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An Exploration of Long-term Volunteer Retention in a National Youth Work Organisation

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Abstract

This study explores the long-term retention of volunteers in a National Youth Work Organisation. The researcher wanted to understand the reasons people continue to volunteer over long periods of time and if motivation to volunteer plays a role in continued volunteering. From this the researcher wanted to ascertain what organisations can do to encourage sustained volunteering. The literature review briefly examines the nature of volunteering and factors that can affect volunteer retention. Employing a qualitative approach data was collected from volunteers, who had been involved in a particular Youth Work Organisation (YWO) over a long period of time. Volunteers were interviewed in relation to their thoughts, feelings and perceptions about volunteering and volunteer retention. This information was then analysed and a number of significant findings emerged. The findings of the study show that training, support and praise and recognition are key factors in volunteer retention. From the literature review and findings; recommendations are made in relation to supporting future volunteer retention; for example the provision of supervision for volunteers.

Keywords: Volunteering, Volunteerism, Retention

Background to the Research

Sheer (2008, pg. 64) states '*social work owes its existence to volunteerism*'. He further goes on to discuss how volunteers preceded social workers in many fields of practice and also speaks about the long tradition of volunteerism in social welfare. During the 19th and early 20th centuries social work in Ireland was carried out on a voluntary basis. It is clear that volunteering still plays a vital role in social work and the provision of social services. Service users are referred to organisations such as the St. Vincent de Paul, Women's Aid, Focus Ireland and Le Chéile, among others. Each of these organisations utilises volunteers in its everyday provision of services. In a time of under resourcing and large case loads, social workers have come to rely on volunteer services to further support clients. These voluntary services are a key resource for both social workers and service users.

Research by Volunteer Centres Ireland (VCI) has shown that the number of people volunteering has risen throughout the economic downturn. According to the VCI, there was a 100% increase in people registering to volunteer in the first three months of 2010, compared to the same period in 2008. (Volunteer Centres Ireland, 2010). However, there are a number of volunteer led organisations finding that their numbers are not increasing to this extent.

This piece of research is based on a volunteer led YWO that is having difficulty with decreasing volunteer numbers. Without these volunteers it would be impossible for the Organisation to continue the work it does in communities around Ireland. The Organisation has found that it is Garda vetting approximately 1500 potential volunteers a year, but its volunteer numbers are increasing by less than half of this. This would appear to indicate that there are many people giving up their volunteering role with the Organisation each year.

Clary and Snyder (1999) pose two fundamental questions raised by volunteering; why do people engage in volunteering in the first place, and once they are involved, what keeps them committed to volunteering in the long-term? This leads to a discussion regarding one of the most important issues facing volunteer-led organisations, and that is the high turnover of volunteers. It is these issues that this research hopes to address in putting forward potential answers to these two fundamental questions.

For the purpose of this study, *long term volunteer* refers to volunteers who have been engaged in a volunteering position with the YWO for more than three years.

Methodology

A qualitative method of research was used in this study as the subject of volunteer retention required insight into the perceptions and opinions of long-term volunteers. This qualitative research was located within an interpretivist framework which ensures the researcher is not only aware of participants' ideas about the social world, but also the thought process behind these ideas. Interpretivism works towards understanding the opinions, emotional responses and attitudes of research participants, linking these to their behaviours and actions and finally, placing these thoughts and actions into perspective (Carey, 2009). By using a qualitative method, the author relies on people's experience of their social world to inform research rather than numbers and figures.

Both a literature review and semi structured interviews were the methods of data collection employed. The literature review gave the researcher an opportunity to review other research in the area and discover what is already known about the topic. The semi structured interviews gave the researcher the opportunity to gain access to attitudes and values of participants. It allowed for flexibility and the exploration of underlying views. Qualitative researchers choose research participants for the qualities they can bring to the study. Participants are chosen in relation to who can give the greatest possible insight into the topic. With this in mind it was decided that non probability sampling, in the form of purposive sampling, was the most appropriate way to gather participants for the study. There were six participants with the criteria for participating being that participants had to have been volunteering with the organisation for more than three years. Data was analysed by way of thematic coding.

Ethical Considerations

Carey (2009) discusses the power a researcher has over participants. Ethical concerns appear to revolve around four main themes; harm, consent, privacy and confidentiality of data (Punch, 1998). Each of these themes was addressed at each stage of the research process with particular attention paid to consent and confidentiality. The privacy of the participants was ensured with participants not being named in the written dissertation and all information relating to them and their involvement in the YWO was kept confidential. Participants were assured that the researcher was the only one who would have access to the data and that

transcripts and data would be destroyed on completion of the research. One ethical issue arose for the researcher during the study and that was the fact that the Organisation chose the participants and was aware of who was being interviewed as part of the study. The researcher did her best to ensure that all the participants' anonymity was maintained, and that no identifying information was evident throughout the research.

Limitations

A number of specific limitations can be seen in relation to this study. Due to the small scale nature of the piece the scope and size of the research do not allow it to be generalised. A further limitation that could be evident within this research is bias. The organisation sourced the participants for the research and are aware of what volunteers took part and this may have caused some participants to be less honest about the organisation for fear of their observations being identifiable. Furthermore each of the participants is heavily involved in the organisation and this may have encouraged them to talk about the organisation in a positive light.

Literature Review

Volunteering

The 2008 Report from the Taskforce on Active Citizenship made a number of recommendations in relation to active citizenship and volunteering. One of the main recommendations stated that individuals should be recommended:

...to spend at least one percent of their time doing some form of community service or activity outside the home that they enjoy. This means just under two hours a week volunteering, coaching, organising or giving a helping hand somewhere (2008, pg. 11).

Clary and Snyder (1999) used a functional approach to consider volunteerism. The functional approach examines what initiates peoples desire to volunteer, how they are directed into a volunteering role, and more importantly what sustains them in this volunteering role. Although some volunteers may engage in volunteering for similar reasons, there are different motives behind these reasons.

Throughout the literature volunteer retention is referred to in a number of different ways including; ‘sustained volunteering’, ‘continued volunteering’ and ‘volunteer continuation’. These terms will be used interchangeably throughout the literature review.

Volunteer Motivations

Esmond and Dunlop explain ‘what actually motivates a person to volunteer is a complex and vexing question, yet understanding these motivations can be of great assistance to organisations in attracting, placing and retaining volunteers’ (2004, pg. 6).

Clary et al (1998) identified six personal and social functions served by volunteering. These functions are: values, understanding, enhancement, career, social and protective functions. This built on the work of Omoto and Snyder (1993) that looked at the personalities and motivations of HIV and AIDS volunteers. Each of these functions serves a different purpose and can be seen as creating a different motive for people to volunteer. Powell and Guerin (1997) discuss a number of moral principles which imply a duty to give to others, these include; indebtedness – one person owing something to another, reparation – one person has to compensate another for harm done and duties owed, within families or according to status. These principles appear to reflect the protective functions of volunteering discussed by Clary and Snyder (1999) and Clary et al. (1998).

It is clear that there are many different motivations behind volunteerism. However, the motivations mentioned all overlap in a number of ways, and it can be seen that there may not be one particular motivation for people to volunteer, but many different motivations. Some of these motivations can be seen as protective factors for sustained volunteering, however Kovacs and Black clearly warn that *‘factors that influence individuals to volunteer in the first place are not that same factors that influence them to continue to volunteer’* (1999, pg. 30).

The debate about altruistic motivations and egotistic motivations for volunteering is evident in much of the volunteering research. The altruism/egoism debate involves two opposing arguments in relation to peoples’ motivations to volunteer. One side of the argument is that no voluntary act is truly selfless; all acts come with the hope of personal gain. The other side of this is the argument that helpfulness is sometimes based on selfless concern for another. Dolnicar and Randle (2007) identify significant research which suggests that although some

form of altruism is commonly found in many volunteer actions, there are implicit egotistic factors with the benefits they receive from being involved in the volunteering role.

Meier and Stutzer (2004) discuss the altruism/egoism debate in terms of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to volunteer. The first relates to people who volunteer because they enjoy helping others. This increases their well being; this reward is internally due to an intrinsic motivation to care for others. This could also be seen as altruistic motivation. The second relates to people who volunteer in order to see a by-product of this volunteer work. These people may not enjoy volunteering, but volunteer for a purpose such as career advancement or to increase their social standing. This is an extrinsic motivation for volunteering which can also be seen as egotistic motivation.

Clary and Snyder (1999) came to the conclusion that many volunteers' motivations cannot be explicitly categorised into altruistic or egotistic motivations. Motivations are multifaceted and both altruism and egoism can play a part in a volunteer's motivation to engage in voluntarism.

What are the factors affecting volunteer retention?

Locke, Ellis and Davis Smith, (2003) discuss that continued volunteering is encouraged by management that is explicit, developmental, supportive and appreciative; by congruence between organisational and individual objectives and by social support such as friendship and a sense of responsibility.

Research tells us that there are primary and secondary factors for determining whether people withdraw from or continue to volunteer. The primary factors include personal and life events, and domestic stability, while secondary factors can be seen as being related to organisational practices. Alexander (2000) in his study of Special Constables in the UK found that volunteers who were already married at the time of joining were more likely to continue volunteering in the longer term. It was also found that volunteers with children at their time of joining were less likely to leave and more likely to complete a longer period of volunteering.

Carmen Hidalgo and Moreno (2009) discuss five variables that are seen to affect volunteer retention. These variables include: social networks, training, social support inside the

organisation, characteristics of the job, and understanding. These variables support previous research by Locke, Ellis and Davis Smith (2003) and Alexander (2000). With variables from each of these pieces of research, it can be seen that there are a number of common withdrawal and continuation factors associated with the organisation in which the individual is volunteering. The table below has been constructed by the researcher to clearly show common withdrawal and continuation factors evident throughout the literature:

Withdrawal and Continuation Factors

<i>Withdrawal Factors</i>	<i>Continuation Factors</i>
Poor supervision	Social support and ties with other volunteers
Lack of relevant training	Sense of responsibility
Feeling undervalued	Congruence between organisation and personal intentions
Uninteresting duties	Space for personal autonomy
Feeling volunteers are not deployed in a worthwhile manner	Feeling valued and appreciated
Loss of communication between volunteers and staff members	Frequent supervision
	Adequate preparation and training

This model of continuation and withdrawal factors gives a clear example of the most prominent factors pertaining to volunteer retention.

Locke, Ellis and Davis Smith (2003) did however stress that continuation factors are not necessarily just the opposite of withdrawal factors. A number of these factors will be discussed in greater detail below.

Withdrawal Factors and Protective Factors

Haski-Leventhal and Bargal (2008), in research related to Israeli street work volunteers, talked about volunteers experiencing shock and surprise when they enter the field for the first time. The volunteers commented on contradictions between their expectations of the work and what they were faced with in reality. It was found that the same volunteers were given only brief induction training in the minutes before they began work, learned about the job through 'on the job' training, and in many ways were left to learn their role themselves. Oliviere et al. (1998) looked at volunteers in a palliative care setting, and the importance of training and support, for their development as volunteers and for their sustained involvement. This form of training covers many areas including what it was deemed the volunteer was most concerned about, such as knowing what to say to the client and knowing what practices might be seen as unhelpful. Oliviere (1998) acknowledged that volunteers can be in a vulnerable position when working with particular client groups and emphasised the importance of ongoing support and supervision.

In the Carmen Hidalgo and Moreno's (2009) study, volunteers positively evaluated training and social support from the organisation. This confirmed the findings of other studies, which linked the supervision of volunteers by the organisation on satisfaction and the maintenance of service.

Carmen Hidalgo and Moreno (2009) looked at the role of the characteristics of the job of the volunteer. The nature of the job or activity the volunteer is involved in can be seen as the main predictor of a volunteers continued satisfaction and commitment. Their study found that the possibility of developing an interesting job with some autonomy has a positive effect on volunteer work. Alexander (2000) also noted that space for personal autonomy and a sense of responsibility in the work they do, were also protective factors for volunteering in the long term. This was supported by Carmen Hidalgo and Moreno's (2009) work which found that volunteers who lasted longer, were those who generally chose their task and had a higher perception of autonomy, and yet a sense of co operation with others.

In Locke, Ellis and Davis Smith (2003), the importance of congruence between the goals of the organisation and the goals of the individual was stressed. This in turn stresses the importance of matching volunteers to organisations. It can be seen that a loss of confidence in

the agency's work or philosophy can lead to volunteer withdrawal. McCudden (2000) found that volunteers continued in the Home Start scheme researched because they supported the ethos of the organisation, they regarded their work as worth while, cared about the families they worked with, and had pride in the organisation. This shows that there are a number of inter-linking issues that were important to these volunteers in maintaining their volunteering role; ethos of the organisation, valuing the work they were involved in, care for the recipients of their work, and pride in the organisation they work for.

Grube and Piliavin (2000) suggested that being a volunteer over a long period would increase the commitment to the organisation, which leads to the incorporation of a volunteer role to personal identity, resulting in the continuity of the volunteer activity. Volunteers commit themselves to their volunteering role and, to the organisation they are volunteering for, this incorporated being a volunteer as a regular part of their lives. In turn volunteers come to see volunteering as part of who they are, which encourages them to continue volunteering.

Social support is seen as a huge organisational protective factor. This social support was found to come in the form of friendships and networks made with other volunteers, and through the volunteering experience. Links can also be seen between a positive relationship and social support from other volunteers in the organisation, and intent to remain a volunteer. Haski-Leventhal and Bargal noted that *'people may start to volunteer for certain reasons, such as a desire to help others, and continue to do so for different reasons, such as a strong affiliation with a volunteer peer group'* (2008, pg. 70). From this research, the importance of social relationships inside the organisation was emphasised. This corresponds with the findings of several other researchers (including Grube & Piliavin 2000), which suggest that social relationships inside the organisation provide a good organisational climate and help to make the performed activity pleasant.

Carmen Hidalgo and Moreno (2009) found that creating a friendly climate, and supporting the volunteer with training and supervision, as well as gratifying and non repetitive tasks are clear ways to promote volunteer retention. In this way, Carmen Hidalgo and Moreno (2009) suggested that volunteer managers and organisations should favour and invest in these areas, in order to promote increased volunteer retention.

Motivation, commitment and satisfaction are three areas that this researcher would have anticipated as having the greatest impact on volunteer retention.

Research has shown that volunteer retention is more closely linked with organisational practises, and that commitment and satisfaction are linked to the organisation rather than the individual themselves. The ethos of the organisation and relationships within the organisation also play a much larger role in the retention of volunteers. The research highlights people's motivations to volunteer, as well as the fact that these motivations do not necessarily correlate with the reasons people continue to volunteer. It would appear from the research that the retention of volunteers has much more to do with the organisation and organisational structures than with people's intrinsic or extrinsic motivations to volunteer. The research highlights the benefits of supervision and continued training within organisations and the importance of ensuring volunteers feel valued and appreciated.

Data Analysis and Findings

In researching this piece the researcher interviewed six participants. The participants each had personal experience and knowledge of volunteering, and had been volunteering for between eight and twenty three years. To ensure anonymity the participants will be referred to as Participants One, Two, Three, Four, Five and Six. All participants were asked the same questions. Using the literature review, the data collected has been considered with regard to a number of prominent themes.

Training and support

Training

Adequate preparation and training was cited throughout the literature as a protective factor for volunteer retention. This sentiment was echoed by each participant who felt that training was essential to sustained volunteering. However because of the voluntary nature of training, a number of the participants commented that not everyone avails of this training. Participant Two commented that training is not compulsory and that no one appears to be monitoring who has done what training *'the induction training is compulsory yeh, you will have to do the other levels at some point but you're not actually made do it and no one really checks'*.

Participant Four talked about the value of training in giving leaders confidence to work with the young people and to know they are running the club in an appropriate way;

I think the training gave me the confidence really and when you know what you are doing is right you have no fear then and you know its confidence really I suppose is the right word.

This corresponds with findings from Haski-Leventhal and Bargal (2008) who comment on volunteers experiencing shock and surprise when they embark on their volunteering role and that their expectations of the work were a lot different to the reality of the role itself. Training was named as a supportive factor by each of the participants.

Support

Each participant was very vocal about the positive role staff members of the organisation play in supporting leaders.

The [Staff Member] is only a phone call away and that's a huge thing really and it's critical that stays there because you have that all the time. And like I'm there [a number] years now and I've done level four training... but at the same time you have to have the services of the RYO immediately and I know that's there. (Participant Six)

It appears the staff member with responsibility for the local area is generally the main source of support for leaders. There is no supervision element to the volunteering role. A number of participants said that they believed the opportunity to discuss issues arising from their volunteer role, would benefit volunteers. Haski-Leventhal and Bargal (2008) talk about volunteering as being a small part of people's lives but they also comment that being heavily involved in members lives without proper training and support can cause volunteers to burn out. It appears to be the club leader who has the most contact with the staff member, and it may be that the leaders get their support from the club leader. As far as the participants in the research are aware, there is no formal supervision structure within the organisation. Although some participants felt that this would be a positive thing, others felt formal or scheduled supervision would take up more time and mean more time away from people's lives in general. Participant Two commented that it would *'be nice if someone checked in to see how the leaders were doing from time to time, and not just the young people'*.

Each of the participants felt they were supported by the organisation, and they felt that this was a positive factor in their retention. This corresponds with Carmen Hidalgo and Moreno's (2009) findings, that volunteers who feel supported by an organisation are significantly more likely to stay involved over a longer period of time.

Motivation and Value of Volunteer Role

Motivation to volunteer

There was a question asked in relation to what initially motivated the participants to assume their volunteering roles. The researcher had originally believed that reasons for motivation would tie in as protective factors for volunteer retention. However, it can be seen from literature that this may not always be the case, and particularly Kovacs and Black (1999) warn against assuming this. When asked about motivations to volunteer, each of the participants discussed a community wide need to provide a place for young people to go, and an activity for them to be involved in. A number of the participants had been approached by members of the community and asked to become involved, while other participants saw the need to set up a club, and went about organising these themselves. In all, the overarching motivation was to work with young people, and give them an outlet to express themselves and develop their skills and abilities.

Meier and Stutzer (2004) discussed two groups of motivational factors; intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. It is evident that the participants in this study all volunteered for intrinsic reasons; they enjoy helping others. This in turn increases their well being, as they are internally rewarded due to an intrinsic motivation to care for others. It could be inferred from this research that people who are intrinsically motivated to volunteer stay in their role for a longer period of time, as they are not looking for an outcome. Whereas achieving a desired outcome may lead volunteers with extrinsic motivations to withdraw from their volunteer role.

Value Placed on the Volunteer Role

Each participant talked about the value of the work they did with the young people they volunteered with, and the importance of *'making a difference'*. The participants placed significant value on this as a retention factor for sustained volunteering. Participant Three talked about wanting the young people to be the best they can be *'this doesn't mean winning the race but maybe improving by a quarter of a second the next time'*. This links in with Alexander's (2000) findings which found that volunteer Constables who felt they were utilised in a worthwhile manner were more likely to continue their volunteering role over a longer period of time. In this way volunteers who see the young people benefiting from the

work they do within the organisation, may be more likely to continue to volunteer over an extended period of time.

Continued Commitment to Volunteer Role

Positive impact of volunteering on volunteers own lives

This is one aspect of volunteering that did not appear to be looked at extensively in research, and did not play a part in the model of withdrawal and continuation factors seen in the literature review. However, throughout each of the interviews the positive impact of volunteering on the participants own lives was discussed. Participant Three commented

I suppose it [the work] then kind of went into my own personal life in they way I look at things, I got influenced by that, influenced by the kids. And the one thing that keeps coming back is just how much you learn from them and how much they surprise you.

Volunteering with the Organisation clearly had an impact on this participant in their personal life and they felt that this was very much part of the reason they stayed involved over a long period of time.

This positive impact of volunteering could also be put down to the training and development opportunities offered to volunteers. Participant Four talked about his experience with the Organisation helping him make difficult decisions he may have avoided in the past:

You are able to kind of think about things and make a call on things... and the experience to be able to say things to people that a couple of years ago I would have thought Jesus no, I'd never be able to do that...

This participant clearly felt that his experience with the Organisation gave him confidence both in his role as Club Leader and in his personal life. From this it can be seen that the organisation has benefits not only for the young people involved, but also for the volunteers.

This corresponds with comments from participant one;

[Organisation] continuously talk about what they do for young people, they don't talk about the things they actually do for adults, because you know a lot of the training that adults get stand to them in good sted in their own lives, in other areas...

Participants discussed the positive impact their volunteering role has on their work/life balance. Participants spoke about looking forward to leaving a stressful work day behind and

going to the club and getting involved with the young people. Participant Two commented *'I get a great buzz out of it, it's coming to the end of the week and I'm saying 'yes it's [Organisation] night!'* Participant Five spoke of hearing a number of his volunteers talk each week about how being involved in the club really helps them forget about all the other things going on in their lives, and just concentrate on the young people for those few hours.

Ties to other volunteers

Grube and Piliavin (2000) highlight the importance of social relationships within an organisation. It is suggested that these relationships provide a platform for good organisational climate and make the volunteering work more pleasant. Participant Four commented that the volunteers within the club are all friends and they meet regularly outside the club *'...because we are all very similar we have a great friendship going and a great camaraderie between us...'* This participant maintains that this is part of the reason he continues to stay involved with the club. Participant One spoke about knowing volunteers from all parts of the country. The participant went on to speak about enjoying meeting up with the different volunteers and sharing their different experiences. The social aspect did not play a significant role for participant Six. This participant believes that if a volunteer is going to leave, social ties would not be retaining factor. While Participant Five felt the support of fellow leaders was an important factor in his continued involvement, particularly following an incident with the parent of a young person. This participant felt the support and back up of the other volunteers in the group was invaluable.

The overarching themes evident in the research can be seen here. The participants used their experience and knowledge of volunteering to answer questions on a range of issues pertaining to the volunteer experience with the Organisation. Their feelings on volunteer retention and that which has kept them committed to their volunteer role were also explored. Locke, Ellis and Davis Smith surmised that the main factor in volunteer retention is the management of volunteers in an 'explicit, developmental, supportive and appreciative way' (2003, pg. 87). Participants views and experience of volunteer management were clearly evident in the themes discussed; training and support, motivation and value, influence of the organisation and continued commitment.

Conclusions

The broad aim of the research was to explore the long term retention of volunteers. It is clear from the research that there are many positive retention factors already evident in the Organisation, however the development and promotion of current structures, as well as the possible addition of supports, could be made to further facilitate sustained volunteer involvement.

From reviewing literature and interviewing participants, a number of key themes emerged, as well as a number of further questions for moving forward. Although it is difficult to generalise the findings of this piece of research due to its small scale and its basis in one area of Ireland, the table presented in chapter two outlines withdrawal and continuation factors for general volunteering. This table was created from the literature, and the findings appear to tie closely with this table. This could be used to inform volunteer retention policies or further research for other volunteer agencies throughout the country.

From the findings it is clear that the Organisation is doing a substantial amount to encourage volunteers to remain committed. There were a number of key findings in relation to what encourages sustained volunteering. There were also a number of findings in relation to what more could be done to foster further volunteer retention. There was an overwhelming consensus that training, development and support are the most important retention factors, along with volunteers feeling valued and appreciated.

It was also evident that although the volunteers interviewed did feel supported by the organisation; the development of a further, more structured support system would benefit volunteers. There appears to be no formal mechanism for support available to volunteers. A number of participants believed access to more regular support would be beneficial to the volunteers in the Organisation.

The effect of volunteering on personal life was not a strong theme that emerged from literature; however it was a clear theme throughout data collected. The positive impact of the training provided by the Organisation, and the volunteer role, working with young people, clearly benefited each of the participants in different ways. Confidence appeared to be the

main benefit along with skills learned from training. This was a significant sustaining factor for a number of the participants.

The ethos of the Organisation was a positive retention factor for a number of participants. These participants felt that working with the young people rather than being in control of them is a very important aspect of the work they do. This is seen to tie in with the importance of congruence between values of the volunteer and that of the organisation. Each of the participants involved felt the work they are doing is worthwhile and that they are making a difference to the young people they work with.

From the outset this author believed that motivation to volunteer played a significant role in people's intention to remain volunteers. It is clear from the literature and data collected that this is not necessarily the case. Although intrinsic motivation to volunteer does appear to be a protective factor for volunteer retention, the more significant retentive factor would appear to be the management of volunteers within an organisation. From this research it would appear that the most prominent aspects of management related to sustained volunteering are; training, support and recognition.

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