience she gained in the physiotherapy departments were invaluable to her when applying to university. She was able to show a genuine interest in this vocation when completing application forms and found that she could talk with knowledge and confidence at selection interviews. Alex is now part-way through her physiotherapy degree at the University of Teeside.

Anna – third year medical student

Anna chose to take a gap year before starting her studies as a medical student. For five months of her gap year she lived in Guinea, West Africa, during which time she spent three months working aboard the Mercy Ship *Anastasis*.

Mercy ships are floating hospitals that perform life-changing operations for those who would not be able to receive such treatment through any other means.

Anna was not allowed to become directly involved with the medical work but had the opportunity to “adopt” a patient, which meant she could befriend them and find out more about their medical case. She also took the opportunity to go into surgery and watch operations being carried out. Whilst on board, she helped in the housekeeping department, working alongside people from a wide variety of backgrounds.

For the last two months she lived in a very remote area of Guinea with a team of people from the Mercy Ship, carrying out a variety of tasks from building the

foundations of a school to socialising with the local people. Although at times Anna found it difficult to be so far from home and away from an environment she knew and understood well, she would not wish to have changed anything.

She learned how to interact with people from a whole variety of backgrounds and beliefs and gained a much broader perspective on life.

Jo – education officer, Wildlife Conservation Trust, Jersey

Jo was studying for a degree in zoology when she focussed her career ideas on conservation education. When the opportunity arose, at the end of her second year, to undertake a one year placement as part of her course, she contacted the world famous Conservation Trust in Jersey with a view to undertaking a paid placement within their education department. She was told that they did not offer paid placements and, despite concerns about finance, she decided to join them on a voluntary basis.

At the end of her degree course, she re-contacted the Trust with regard to possible employment and was made an immediate offer to join the education department. Her period of volunteering assisted her in securing this position; not only did she have the necessary skills and knowledge required to do the job, but she was personally known to her employer and had already proved her commitment to their work.

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