

Understanding volunteering

If you are a student with disabilities, planning for the future can involve discovering and exploring your interests, skills, and dreams as they relate to potential employment. Volunteering provides an avenue to explore the world of work. It also helps you give back to your community by becoming involved with the good works of an organization that shares your values.

Getting started

Volunteering is a great way to investigate careers. You may be interested in using your talent for details as an event planner or your way with words as a communications professional. You may even want to try something totally unfamiliar. Volunteering can help you gain experience and hone useful skills.

Part of volunteering is being flexible so that you can meet an organization's needs. You should also think about how volunteering fits into your life by considering the following questions:

- **How much time can I devote to volunteering?**

Think about your daily schedule so that when you consider specific volunteer roles, you'll have an idea if one is too demanding for you. It's better to pass up an opportunity than to have someone depend on you and not be able to fulfill your commitments.

- **When should I volunteer?**

Do you prefer to volunteer during the work week? In the evening? On weekends? Is your schedule flexible?

- **What type of volunteer role is right for me?**

Are you looking for something that matches specific skills and interests, or are you open to something completely new?

- **Where do I want to volunteer?**

Do some background research on an organization you are considering. Does the organization meet its goals and objectives? Do their programs and services relate to the organization's overall mission and vision? Avoid organizations that don't share information about their programs and finances.

The benefits of volunteering

Like internships, volunteering can give you a sense of the work environment, including the rhythm of working, culture, duties, and responsibilities. Other benefits and advantages to volunteering include:

- **Building confidence.** During your volunteer experience, you may be matched with an individual who helps provide you with your assignments. In addition, this person can provide guidance and feedback on how you are doing with tasks in the work environment.
- **Building new work skills and habits.** While volunteering, you may be asked to practice technical skills needed for the job and "soft skills" needed to continue your success throughout employment, such as learning the rhythm of working, how to ask questions to complete work assignments, and the importance of getting to the job on time.

- **Developing new relationships.** While volunteering, you may have opportunities to meet new people and begin building your network of resources. There may be a chance to be mentored or meet someone who is willing to provide you with advice about improving your work skills, tricks of the trade, and other resources to investigate and explore.
- **Asking and answering questions you may have about working.** Volunteering is a way to observe and experience elements of a career. It can help answer some of the questions you may have about working, for example:
 - How do I know if I am doing a good job?
 - What are some other skills I will need to develop to be successful in this career?
 - Is this really the right career path for me to follow?
 - Do I have enough stamina to do this type of job?
 - Will I need to explore other job accommodations and assistive technology so that I can succeed in this career?

For a student with disabilities, transitioning to the world of work requires careful planning, along with the discovery of interests and skills. Volunteering can provide a way to explore your skills and interests in the context of the employment world.

Questions about volunteering or planning for your future career? Contact PACER at (952) 838-9000 or pacer@pacer.org for more information.