



Skills-based volunteering

How to do more through skilled volunteers.

A charity guide

pilotlight

Ed Mayo

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Author

Ed Mayo led Pilotlight as Chief Executive from 2020 – 2025. Pilotlight is the charity that partners with business and charities through skills-based volunteering.

This guide is one of three user guides on skills-based volunteering; - for business, for charities and for individuals check out our other guides for more.

My warm thanks to colleagues at Pilotlight and in our partner charities who we have worked using skilled volunteers here at Pilotlight - and also to colleagues in other skilled volunteering agencies who have contributed their tips and insights in the preparation of this guide. One origin of this guide is in a brainstorm session I ran with skilled volunteering charities who are members of the UK Pro Bono Association. I include Katherine Mathieson, Mei Li Powell, Finia Kuhlmann and Tina Alexandrou in my thanks for their serial help and encouragement – and to Emily Perkin, PhD student at the Centre for Charity Effectiveness at Bayes Business School for your help throughout A special thanks to Jennie Talman and Anna Saggerson for your editing advice on this guide.

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We are growing a better world through our co-operation.



Ed Mayo



Summary

This is a practical guide to skills-based volunteering for charities, also known as pro bono work or corporate volunteering. It explains how you can attract and best use volunteers with professional or occupational skills and it answers the most common questions around this.

Skills-based volunteering is a growing trend, with charities benefiting as this brings in valuable outside perspectives and skills up their team. But it is worth adding that that volunteers benefit too.

This is the triple win of skills-based volunteering. It helps charities, but it also gives volunteers a chance to make a meaningful impact on causes they care about and it can help the volunteer's own workplace where it enhances their personal and professional development.

It doesn't always work perfectly, though, and if you want to take advantage of skilled volunteers for your charity, it helps to do it with care. This guide will point out some of the common pitfalls.

This guide is here to inform and inspire you to access skills that volunteers can offer and with them, to do more for your world.



Introduction and who this is for

If your charity has the ambition to help others and the intelligence to know that you may not have the skills to do that all on your own, this guide is for you.

For me, this has been a lifelong passion. I have been a volunteer since I was a student at university. Many years on, I work at Pilotlight, a leading skills-based volunteering charity, where we work with over one thousand skilled volunteers from business each year.

Skills-based volunteering is at the heart of what charities do. There are volunteer trustees with skills on the boards of charities from the largest in the country to the smallest. That is why, however many staff we have, we are called the 'voluntary sector'.

I look to answer the most common questions about skills-based volunteering that I hear from others in your position, so that you can feel confident about what it entails and how your charity might benefit.

How do we find skilled volunteers? Is this for us? Do we have the time to work with volunteers? These are common questions and you will not be alone if they are your questions too.

Our motto is simple - that great causes deserve great talent. Welcome to the world of skills-based volunteering...



What is skills-based volunteering?

Skills-based volunteering is where employees (or indeed individuals outside of a work setting) volunteer their professional or occupational skills to help charities and good causes.

Done well, it's a win-win-win: charities get valuable expertise; employees develop new skills and boost their well-being; companies gain from an improvement in the development and productivity of their staff.

The idea of skills-based volunteering is as old as the hills, but the practice is growing at present. Back in the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a flowering of informal volunteering, with a lot of people with skills who were left to work from home or 'furloughed' off work altogether for a while. Many of these people looked to use their time and their skills to make a difference, helping to accelerate pro bono action, often operating online as virtual volunteering rather than being required to turn up in person. Since the pandemic, the level of skills-based volunteering has increased by 20% (while general volunteering, sadly, has been falling back).

This is not the team-building days of the past of litter picking and painting community halls. That got people out of the office, but they had a poor reputation. Time and again, charities complain when the local accountancy firm wants their staff to come out as a team to do up the garden, rather than offering much-needed financial skills support for their work. And it is true that on some occasions, their gardening skills have been so low that the charities have needed to pay for professional gardeners to put things right afterwards...

The difference here is that through skills-based volunteering, people are using their professional or occupational skills and helping charities access specialist skills that they need.

Around six million people (21% of the workforce) are now putting their work skills into use on a voluntary basis and a further 50% would like to volunteer using their occupational or professional skills. This is an inclusive swathe of people – those who volunteer with the support of their employer are around twice as likely to be people who are black or of colour as the population at large.



What the words mean

There are different terms for skills-based volunteering, including 'skilled volunteering', 'skills sharing' or 'pro bono'. You can find other terms too in specific contexts, like 'corporate volunteering', 'occupation-related volunteering' or 'tech for good'.

I use any or all of these terms, but the formal definition we use is that “skills-based volunteering involves people with professional or occupational skills offering their time and expertise without charge to non-profit organisations or individuals in need.”

An added word then on the term 'pro bono'; this is derived from a Latin term meaning 'for the common good'. It characterises a voluntary contribution of professional services, skills, or expertise to benefit the public, typically without compensation. Pro bono is most commonly associated with the legal profession, where lawyers provide free legal assistance to those who can't afford it. But pro bono has evolved over time to cover almost every profession and industry.

A final word is on 'charity' in this guide, as I use this term in this guide as a placeholder to cover a wider variety of good causes, including community groups, faith groups, public services and social enterprises.

So, shall we start our guide with a look at whether your charity can benefit from getting skills-based volunteers on board?



Why should my charity take up skills-based volunteering?

As every charity knows, money only runs so far. It is a strength of the charity model that volunteers can bring expertise that an organisation may not be able to pay for.

While big, household name charities are often able to employ people with specialist skills, it is an old saying that leaders of smaller charities have to be Jack or Jill 'of all trades', able to turn their attention to a slew of different tasks - from managing staff and volunteers, running operations, analysing data, building relationships and fundraising. The big names add up to no more than 4% of all UK charities. The rest typically have an income of less than £1m pa.¹

It is hard to be good at all these different tasks. So, skilled volunteers help charities to act in a more expert and more effective way for the people they are here for.

Overseeing the work of all charities is a Board of Trustees. Trustees are volunteers, often with skills that help them to guide the team running the operations. Trustees are therefore often the first source of volunteer expertise.

A great example of making a difference is the rise of volunteers from the digital and tech sector. Starting well before but also prominent during the shock of the pandemic, pro bono (or 'tech for good') volunteers, have been deployed to equip charities to develop and use digital solutions in their work. This includes recruiting trustees with digital skills. Skilled digital trustees can help when it is hard

for charities to employ and retain people with the same skills, given that salaries are so much higher in other sectors. One in two charities in 2023 (48%) now report [having a strategic approach to digital](#), up from one in three (32%) in 2019.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is of real interest at present across a range of charities. Skilled volunteers can help charities up the learning curve. They can also, in some cases, use their workplace AI platforms, with added functionality, to help. I have seen a charity donated a full suite of marketing materials, now in use, all in a morning's work from a short set of prompts to a powerful corporate AI system.

Having said that, whether digital or more widely, if the charity can pay for specialist support, of course that tends to be the most straightforward. And it will be a better option in some contexts.

So, how charities find skilled volunteers and how do they manage them to get the right results that will work over time, when the volunteers are gone? Let's start by looking at the three roles that you might want them to play.

¹ See <https://smallcharitiesdata.org/topic/the-number-of-small-charities/> and also <https://www.loydsbankfoundation.org.uk/influencing/research/the-value-of-small>

Case study

Disablement Association Hillingdon (DASH) encourages disabled people of all ages to reach their full potential.

Vanessa Bonner, CEO of DASH, was aware that their systems did not allow the charity to track the journey of their beneficiaries through their projects and services. As a result, they were unable to measure their true social impact. Nervous about the costs of new systems, she turned to Pilotlight for pro bono support to identify a positive way forward.

A team of six volunteers from Barclays came together to answer the exam question set for them: “how can DASH most effectively track its service user journey and the impact of its work?” Over ten weeks, they worked to come up with some practical ways forward, transforming their understanding for good of the context and capabilities of disabled people in the process.

As a result of the programme, DASH has secured funding from The National Lottery Community Fund and implemented all the recommendations. Vanessa commented that “for a small organisation like ours, this is invaluable... Without this project and the support, I am certain that we would not have been able to demonstrate the need and obtain this funding.”



The three pro bono roles: coach, consultant or trustee

There are three main pro bono roles:

The coach.

Coaching, mentoring, buddying... there is a spectrum, but the key here is that while the volunteer may have skills and experience, the role here is not task oriented so much as people oriented. The goal for a volunteer is to leave the people they work with pro bono more capable as a result. This can involve formal coaching, training or a commitment to mentoring. In business it has become common for leaders to have paid coaches and the benefit is to help give an outside perspective on your challenges and support you when it comes to tricky decisions. Volunteers with the right skills and experience can play this role for free for charities.

The value of all of this is that it builds skills, which is not something that charities find easy to do. One in five small charities in the UK for example have no learning and development budget whatsoever for staff and pro bono can help bridge the gap through skills sharing.

The Consultant

The second role is the consultant, which is where a volunteer is providing expert input around a key task or challenge. The volunteer does have a task orientation, but it is also important of course for them to support those in the charity that will need to pick up after they have gone, so passing on knowledge along the way could be important too. The output could still be advice, or it might be creating something specific, such as a design firm that delivers a new logo or an architecture firm

that drafts a plan. Or it may be an integral part of your fundraising strategy – where supporters raise money by donating their time and skills, whether that is sky-diving or comedy (think of Comic Relief for example).

The value of this form of volunteering is that it helps charities move forward with specific work that it might not have found any other way to advance, helping it in turn to do more for others. This can be work completed outside of the charity or inside, for example in the form of a secondment – this is a model for example that is well developed in the Civil Service, championed by the Whitehall and Industry Group.

The Trustee

The third role, as we have touched on before, is that of the trustee, where a volunteer is joining the Board of a charity or social enterprise and will use their skills over the period of your appointment, typically a number of years, to support the charity. This a public, regulated role which comes with formal duties. Where there are staff, trustees don't usually do the day-to-day running of the charity. The focus of the role is governance, rather than implementation but it is common, particularly in smaller charities to have a hands-on role in volunteering too and they may also act as ambassadors for the organisation.

Compared to other forms of skills-based volunteering, there are a lot more resources and guidance available on recruiting and supporting trustees – including from the Charity Commission and Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR).²

² Although the guidance from the regulators tends to be a bit more dense, formal and cautionary than is needed -or helpful - early on.

Ask for volunteers

Even so, finding volunteers to be trustees is not straight forward. The most common way to find a trustee, says an old adage, is to ask. 80% of trustees would recommend the role to others.

But as overall volunteering rates decline, around two thirds of charities (63%) have a vacancy of some form on their Board. Four in ten charities (44%) say that they are missing fundraising and income generation as critical skills on their boards – and around the same level (39%) say they lack marketing and communications skills too.³

These three roles are not exclusive therefore and in some cases they may follow one another, but each comes with its own expectations and it is helpful to think about what might work best for your charity.

³ See <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/taking-skills-on-board>



Case study

Castlehaven Community Association is a small, vibrant charity with a high profile in its local community.

Services include after school and youth provision, activities for older people, environmental and horticultural projects.

Following two pro bono projects facilitated by Pilotlight, one coaching and one consultancy, the charity has developed a sports facility and a community nursery as new services, with new income attached.

Eleanor Botwright, charity CEO, says that: “the projects have proved to have had a phenomenal impact on the charity both in terms of governance and aspiration. Pro bono has given us a future.”



Virtual volunteering

A related question is where you want skilled volunteers to be.

There are typically more options now to work virtually, rather than in the physical location of the charity itself. It depends on your needs, but, while it is rewarding for volunteers to visit the charity, but the research suggests that volunteering virtually is as satisfying and as effective as doing it in person. For those who volunteer exclusively by phone or online

and those who volunteer exclusively in person, NCVO research shows that there is high satisfaction (92% for both, with both feeling similar levels of support, 82% and 81% respectively). Those who volunteer online only also report very high levels of 'belonging' (92%).

And for charities, it can be just as productive. Virtual volunteering also opens up the scope to attract volunteers from a different part of the country, or indeed the world.

Micro volunteering

The same question is how long you want skills volunteers for.

Trustees are for the long term, while there has been a rise in volunteers looking for opportunities to do very short-run pieces of work at times that suit them. One word for this is micro-volunteering.

Micro volunteering is often about helping out with quick, convenient tasks. Typically this is online. As a charity, you need to offer a level of direction and support and this starts with clear instructions for each task. It is worth recognising that if micro

volunteers work online for short periods, it can be difficult for them to see the impact - and if they have little interaction with the charity's staff and other volunteers, they can be left feeling somewhat isolated. So, you will want to think about good communication too.

[Digital Candle](#) is an example of a pro bono micro-volunteering platform in which tech professionals can book in to field short, time-limited calls with charities needing advice and guidance on digital decisions. It is simple and it is effective.



What skills are charities looking for?

Drawn from work of Reach Volunteering, the leading online platform for accessing skilled volunteers, here are the skills that other charities are looking for. They may give you ideas of the support that you could use.

Communication and marketing	• Copywriting and journalism • Event management • Marketing strategy • PR • Social media marketing
Creative services	• Film / video production • Graphic design • Illustration • Photography
Digital and IT	• Database / CRM development • Digital and IT strategy • Digital trustees • Network / system management • Project management • Product • SEO and analytics • Software and web development • Web design, including UX/UI
Finance	• Accountancy / audit • Bookkeeping • Financial management
Income generation	• Business development / sales • Commissioning / contracting • Fundraising events • Fundraising research • Bid writing • Fundraising strategy
Leadership	• Governance • Public speaking • Strategic development / planning • Strategic mentoring / coaching
Legal	
Management	• Change management • General operations management • HR • Management consultancy • Office / administration • Volunteer management
Organisational policy	• Data protection / GDPR • Health and Safety • Safeguarding
Property	• Architecture / surveying • Property management • Rural and town planning
Research and analysis	• Business advice / analysis • Data analysis • Market research • Research • User research
Service design	
Support and training	• Advice / advocacy • Mentoring / coaching
Social care / counselling	
Teaching / education	• Training

The value of lived experience

These are a wide range of professional and occupational skills, but as charities know, lived experience can also be a skill and a compelling source of expertise for charities.

The charity sector will be welcoming of skilled volunteers from different backgrounds and lived experience. To take one example, only three per cent of trustees are young (under thirty years old).

One charity that is addressing this through younger volunteers is Brook, a charity providing sexual

health services for people under the age of twenty five. The charity reserves two places for 18 – 24 year olds, with the role lasting for between one and two years. One trustee appointed through this is Charlotte, who comments that “I had just finished my time as a welfare officer at Leeds university union, where I ran campaigns on student health and sexual health. I felt that Brook shared the values that I was trying to achieve in my campaigns.” She encourages others to step forward too: “it’s a great opportunity to have your voice heard and be a part of something that really makes a difference to young people’s lives.”



Case study: Tackling loneliness

One skills-based volunteering success story is the Mental Health Collective, founded by Amy Pollard as a fellowship of people who have experienced mental health difficulties themselves, alongside experts from a variety of mental health professions.

With pro bono tech support, Amy developed a model to tackle loneliness by asking people to send and to receive a message by post.

Over 12,000 people have taken part in **#KindnessByPost** with participants from across the UK. Actor Indira Varma, broadcasters Rev Kate Bottley, Anna Richardson and comedian Dave Chawner have all got involved.

The initiative did benefit from small funding grants, but also from a range of individuals and organisations Amy calls 'pro bono heroes'. Key to this was the firm OpenCredo, who built the software

on which #KindnessByPost depends. "There are no words for the levels of love we have for OpenCredo" says Amy, "achieving your mission as a not-for-profit is like climbing a mountain, and they have effectively built us a cable car."

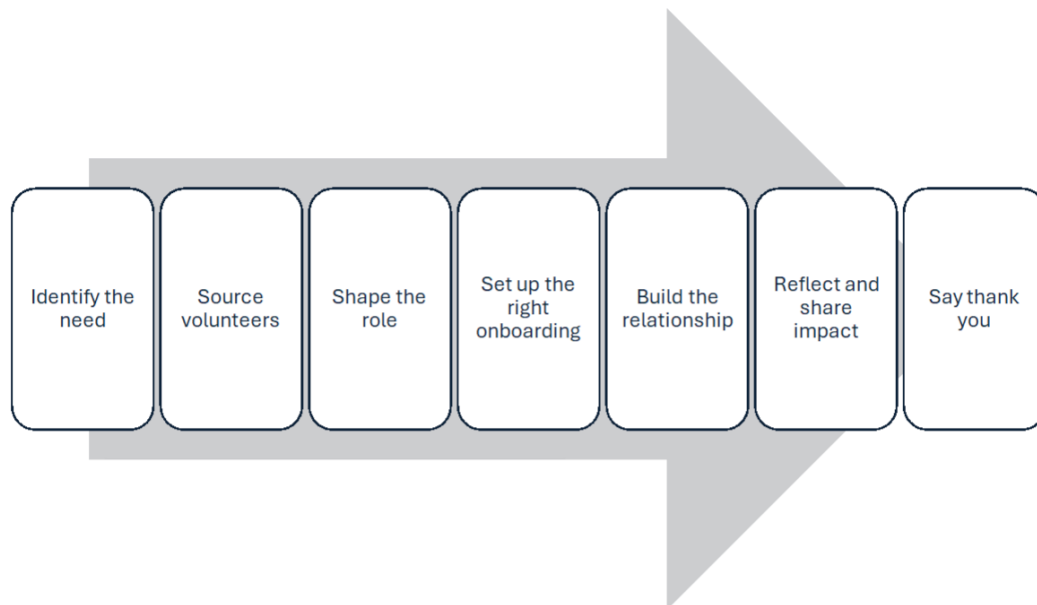
Nicki Watt is Chief Technology Officer at OpenCredo, first met Amy when working at Sony Playstation. "At OpenCredo, we were looking for ways to give back to the community. We thought of people volunteering at food banks but we have skills in IT and thought that this was a perfect way to contribute: using skills we are good at for a really special cause."

"We had a few people who were on the bench, as we call it, and we deployed them to work on #KindnessByPost. Our team went above and beyond to contribute because it was building something that is a worthwhile cause. We have people in our company who struggle with mental health issues. The work helped to create a conversation on this."



Advice for the first steps

When you travel, you would be packed and prepared. The same is true for when you want to find and use skilled volunteers. Here are some suggestions on how to make the most of this:



1. Identify the need

The first step is to explore what your charity needs. It may be that there is an obvious gap, something expert that needs to be done, but without necessarily the money to pay for it. Or it may be that you find the space to explore the diverse skills volunteers can offer and how they might help you to do things differently. It needs to be important to you, as someone within the charity needs to have the time to manage the volunteer. But you don't necessarily have to go into the specifics of the work yet – you can often wait for the right volunteer instead.

2. Source Volunteers

Being clear about what you need – and why – is then a key ingredient for finding the right skilled volunteer with the right skills, because their key motivation is to help. That person can come from a variety of avenues and you are trying to sell your opportunity, as it were, to them. If you have existing volunteers, ask them what extra skills they might have to help out with. For new volunteers, think about trying informal routes like your personal contacts, local businesses, recommendations from peers or funders, a shout out on social media... or formal routes, like online platforms such as [Reach](#) or the [Charity Excellence Help Finder](#), skilled volunteering charities or national business and professional associations. So, do leave enough time – both to find the right volunteer but also to give them time to complete the work alongside their own day-to-day commitments.

Setting up

3. Shape the Role

Once you have the volunteer, you can work together to define the role, scoping the work and establishing clear objectives to ensure everyone understands what the volunteer is expected to achieve. Think about whether you want the volunteer to provide advice or deliver a product. Think about phasing – volunteers who are new to you might prefer to start with a shorter project, such as scoping work that needs then to follow, by them or by others. Creating a role description or

agreement can formalize expectations and responsibilities. Reach Volunteering says that “in our experience the most successful placements happen when the organisation is clear about its goals, and they then collaborate with the volunteer to define how they do the work.”⁴

4. Set Up the Right Onboarding

Onboarding sets the stage for a positive volunteer experience. Whether you do this in person, on screen or in writing, you will want to give volunteers the essential background information they need, such as introducing them to key contacts, explaining relevant procedures or establishing clear expectations. Onboarding can be a chance to check the chemistry – the interpersonal dynamics between the volunteer and the charity team,

particularly in mentoring programs. This is the time too to set clear expectations and criteria, so volunteers understand the commitment and boundaries of their relationship with the charity and vice-versa. Try, for example, not to put too much responsibility onto one lone volunteer if the work is mission critical, but to share this as part of a team, which could always include more volunteers in future. Reach Volunteering advises against asking volunteers to manage paid staff: “some volunteers may be happy to, but it can cause problems.”

5. Build the Relationship

If things aren't working or circumstances change, it is important to address this early. And as the work continues, it is important to keep open communication. Schedule in regular check-ins, whether a ten minute phone call at the end of a week or reviews at the end of a project stage. By building the relationship, you can help to smooth over some of the edges that can come with collaboration across different professional worlds. Skills-based volunteering is about sharing power, recognizing the expertise volunteers bring while ensuring they work collaboratively and respectfully within the charity's existing team. The volunteers will learn, but equally you and your team can learn from them, in preparation for the day they complete the work and step away.

⁴ See [How to recruit volunteers with skills | Reach Volunteering](#). A skilled volunteer role description, Reach advises: “should include the title, their manager, their time commitment, where they will work, the length of the role (whether on-going or a discrete project) and include a list of their agreed work tasks and goals. However, remember to emphasise that this is a voluntary agreement and not a contract, or you risk creating an employment contract by mistake.”

Draw it all together

6. Reflect and Share Impact

It is not uncommon for skilled volunteers to be unsure of whether they have really helped. It is perhaps a paradox of skills-based volunteering that people are not always confident that their skills can make a difference in a different setting. So, understanding and communicating the impact of their contribution is important for them and for you. The best volunteers, if you get it right, will become allies who are invested in your cause. Providing feedback to volunteers on the difference they've made can encourage them to continue supporting your charity and other causes.

7. Say Thank You

There are two words which operate as a super power in a charitable context – thank you. Expressing gratitude is essential. Make sure to show your appreciation for your volunteers' contributions and make them feel valued.

This is the advice for your first steps. The more volunteers you use, of course the easier this all becomes. For example, if you use many volunteers, for example, you might implement a Volunteering Code to serve as an agreement between volunteers and charities or you could evolve a Volunteering Handbook. If you are able to bring in skilled volunteers, say as trustees, they in turn may be able to help you find others with the skills and expertise to help out.



Case study

Responding to gender based violence: Luminary Bakery is a social enterprise based in East London that supports women who have suffered abuse or exploitation to find their strengths and develop their skills.

With baking at its core, women engage in programmes that offer therapeutic and creative tools, helping them not only to learn how to bake but also to develop transferable skills that open doors to the professional world.

With support from Passion Partnership, the bakery boosted their communications function at a key stage of growth.

Alice Williams MBE, the Chief Executive, explains that “our pro bono partners bring such value to our work, it gives us access to skills and expertise we would never have been able to afford! We get fantastic engagement from them, and you can really sense this is something they are passionate about.”



What company should we partner with?

One way to find skilled volunteers is through a partnership with a business.

Obviously, any business may have an area of speciality, as well as operations staff or others who may bring other skills. The legal profession in England and Wales is a leading sector in terms of pro bono work. With 153,000 practicing solicitors, pro bono is growing fast and there are around 9,000 now that are active, skilled volunteers. But companies more widely are getting in on the act. Dame Elizabeth Corley, Chair, Impact Investing Institute comments that “there is a growing realisation that giving days of pro bono time to employees should in some way be part of their employment package.”

According to the Royal Voluntary Service, one in four businesses (27%) have introduced volunteering programmes in the last 12 months and close to one in five (18%) plan to do so in the next year. So, it is worth asking businesses you approach whether they have a volunteering policy. The Royal Voluntary Service also indicated that only 31% of volunteering days that companies offer under these policies are taken up. As a result, 140 million employee volunteering hours went unused in the UK last year.⁵ This could be hours won for your charity.

But a good partnership will involve more than just time. For example, a number of charities are experienced on the upsides – and downsides – of becoming a ‘charity partner’ or ‘charity of the year’ for businesses. The focus has been to raise money. Charities don’t love these, as they are a lot of effort to apply for and win. But skills-based volunteering can be a helpful add-on to this, or a separate focus. Either way, it is worth for the longer term seeing

these as relationships that you might build in terms of value and collaboration.

The Collaboration Continuum is a helpful model developed by researchers to assess the quality of partnerships between business and charities. The aim, they suggest, is to move from philanthropic base to build more generative ways of working together. For charities, the benefit is that the more that businesses value working together, the more that partnerships can become more productive, with less pain in the process.

Sometimes, it takes time in a partnership to understand where each can help the other. When I was Chair of a campaign group, Jubilee 2000, in the 1990s, we wanted to bring in skilled volunteers in the form of rock stars, to raise money for our debt campaign by putting a song together. After spending an intensive morning with Bob Geldof in the campaign headquarters, on the roof of Christian Aid’s headquarters opposite London Waterloo, talking through the intricacies of the International Monetary Fund, we realised that we were wrong. We had an offer of skills in the form of public leadership and global advocacy that were far more valuable for the campaign than royalties on a song.

⁵ Royal Voluntary Service, 2025, Untapped Impact: unlocking the 140 million hour opportunity

Levels of collaboration

In a corporate partnership, finding out about each other opens new ways of seeing where collaboration can work.

Take the comments of Rebecca Dunn, Head of Sustainability, Spectris for example. She says that “our understanding of the charity sector has changed; what we first saw as a channel for corporate donations is becoming a partner for business innovation.”

	1. Philanthropic	2. Transactional	3. Integrative	4. Transformational
Level of engagement	Low			High
Importance to mission	Peripheral			Central
Interaction	Infrequent			Intensive
Scope of activities	Narrow			Broad
Value	Minimal			Co-created
Innovation	Seldom			Frequent

Adapted from: Austin, J & Seitanidi, M, Collaborative Value Creation: a review of partnerships between nonprofits and businesses: Part 1. Value Creation Spectrum and Collaboration..., Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, July 2012

Four things that can go wrong

Time now for some health warnings... skills-based volunteering is a force for good, but it does come with some challenges and considerations. Here are four ways in which things can go wrong:

1. Translation errors

Bridging the gap between the professional and charity sectors can be a major hurdle. Professionals may struggle to adapt their skills to the unique context of a charity, and vice versa. The professional world can sometimes be technocratic, it is often distanced from the lived experience of people

engaging with charities and, like the world of charity leadership, it can often not fully reflect the diversity of wider society. It is easy to end up with translation errors and misunderstanding.

Successful skills-based volunteering requires people from each sector to find common ground through

open and inclusive communication. The Specialist Volunteer Network of Inspiring Scotland has this guidance for volunteers: “seek to understand, then to be understood”.

2. Lack of Buy-In

You may see the benefits of skilled volunteers, but do others in the organisation? If there is not support and commitment from the right people, it won't matter how good the expert input is from a volunteer. That may be about resistance or neglect, if those within the charity feel put upon or undervalued but it is just as likely to be a reflection of their workloads: how will they find the time to engage with volunteers and to respond to what volunteers come up with. The same concerns may come from recruiting professional skills to your trustee Board – are those experts encouraged to contribute to wider matters or are they confined to their specialism. For skills-based volunteering to be effective, there is a need to embrace the process that it implies.



The 'pro bono no nos'

3. The wrong match

You want the right match - the right volunteer with the right charity - but even with care upfront, this can go wrong. At the heart of skills-based volunteering is likely to be a level of ignorance on both sides – the charity may not understand the project for which it needs outside advice, the volunteer may not have understood the context within which their advice or support is landing. For mentoring or coaching, there is a methodology at work and someone trained in these roles will be able to draw on techniques to bridge this gap. For consulting too, there is a professional framework, based on client service. But will volunteers have these as part of their skillset? Will the charities know what it is to be a good client, or have the mindset to be a good mentee?

The risks can be reduced where there is a process at work. The challenges of matching, for example, are well known to skilled volunteering charities, who act, more or less, as intermediaries between charities and volunteers, giving a degree of assurance in the process.

4. The wrong timescales

Skills-based volunteering can save you time, if things are done well. As one charity, said to the Specialist Volunteering Network of Inspiring Scotland, half-joking, “specialist volunteers will do well in 30 minutes, something it would take us two weeks to do badly.” At the same time, the caution from the network to charities is that “support from skilled volunteers isn’t recommended for any task with an urgent due date.” Because the charity is not paying for a service, there is a risk that volunteers over-commit and find that other priorities crowd out their time. Be clear on timescales, allowing for flexibility where you can.

If a business is using employees who are ‘on the bench’ for skilled volunteering, there should be a process in place to hand over the work to others if the employee is allocated paid work. It helps both the charity and the volunteer to be clear on timescales, but the advice perhaps to both is the same... give yourself some leeway.

These are four common pitfalls, but there are others too. A trustee is more demanding than expected. A technology package turns out that it can’t be updated. A set of recommendations in a beautiful slide deck are never implemented. With the best will in the world, interactions with volunteers can go wrong. As ever, it is useful to have a complaints policy, even if this is not necessarily specific to skills-based volunteering, so that there is a reference point and process for learning and responding.

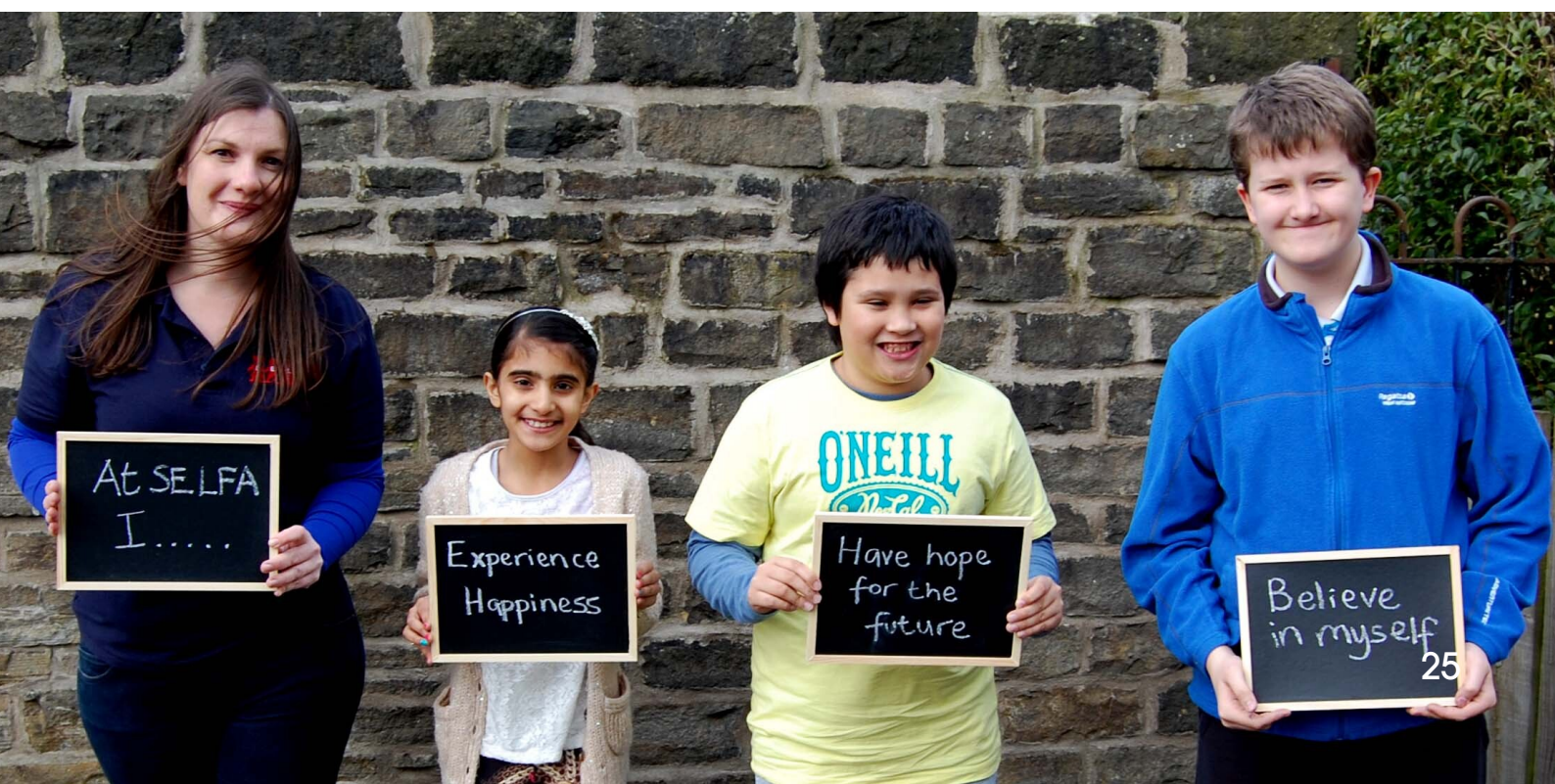
When things go wrong, it is OK to call a halt... and then reflect on what could be better another time.

Case study

Children's wellbeing: The heart of skilled volunteering lies in its ability to transform lives, both for the volunteers and the communities they serve. Emma Pears is the founder and CEO of the charity SELFA, in Skipton. She had her first experience of pro bono support in 2016 and it was a profound one.

"I remember the first day I walked through the reception to be greeted by a team of business experts and feeling like the imposter in the room. Letting a team of professionals put our little charity under the spotlight felt quite daunting initially. Having helped to set up the charity nine years earlier, I knew that to really make a difference in the lives of children and young people for years to come, we needed to embrace significant change. To accomplish that we needed support, particularly around how we could apply business strategy to our blossoming organisation."

Emma adds that "in the seven years since we completed Pilotlight 360, we've kept moving forward - our income has increased threefold, we now have diverse and secure funding streams as well as clear financial planning. We are reaching more children and families than ever before, branching into new areas of work around children's mental health and addressing health inequalities. All of this at a time when charities have been under more pressure than ever before, both financially and in terms of demand for our services. I can honestly say that the year spent with Pilotlight was the most impactful time in my 20+ years career in the voluntary sector, we are still reaping the benefits of the opportunities that it brought many years later."



Closing thought – a great way to raise the ceiling

Best wishes for your engagement with skills-based volunteering.

I look forward to seeing how we can grow our impact as a charity sector by harnessing the goodwill that exists for our work, not just through donations of money but of time and skills too. With money scarce, it is not just that skilled volunteers saves costs, they can help charities innovate, trying out new ideas and opening new doors.

And the future? Here is a thought. If all the employees who say that they would like to volunteer with their skills were able to do so and for an average of one hour a week, the benefit would equivalent in financial terms to six times the value of what UK businesses currently give to charities in donations.

Skills-based volunteering is a great way to raise the ceiling on what we can achieve as charities.

Appendix 1

The evolution of Pro Bono in the professions

Legal services

Legal pro bono work involves lawyers providing free legal advice or representation to individuals who cannot afford legal services – a growing number as the state has cut back on legal aid. This can include, for example, family law, immigration law, or human rights law. It also covers legal advice given for free to charities.

Consulting services

Management and strategy consultants offer pro bono consulting to non-profit organisations, helping them improve their operations, develop strategies, and achieve their missions more effectively.

Technology

Professionals in the technology field can help by offering guidance on data analysis or technology choice and implementation. This often forms part of a wider movement around ‘tech for good’.

Healthcare

Medical professionals, including doctors and nurses, have a proud tradition of giving support where it is needed, including volunteering overseas or in response to disasters. Health firms also engage in pro bono support with healthcare charities.

Communications

Charities work on causes that people care about, but engaging the public in action, whether to raise funds or advocate for change, takes great communications. Many award-winning campaigns are run as pro bono projects by communications agencies and professionals.

Mentorship and education

Back to school anyone? Many individuals and a number of firms offer their time to mentor and educate underserved or disadvantaged youth, at school age or beyond. This can involve tutoring, coaching, or providing career guidance.

Design and creative arts

Graphic designers, artists, and writers often donate their creative talents to non-profit organisations. They may design promotional materials, create artwork for events, or write content for social initiatives.

Appendix 2

UK Pro Bono Association

This is not a complete list, as it can change over time, but members of the Pro Bono Association include:

Be Impact

Be Impact exists to empower 10 million employees to build skills for good by connecting businesses and not-for-profits through short but powerful learning experiences, recognising that the best way to learn... is to teach others.

Business in the Community

Business in the Community's National Business Response Network harnesses the skills and time of the charity's business members to support the needs of local community organisations across the UK, brokering and nurturing connections between our members and community organisations.

Charterpath

Charterpath aims to chart a path between non-profits and accountants and all people with finance skills. Non-profits can advertise volunteer opportunities free of charge on the Charterpath website, where volunteers can apply directly to the non-profit if they are interested in these opportunities.

CIPD Trust

The trust gives members of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) the opportunity to do much more; to share their talents with those who need them most, to broaden their experiences and insights, to influence good practice across their organisations and to diversify and strengthen the profession.

Cranfield Trust

Cranfield Trust provides free management support to welfare non profits. Our services include: consultancy, mentoring, telephone advice, peer support groups, webinars and information resources and are delivered by management professionals from the commercial sector, who give their time as volunteers. Our volunteers act as advisors, consultants and mentors, supported by our experienced staff team.

DataKind UK

Part of an international network of organisations focusing on data and the public good, Datakind UK run a series of programmes with skilled volunteers to support charities to improve their data capabilities, from understanding their beneficiaries through to using service data to support effective advocacy.

Digital Candle

Free expert help for charities and social enterprises on digital questions via one hour video calls.

Ella Forums

Ella provides a membership-based service to leaders of charities and social enterprises with the goal of fostering ongoing development of their leadership skills. We offer a variety of online and in-person member forums across England. The forums encourage inclusivity and non-judgemental learning with peers, and are facilitated by experienced coaches or mentors.

Appendix 2

ICAEW

The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW) is a professional membership organisation that promotes, develops and supports chartered accountants and students around the world. ICAEW works with its members to: help charities find volunteers with financial expertise, offer free online trustee training and provide free guidance and webinars for finance professionals in the charity sector.

Inspiring Scotland

Established in 2008, Inspiring Scotland is a charity based in Edinburgh that provides funding for charities and runs the Specialist Volunteer Network, which matches pro bono volunteers to around 200 charities each year.

Kilfinan Trust

The Kilfinan Group is a circle of senior business people who provide free and informal mentoring to charity chief executives. The Group was founded by Nicholas Ferguson CBE, Chairman of Savills plc in 2003.

LandAid

LandAid, the property industry charity, draws on its network of corporate partners to run a free support brokering service to match professionals to requests from a wide range of charities looking for high quality professional property skills, services and advice.

Law Works

LawWorks is a charity working in England and Wales to connect volunteer solicitors with people in need of legal advice, who are not eligible for legal aid and cannot afford to pay, and with the not-for-profit organisations that support them.

Link up London

Link Up London supports small and medium sized London-based charities, social enterprises and community groups that often lack specialist professional skills in-house to help them develop, grow and create a larger impact in their local community.

MarketingKind

MarketingKind is a community of marketers, business leaders and change makers who come together to make marketing mean more. The Pimp My Cause free pro bono marketing matching platform is one way that we create impact.

Media Trust

The charity works with the media and creative industry to provide capacity building for charities through skilled volunteers and to empower young people with diverse backgrounds to work in the industry.

Passion Partnership

The team is working to put pro bono at the heart of the communications industry. Passion Partnership matches and mentors pro bono partnerships between charities, individuals and teams.

Pilotlight

The charity supports pro bono volunteers to do more for their world, attracting people in as individuals or as employees of partner businesses to participate in a range of structured and facilitated programmes to benefit charities and to support learning and development through the process. Highly experienced staff are there every step of the way, so those involved are fully supported.

Appendix 2

Pro Bono Economics

Pro Bono Economics uses economics to empower the social sector and to increase wellbeing across the UK, using in-house staff and a growing community of economists who want to contribute to the common good. The charity combines project work with individual charities and social enterprises with policy research that can drive systemic change.

Reach Volunteering

Reach helps charities and groups recruit volunteers with expertise in a large array of professions including digital, finance, communications, HR, research, data, videography and more. Organisations can recruit volunteers to design and plan programmes, to deliver projects or for longer term volunteer roles. Charities can also recruit trustees. The model is ‘supported self-service’: organisations recruit through an online platform.

Scottish Tech Army

Scottish Tech Army, and its linked Tech for Good Alliance, aims to mobilise the UK’s tech talent for good. The organisation is a not-for-profit that helps charities and other organisations across the UK with their tech and digital challenges through a network of skilled volunteers.

Skilling Time

Skilling Time sees pro bono as a powerful career development tool as well as an impactful karma credit generator, so encourages ambitious professionals to develop their career by sharing their valuable skills with causes they care about.

Social Business Trust

The organisation works with a select number of world-class corporate partners and social enterprises, to provide connections for pro bono business expertise and drive social change.

Spoted

The charity supports grassroots organisations on a range of topics through coaching, mentoring and one-to-one projects to help them use the power of sport/physical activity to transform the lives of 11-25 year olds.

The OR Society

The charity enables non to benefit from Operational Research (OR) and reach their full potential. We work with all types of third sector organisations ranging from large national organisations down to small community groups and social enterprises.

Whitehall and Industry Group

The charity supports people from across different sectors to come together for mutual gain. Alongside its events and leadership programmes, it curates opportunities for skills-based volunteering, including through secondments and mentoring, both well recognised across government departments.

**Pilotlight is where business
expertise meets charity
ambition.**

**We connect people across sectors to
create real-world learning, stronger
organisations, and greater social impact.**

www.pilotlight.org.uk

Pilotlight
5th floor, 14 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4BX

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