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Volunteer Retention: What Can Organizations Do?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify organizational factors that impact volunteer retention. Many nonprofit groups struggle to retain volunteers. Previous studies of volunteer practices within organizations have identified many common themes among organizational practices that may impact volunteer retention. Organizational climate, volunteer motives and matching organizational values, as well as volunteer satisfaction with activities are all extremely important factors to consider when evaluating what organizations are doing that retains or loses volunteers. Considering these factors, I designed a survey to collect data from organizations on their volunteer practices and retention rates. Sixteen responses from organizations that utilize volunteers were collected and this information was reviewed and analyzed in order to recognize patterns and make recommendations to organizations on how to retain volunteers.

Introduction

Volunteer retention refers to the ability of a specific organization to keep volunteers consistently engaged with the organization. Volunteer retention is vital to many organizations because volunteers are often the members of an organization that carry out the actions that connect the organization to their client base and provide them service directly. Having a consistent volunteer team is important for operation and efficiency of services, cost effectiveness, and community within organizations. Volunteer retention positively affects organization operations and efficiency of services, having a consistent and reliable volunteer network allows for organizations to accomplish their goals and execute their mission. If an organization has high levels of volunteer turnover, they are likely spending much of their time training new volunteers whereas organizations with high retention rates can utilize their volunteer base to the fullest extent as they become a natural part of the daily operations. When volunteers are familiar with the work expected of them and the mission of the organization, they are able to assist in the accomplishment of organizational goals. Low retention also has negative impacts on costs. If volunteers are consistent over long periods of time, then organizations do not have to spend as much time recruiting and training volunteers thus reducing volunteer management costs. Volunteer retention is also important for building a community within an organization. Having people who show up consistently and are familiar with the operations and mission of the organization creates a stronger sense of togetherness within an organization this leads to higher morale amongst organizational staff and a more pleasant work environment.

There are many factors that can affect volunteer retention in organizations.

Organizational Climate is one important factor in volunteer retention as organizational values,

accomplishments, and attitudes towards volunteers can affect a volunteer's desire to continue working within an organization. Another factor is individual volunteer motivations. Why people volunteer has been an important question within the nonprofit sector. Understanding individuals' motivations and goals for volunteering can be helpful in recruiting and retaining volunteers. Volunteer satisfaction is also a key component of retention. If volunteer work is not meeting the individual goals of a volunteer, they are less likely to continue to engage with the organization.

This study will focus on organizational factors that contribute to volunteer retention. We will examine volunteer retention trends in organizations and what those organizations do or do not to contribute to the turnover or retention of their volunteer base.

Review of Literature

Research on volunteer retention has been done from a variety of perspectives using many types of data collection to analyze reasons for high and low retention rates. Studer and Schnurbein (2013) conducted a literature review that focused on organizational factors that affect volunteer retention. The main focus of this review was to observe volunteer coordination practices within organizations. Studer and Schnurbein (2013) argue that practices and instruments used in volunteer coordination as well as organizational values and attitudes towards volunteers have a large impact on volunteer retention. After a review of 386 publications related to volunteer coordination it is stated that "recognition activities, training, professional volunteer development, screening volunteers, matching volunteers to assignments, and volunteers recruiting others one-on-one all have statistically significant positive effects on volunteer retention" (Studer and Schnurbein, 2013). It is also found that perceptions of volunteer treatment affect participation within organizations (Studer et al. 2013). Relating to volunteer treatment, McBride, Gonzales, Morrow-Howell, and McCrary make an argument regarding stipends for

volunteers, “Stipended volunteers in this study serve nearly twice the number of hours per week, provide more months of service, and are more likely to complete the academic year” (McBride et al. 2011). Further it is argued that because stipends can increase retention, they can also decrease overall volunteer management costs (McBride Et. Al, 2011). It is found that stipends can encourage individuals to volunteer “stipend may mitigate the costs associated with service for some groups. Theoretically, stipends may act as a facilitator if they increase representation by underrepresented groups” (McBride et al, 2011). Volunteer management practices are extremely important to retention, “the better the organizational facilitators, the higher satisfaction and loyalty would be. Furthermore, the exception of schedule flexibility showed positive correlation with intent to remain” (Wu, Lin, and Wang, 2019). Organizations taking time to properly integrate volunteers into their community and allowing volunteers to have a voice can greatly improve retention rates.

Who volunteers and why is a large area of interest in research regarding volunteer retention. Understanding volunteer motivations as the first step in the volunteer life cycle can help organizations recruit and retain volunteers. The second step in the life cycle, matching volunteer and organization expectations, is also important for retaining volunteers (Bussell and Forbes, 2007). Bussell and Forbes studied volunteer coordination in one specific theater and found that the theater’s, “high recruitment and retention rate is the result of an informal and reliable network for recruitment and an efficient and professional team approach supported by an understanding manager who is a transformational leader” (2007). This establishes the importance of a system in which volunteers are introduced to organizational values and expectations as well as the importance of organizations understanding volunteer needs. It is also argued that organizational support affects volunteer retention, “we found that both task- and emotion-

oriented support were positively associated with volunteer engagement,” (Alfes, Shants, and Bailey, 2016). Organizations providing support for volunteers can spark new motivation and encourage retention. Who volunteers is also important for organizations and diversity within volunteer populations is often a priority for organizations, “Volunteers bring more diversity into organizations, and the integration of diverse populations may enhance service delivery, as the volunteers are more similar to those being served” (McBride et al, 2011).

Volunteer satisfaction is also important to ensure retention. Volunteers need to feel like their work is impactful to an organization and that they are a valued member of the team. In a study conducted by having volunteers who stopped volunteering fill out a survey the data showed that, “The second area of greatest response was to the statement "I did not feel as though I was a part of a team" (38.5%) followed by "Responsibilities and expectations were not clear" (35%)” (Gabard, 1997). Gabard (1997) argues that volunteers may experience burnout when they do not feel as though their work is meeting their expectations. Milbourn, Black, and Buchanan had similar findings when conducting interviews with volunteers from an international volunteer organization, “Some respondents suggested that membership brought with it a heavy workload that eventually took a toll on them,” (2019). This research also found that volunteers left for reasons including lack of voice, alienation, lack of faith in leadership, and a disconnect between volunteers and the organization (Milbourn et al, 2019). In another study done by Nencini, Romaioli, and Meneghini, volunteers from four different organizations were given a questionnaire about their satisfaction with their volunteer work (2016). It was found that volunteers who were more satisfied felt they had positive relationships with the board and other volunteers and felt supported by the organization (Nencini et al 2016).

Much of the literature surrounding volunteer retention finds similar reasons why volunteers choose to stay or leave. One example of this is seen between Nencini et al (2016) and Studer and Schnurbein (2013), both studies found that volunteers' perceptions of volunteer treatment affected retention. Similarly, it is mentioned that one of the most common reasons volunteers leave organizations is because of a disconnect between volunteers and the organization (Milbourn). Support from the organization is mentioned as an important factor for volunteer satisfaction by both Alfes et al. (2016) and Studer and Schnurbein (2013).

Most of the focus in research has been from the volunteer side. Even when looking at organizational factors that information is often collected from volunteers. For my research purposes I will be evaluating organizational factors that affect retention from an organizational standpoint.

RQ1: What organizational factors affect volunteer retention rates?

Methodology

Data collection

For my study I have designed a survey for organizations regarding their volunteer practices and retention rates. Questions were designed based on findings from previous research on the topic. My goal is to find out what organizations are doing or not doing in terms of volunteer recruitment, onboarding, support, and appreciation and how those practices impact volunteer retention.

Sample selection

For my research I have chosen to focus on Northern Illinois organizations. The survey was sent out to organizations in DeKalb County, Aurora, Naperville, Rockford, and Kane

County. The goal is to have a volunteer management team member or other staff familiar with volunteer practices in their organization answer the survey. I do not expect every organization to respond therefore my sample will consist of organizations that do respond to the survey.

Procedure

I have designed a 12-question survey regarding volunteer management and retention. Questions were designed based on findings of previous research, namely organizational factors that have an effect, positive or negative, on volunteer retention. I also included questions regarding what retention rates look like for the organizations in order to determine any cause and effect of the organization's volunteer practices on their retention. The goal of this is to be able to present evidence of certain practices leading to better retention.

Survey Questions

- 1) Does your organization utilize volunteers?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
- 2) How does your organization recruit volunteers? (Select all that apply)
 - a. Social media (please specify)
 - b. Word of mouth
 - c. Community events
 - d. Other:
- 3) Does your organization conduct volunteer interviews as part of recruitment?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
- 4) In your experience, volunteers at your organization share your organizational values...

- a. Always
 - b. Often
 - c. Half the time
 - d. Rarely
 - e. Never
- 5) How would you describe your organization's volunteer base? (Select all that apply)
- a. Regular: consistent, long-term volunteering
 - b. Sporadic: irregular or random short-term volunteering
 - c. Annual: Volunteering at specific events every year
 - d. Other (please describe below)
- 6) Describe the volunteer training process.
- a. (short answer)
- 7) Do you allow volunteers to choose their activities?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
- 8) Does the organization utilize volunteer appreciation?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
- 9) If yes, how? (Events, gift cards, awards, etc)
- a. (short answer)
- 10) Do you assess volunteer satisfaction?
- a. Yes
 - b. No

11) If yes how

a. (short answer)

12) How would you describe volunteer turnover rates at your organization?

- a. High turnover rates, mostly sporadic volunteers, few regular or returning.
- b. medium turnover rates, some regular volunteers and some sporadic
- c. low turnover rates, mainly regular and returning volunteers with few sporadic

Data Analysis

As previously stated, the goal of the distribution of this survey was to identify connections between organizational practices and volunteer retention rates. I collected sixteen responses and all organizations reported that they utilize volunteers within their organization.

Survey Results

The first block of questions which included questions two through five was designed to collect information on volunteer recruitment processes. First, I wanted to know how organizations were finding volunteers. Results show that the most common way these organizations bring in new volunteers is by word of mouth. This was interesting because it means that other volunteers or organizational staff are referring people to the organization which would point to high levels of volunteer satisfaction given that they are inviting others to volunteer within the organization. Following behind word of mouth, social media and community events are tied as the second most common form of recruitment. Common themes within the final option of other ways that organizations recruit included newsletters and websites. Question three asks if volunteers are interviewed as part of the recruitment process. Volunteer interviews can help with retention because it allows organizations to be sure volunteers are the

right fit for their organization and vice versa. 57% of organizations that responded to my survey said that they do not conduct volunteer interviews. The lack of interviews did not seem to have too much impact on volunteer matching as responses to question four show that 71% of organizations find that volunteers share values with their organization most of the time and 29% always have volunteers share their organizational values. Answers to question five show that 62% of organizations have mostly sporadic or short-term volunteers, 15% have a lot of annual volunteers who come for specific events and 8% describe their volunteer base as regular.

The second block of questions examines volunteer practices within organizations. Answers to question six vary widely. Some organizations have no training process, others have intensive processes including 30 hours of training. Other organizations do slight training such as pairing new volunteers with returning volunteers to learn on their first few shifts. 62% of organizations said that they allow volunteers to choose their activities while the other 38% assign activities. Question 8 responses show that a large majority, 86% of organizations, participate in volunteer appreciation. Common themes of appreciation methods include treats, parties, gift cards, handwritten notes, public recognition, and giveaways.

The final block of questions focused on volunteer satisfaction. Of the 16 organizations that responded to the survey, 57% do not assess volunteer satisfaction. The organizations that do participate in measuring satisfaction conduct surveys or one on one meetings with their volunteers. The final question asked organizations to describe their turnover rates. Majority of organizations reported low turnover with 62% identifying with this description. 38% said they experience moderate amounts of turnover and none of the sixteen organizations that responded reported high turnover rates.

Connections and Conclusions

Based on survey responses it appears that organizations who do not participate in interviews often experience more sporadic volunteering, even when the organizations reported that volunteers mostly or always share organizational values. This points to effectiveness of interviews as part of the recruitment process. Volunteers may be more likely to stay if they are selected from an interview. This could be because they feel a sense of accomplishment from passing the interview process or because the interview gives a clearer idea of volunteer responsibilities and activities. There were not any noticeable patterns when dealing with training. It seemed organizations had similar turnover rates whether they trained volunteers for 30 hours or not at all. This may mean that organizations may have the opportunity to better utilize time if training is not required, they could have volunteers participating at a quicker rate if training practices are reworked around this finding. Most of the organizations participate in appreciation activities and still had similar turnover to organizations who did not. I do believe, regardless of this fact, that appreciation helps build a stronger connection between organizations and their volunteers. The lack of impact of appreciation on retention may be connected to the fact that organizations found their volunteers to so often share their values. Satisfaction assessments did have a slight positive impact on retention. Specifically, organizations that spoke directly to volunteers rather than giving out surveys were more likely to experience low turnover rates, even when they did not participate in appreciation.

Overall my findings point to two important factors when dealing with volunteer retention in organizations. The first is volunteer matching. Interviews were the most likely practice to reduce turnover within an organization's volunteer base. Organizations should make an effort to

recruit volunteers who will feel fulfilled by their work and add something to the organization so that both parties benefit from the relationship. Volunteer matching is, based on my results, the most important step in the volunteer lifecycle. The second piece I found to be important is satisfaction assessments. Organizations should be participating in regular assessments of volunteer satisfaction if they wish to reduce their turnover rates. These assessments not only allow volunteers to feel more valued by the organization because it gives them a voice but also allows organizations an opportunity to make necessary changes to their volunteer practices that can save them from having an inconsistent volunteer base.

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