Volunteering with MapAction: Information for Prospective Volunteers

Thank you for your interest in volunteering with MapAction.

We receive a large number of volunteering enquiries every month, so we have put together the notes below to explain what it means to volunteer as part of the MapAction team and how to apply if you feel you are suitable. Of course, feel free to contact us for more information if anything isn’t clear.

The MapAction mission is to support the coordination of humanitarian response, providing in-field information management, our specialist teams help to save lives and minimise suffering by making the response to humanitarian emergencies as targeted, efficient and effective as possible.

A humanitarian response requires a huge team effort to work and MapAction team members can find themselves helping at a remote and challenging location or working through the night to provide support to the team on the ground. In between emergencies the team works on organisation projects to advance our ability to deliver in an emergency, as well as represent MapAction at external trainings or events, or attend trainings delivered by humanitarian or technical professionals.

MapAction recruits volunteers to fit specific roles and requirements for the organisation’s operational model. Because our experienced volunteers remain with us for several years, only a handful of new opportunities arise each year.

What does volunteering involve? What are the opportunities and expectations?

Being a member of the MapAction team has many rewards, it has been a life-changing experience for many of our volunteers. You could find yourself as a key player in the UN field coordination centre for a disaster that affects millions of people such as the Haiti earthquake, Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines or the recent Nepal earthquake or liaising with national and local government officials in smaller emergencies such as flooding in Paraguay or Malawi which have similar affects on the population.

Deployments also take place to support preparedness activities and test contingency planning in a range of countries. You could be part of a training that builds local capacity anywhere in the world. You could attend international training exercises or a support mission to UN or other humanitarian organisations.

Volunteers also work on the MapAction organisational development, both technical and organisational, and there are many opportunities to get involved or lead on aspects of this. As a member of the team you will also receive continuous training from MapAction and other organisations such as the UN and ESRI.

Underpinning all this are our monthly training weekends where the team train and much of the development work happens. The aim of the trainings are to equip team members with the necessary
skills for MapAction to deliver its responses, whilst learning from previous deployments and focussing on any and all improvements to ensure excellent in our work. It is also where we socialise and catch up what has been happening. Volunteers are expected to attend 7 MapAction trainings per year, and be available to travel to emergencies for 2 weeks a year on short notice.

The route for a volunteer is that they will join MapAction as a new team member, on a six month probationary period. During this time they will be expected to attend training sessions to develop the requisite skills, and participate in remote support of emergency missions. There is then a five day “field readiness course” covering all the skills required to deploy, upon satisfactory completion of this course, you will then be moved to our deployable list.

Being a MapAction volunteer requires a large time commitment and volunteers generally find this needs to be the main focus of their non-work lives. Our volunteers tend to stay involved for long periods. So when we select volunteers we are looking for a high level of commitment and for people who deliver what they say they will. We are seeking team members who are adaptable, excellent team players, have leadership experience and are committed to supporting humanitarian response. It’s not for everyone so please think carefully if this is something for you.

MapAction Volunteer Profiles

Location of volunteers
MapAction conducts almost all its operations from its headquarters in the UK. For that reason volunteers must live in, or near, the UK so that they can attend to regular training sessions that are a requirement of membership. MapAction is unfortunately, at present, unable to cover travel costs from team members living outside of the UK. MapAction covers all the cost related to being a volunteer of MapAction including travel cost.

General expectations
Our team members can meet challenging conditions when working in the aftermath of a major emergency including living and working in basic tented accommodation, within high pressure environments, and potentially witnessing acute suffering. Weekend training involves camping throughout the year. Typically our team members are happy to camp, are widely travelled and are good team players. We are looking for team members who have broad experience of life both professionally and personally. They have experience of leadership, supporting teams and are focussed on delivering excellence to support vulnerable communities.

Apart from a small number of specialist roles in IT support and software development (descriptions of which are below), volunteers generally need to be expert with Geographical Information Systems (GIS) and/or database. In practice, nearly all volunteers have studied GIS or related subject to masters degree level, although a proven record of relevant work experience is also fine, professional experience essential.
About the Technical Circle

MapAction is looking for volunteers to join MapAction’s ‘Technical Circle’. The Technical Circle is a group of both volunteers and staff whose role is to ensure that MapAction has the technical capability (equipment and knowledge) to both maintain and enhance its humanitarian activities and can provide this in a technically innovative and competitive institutional environment.

The Technical Circle makes recommendations on policy for all aspects of technology which are not directly related to GIS/GPS and mapping, or data management (which are the responsibility of the GIS and Data Circles respectively). The Technical Circle is responsible for ensuring that the technological facilities and skills are available as required to support the work of the other parts of the organisation. IT administration is an important function in MapAction. The prime focus for the volunteers is the aspects which are directly used in the field or during operations. This includes the maintenance of our fleet of laptops and other field kit including printers, networking equipment and both voice and data satellite communications.

We outsource a number of generic IT functions to a local company (email servers, file server, network infrastructure etc). The Technical Circle manages these relationships with the suppliers, notably designing and selecting appropriate solutions, capturing user and function requirements, specification and testing and signing off on delivery.

We use a mixture of proprietary and open source solutions, favouring conservative solutions for generic functions and are more willing to take risks with new technology where it is focused on our core operations.

Person Specification for the Technical Circle

Required

- Pragmatic, practically minded and tenacious problem solver.
- Typically five or more years professional experience in a technical support, system administration or similar role.
- Education to degree level or higher in computer science, GIS or a related subject.
- Professional experience of at least two of the following: administering Microsoft Windows 7, administering Microsoft Windows Server, servicing hardware. Administration of software applications (desktop, server or cloud applications).
- Proven ability in configuration and scripting (Python, Powershell, Batch or similar).
- Good communication skills - listening, speaking and writing.

Desirable

- A vendor qualification like MCSA, MCITP or MCSE.
- ITIL foundation qualification.
- Knowledge of Windows software deployment.
- Knowledge of Linux.
- Experience writing documentation for both technical and end user audiences.
- Experience of working with a volunteer organisation.
- Knowledge of GIS technology (in particular ESRI software), GPS and satellite communications equipment.

Volunteers joining the Technical Circle may not automatically be eligible to join the Deployable Team (i.e. those who travel to emergencies are short notice). Eligibility to join the Deployable Team is based on different criteria to those above. A higher standard of GIS knowledge would be required for the Deployable Team than would be required for the Technical Circle, though this is not the only difference. Currently there is a mix of deployable and non-deployable member of the technical circle. There is plenty of scope for Technical Circle members to play a valuable role in the organisation whether or not they also deploy.
Selection and induction process
We usually recruit new volunteers annually. This will begin in January 2016. The process consists of:

1. Closing date for applications is 31 January 2016.
3. Shortlisted candidates invited to interview, and an open day on what is involved in volunteering with MapAction on one of 1, 2 or 3 March.
4. A practical skills test for your volunteer role will be carried out.
5. Subject to references successful candidates will be invited to join MapAction shortly afterwards.

Every year we receive many times more expressions of interest in volunteering than we have available volunteer vacancies. So, unfortunately, even people with excellent skills and experience are not always selected. However, we do still greatly appreciate all volunteering applications and if you do not succeed please try again. We have several current volunteers who were recruited on their second or third try.

How do I apply?
Please send us the following by 31 January 2016

1. Your CV. This should include:
   a. Current work
   b. GIS/geospatial skills and experience
   c. Relevant IT/technical skill and experience
   d. Educational details
   e. Where you live
   f. Languages spoken
   g. Contact details
   h. References
2. A short description of an interesting and challenging technical problem you have encountered and how you solved it (400 words max).

Please email this to recruiting@mapaction.org by 31 January 2016

Other frequently asked questions
Do you have positions for non-operational volunteers, for administrative roles? These arise very rarely and we would generally advertise them on our website but please send in your CV if you wish.

Are you able to offer internships? So far we have not been able to offer internships, but we are looking at this and may be able to offer some in the future. If you have a particular idea in mind let us know.

I really want to help! Are there no opportunities to do so right now? We’re always sorry to have to turn down the many people who want to help in our work; we just don’t have the resources to accommodate all of them. However, we always greatly appreciate help with fundraising. If you think you could assist with that, do contact us on info@mapaction.org.