

BEYOND THANK YOU: Rethinking Volunteer Reward and Recognition



Volunteers rarely give their time for financial reward. What matters more is how their contribution feels.

For most volunteers, “reward” looks like:

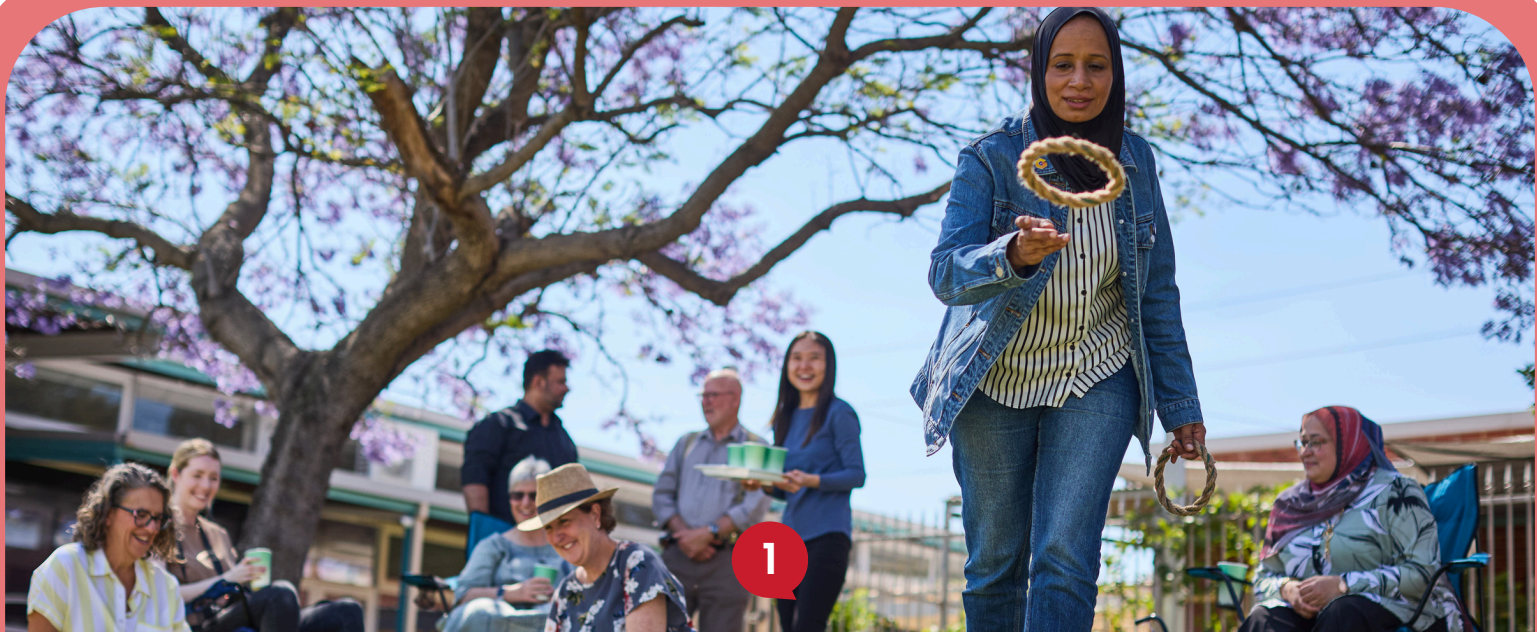
- Knowing their time is making a meaningful difference
- Feeling respected, safe, and included
- Being genuinely appreciated (not just occasionally thanked)
- Having opportunities to learn, connect, and grow
- Feeling part of something bigger than themselves



While events, gifts and celebrations are valuable, research and practice across Australia show that consistent, authentic, day-to-day recognition has the greatest impact on volunteer satisfaction and retention.

Principles of Good Practice

- **Make it personal:** one-size-fits-all recognition doesn't work
- **Make it timely:** recognition close to the contribution matters most
- **Make it meaningful:** connect appreciation to impact
- **Make it inclusive:** consider culture, accessibility, age, and preferences
- **Close the loop:** show volunteers how their work made a difference
- **Co-design it:** ask volunteers how they want to be recognised



No-Cost / Time-Only Ideas

Everyday Recognition

- Say thank you – specifically (“Your support with X made Y possible”)
- Learn and use volunteer names and personal preferences
- Acknowledge milestones (birthdays, volunteering anniversaries)
- Ensure staff are prepared, welcoming, and organised for volunteers
- Provide meaningful, well-planned roles (this is recognition in itself)

Voice, Inclusion and Belonging

- Involve volunteers in decision-making (reference groups, co-design sessions)
- Run regular engagement surveys and visibly act on feedback
- Invite volunteers to team meetings, briefings, and planning sessions
- Create peer connection opportunities (buddy systems, informal check-ins)

Communication and Visibility

- Share volunteer stories (newsletter, intranet, social media)
- Include volunteer contributions in annual reports and impact reports
- CEO/leadership acknowledgements (video messages, emails, drop-ins)
- Highlight impact (“Because of you...” updates)

Growth and Purpose

- Ask about volunteer goals and motivations
- Offer stretch opportunities or new responsibilities
- Provide informal mentoring or shadowing opportunities

Wellbeing and Flexibility

- Flexible rostering and understanding life commitments
- Check-ins focused on wellbeing, not just tasks
- Creating psychologically safe environments

Low-Medium Cost Ideas

Connection and Community

- Regular morning teas, lunches, or informal gatherings
- Themed appreciation days (not just during National Volunteer Week)
- Small group meet-ups rather than large formal events

Learning and Development

- Training workshops (in-person or online)
- Access to organisational or external learning opportunities
- Micro-credentials or digital badges

Thoughtful Tokens

- Handwritten thank you cards
- Personalised certificates (impact-focused, not generic)

- Small, meaningful gifts (e.g. plants, local products, books)
- Branded items volunteers actually use (keep it practical)

Partnerships and Perks

- Local business discounts or vouchers
- Parking or travel reimbursement (where possible)
- Coffee catch-ups funded by the organisation

Recognition with Meaning

- Impact-based awards (not just years of service)
- Peer-nominated recognition (volunteers recognising volunteers)
- Client or community thank you messages

Higher Investment (Strategic Recognition)

Events and Formal Recognition

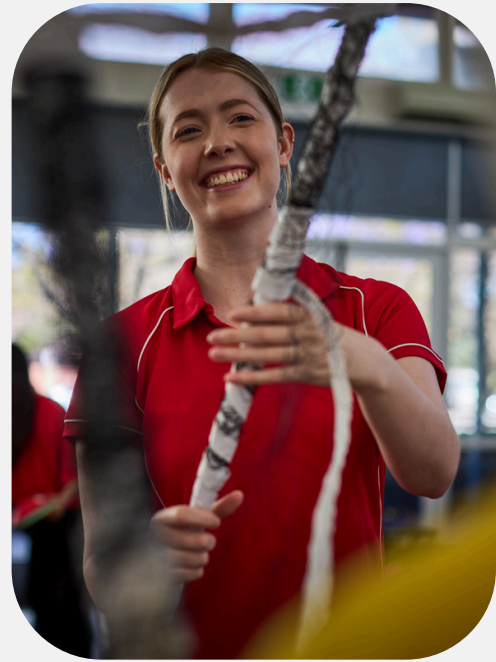
- Annual recognition events or celebrations
- Awards aligned to impact, innovation, or community contribution
- Hybrid events to include regional/remote volunteers

Leadership and Infrastructure

- Dedicated, trained volunteer management roles
- Investment in volunteer systems (communication, rostering, feedback)
- Clear pathways for volunteer leadership or progression

Sector and External Recognition

- Support nominations for local/state awards
- Enable volunteers to attend conferences or sector events
- Showcase volunteers in broader community or media platforms



New & Emerging Ideas

Across Queensland and nationally, organisations are increasingly:

- Moving from “thank you” to “impact storytelling”: Regularly showing volunteers the real-world outcomes of their work
- Offering flexible, episodic volunteering options: Recognising shorter-term contributions equally
- Using digital recognition tools: E-cards, shoutouts, internal platforms, LinkedIn recommendations
- Focusing on belonging, not just appreciation: Creating inclusive environments where volunteers feel they matter
- Recognising skills and employability: Providing references, endorsements, and skill recognition



Volunteer recognition is more than a kind gesture, it's a powerful way to nurture connection, belonging and purpose. Supporting and investing in your volunteers is ultimately an investment in the impact you create together.