Tips for Creating a Culture of Accessibility for Volunteers with Disabilities

• Remember what the volunteer can do for you, not what you can do for them.
• Concentrate on ability rather than disability.
• Remember, you are interacting with a person, not dealing with a disability or condition.
• Use Person First Language to reflect a positive attitude in portraying disabilities.
• Listen to the volunteer; they understand their disability best.
• Ask the volunteer about their communication needs.
• All behaviour is communication. Keep in mind that a person’s inappropriate or ineffective behaviours may be an attempt to communicate some need to you.
• Be clear and consistent about the role and the volunteer’s responsibility to the organization.
• Be prepared to have some flexibility around role descriptions.
• Consider individuals’ interests. People work better when they like what they are doing and feel they are contributing.
• Work with the volunteers to tailor the assignment to their strengths and any challenges they want to address.
• Create Individual skill development plans to fully develop the skills and interests of the volunteer.
• One-on-one mentoring is a great way to support volunteers with a disability.
• Think outside the box.
• Address negative attitudes towards disability - whether from staff, other volunteers or clients.
• Ask volunteers what, if any, accommodations they might need. Prepare the staff for the volunteer by making them feel comfortable working with people with disabilities through education and conversation.
• Make sure that volunteers with disabilities feel part of the team.
• Integrate the volunteer into the workplace. Include him or her in your conversations, coffee breaks, parties, and staff meetings, where appropriate.
• Respect your volunteer’s privacy. Remember that supervisors and coworkers must know the individual’s needs but can only be told the diagnosis if offered by the individual. For example, a supervisor needs to know that Mary needs frequent breaks but not that she has attention deficit disorder.
• Ask the volunteer for contact information in case problems arise during the workday that cannot easily be addressed. For example, if a volunteer with schizophrenia is disoriented one day, whom should be called for assistance?

Adapted from:

Scope Abilities: http://www.scope.org.uk/support/disabled-people/volunteering/tips

American Library Association: http://www.ala.org/ascla/asclaprotools/accessibilitytipsheets/volunteers