



# **How can organisations increase volunteer retention in different types of events across the West Midlands?**

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**UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM**

# Executive Summary

## REPORT AIMS



This report aims to **inform non-profit organisations (NPOs)** on methods to **increase volunteer retention** and/or **improve their retention practices**. This would benefit NPOs **through saving time, money and efforts** on recruiting and training new volunteers. For those interested in how volunteers can be encouraged to transfer across sectors and organisations, see report by Lara Kirwin.

## DATA COLLECTION



We interviewed **volunteer managers** across the sport, art, community and cultural sectors to gain their **insights behind volunteer retention**. We used thematic analysis to interpret our data and identified the key themes raised by the managers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Partner with large employers** to provide **training** for the volunteers to **enhance** their **employability prospects**.
- Create an **Online Engagement forum** to ensure managers and NPOs can effectively **satisfy** and **engage** their volunteers.



## FUTURE DIRECTIONS



I suggest that future research investigates the **barriers** to volunteer retention as uncovering this information would benefit **NPOs in devising and implementing policies** to tackle the issues. This would subsequently help **support and engage the volunteers** and **foster positive relations** that are essential to ensure their **commitment**.

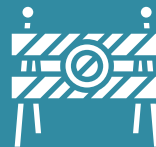


## VOLUNTEERS AND SPORT BIRMINGHAM

Volunteers are **fundamental to society** as many organisations rely on their time and efforts to be successful. This research is in collaboration with **Sport Birmingham**, an independent charity aiming to **locate and connect people** with **wider opportunities** through physical activity. Sport Birmingham identified that improving **retention practices** could help **remove strains** that NPOs are often subject to. This including a lack of funding, which is often subsequently spent on recruitment and training of new volunteers.

## FINDINGS

From our research, we identified the **barriers** and **predictors** of **volunteer retention**.



-Barriers = lack of volunteer time, volunteer support and organisation funding.



-Predictors = incentives, volunteer enjoyment, volunteer skills, volunteer relationships and creating a positive environment.

## LIMITATIONS



The main limitation of our study was that we **did not interview volunteers**.



Secondly, our interviews focused too heavily on **predictors of retention** rather than **barriers** which could have **better informed** our research on volunteer retention methods.

# Volunteers



Volunteers are recognised as **people working in groups** to achieve a **unified goal** through planned but unpaid operations(1-2). The appreciation and significance of volunteerism is rising in society. Non-profit organisations (NPOs) are dependent on the unpaid time and dedication of these individuals.

The **Office of National Statistics 2016** quantified the immense value of volunteering to be worth **£23.9 billion**, equating to 1.5% of GDP(4). Furthermore, in 2015, volunteering time amounted to **1.93 billion hours** (1hr 36mins per week). However, this is a **15.4% decline** from **2.28 billion hours** (1hr 42mins per week) recorded in 2000(4). Having acknowledged the **sheer value** of volunteer's **time**, more needs to be done to ensure **this rate does not continue to decrease**.

Much of the research surrounding volunteering attempts to uncover **why people do it** and **what makes them want to continue**(5). Some of these reasons being to **give back** to an NPO, feeling **valued** and to boost **self-confidence**(6). Once this information is known, it will be **easier for NPOs** to recruit, train and **retain** volunteers which currently is **a major area of concern and development**(7).

**6.2 million (14%)** adults **volunteered** at least **twice** in the last year

Active Lives Adult Survey  
2018/19 (3)

## Sport Birmingham



Sport Birmingham's vision is to **utilise physical activity** to improve **wellbeing** within the **community**. They are the city's leading independent charity. Their aim is to locate and connect people with **wider opportunities** in the community. Additionally they strive to **combat** a range of **social, environmental and public challenges** through **physical activity**(8). Sport Birmingham expressed existing issues to us surrounding volunteer retention including that **time and money** is often lost on recruitment and could be **better used for retention**. They also recognise that **targeting** this issue will produce **long-term benefits**.

**69%** **respondents** volunteered formally at least once in their lives. Of this, **only 7%** reported being **deeply involved** throughout their lives

Time well spent Survey 2019 (9)

In the build-up to the **2022 Commonwealth Games**, volunteers will be called upon from **all sectors** to ensure the success of the event. It is important that **managers are aware of the techniques to retain volunteers** so that they are not lost after the event. This means a legacy of **retained volunteers** can be created which will help **combat** the above challenges Sport Birmingham identified(10). Therefore, this report will aim to overcome this and increase **retention rates**.

# Data Collection



## Ethics approval

The study was **approved** by the University of Birmingham School of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences **ethics board**.

Step  
01

## Interviewees

Step  
02

We interviewed **volunteer and freelance event managers** across the sport, art, community and cultural sectors meaning our results can be **applied across these sectors**. We interviewed these managers as they hold **credible positions** to offer insight into their thoughts and feelings behind volunteer retention(11).

## Interviews

Step  
03

We conducted **qualitative semi-structured interviews**(12) to give structural direction. This also allowed the interviewees the opportunity to **immerse themselves in their experiences** to construct their answers and add comments that they felt were beneficial(13). Semi-structured interviews allowed us to **clarify any uncertainties** and to **probe** for more information if and when appropriate(14).

## Experience

Step  
04

Additionally, we completed **50 voluntary hours** with Sport Birmingham, shadowing them at sport sector events across the city. This benefitted us by supplying us with **first hand volunteering experience** and **insight into the organisation** through engrossing ourselves in the research context(15).

Step  
05

## Transcripts

Step  
06

## Thematic analysis

Using **Braun and Clarke's (2006)** (17) **thematic analysis**, we **identified** and **analysed** patterns within the data. We **coded** the data which involved highlighting the important quotes. After this we **grouped** these with other similar quotes and reviewed them, ensuring **internal homogeneity** (consistency within a theme) and **external heterogeneity** (themes are clearly different from one another), they were then **collated** to create the final themes(16).

We **audio recorded** all the interviews and focus groups, with the interviewees' consent. We used the recordings to **transcribe** the discussions into edited transcriptions, allowing us to highlight the information that was **relevant to our research** question and **accurately record** the data(16).

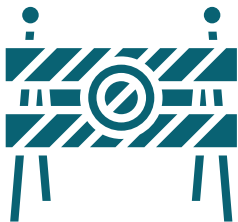
Step  
07

## Thematic maps

We devised **thematic maps**(17) which accurately echoed the **concluding data patterns**, and their connections as a whole. The final step consisted of **refining** each theme **name**, **defining** these and **supporting** them with quotes from our data.

# Retention Barriers

From our interviews, we were able to **identify themes** from the reasons the feelance and event volunteer managers gave. The overarching themes that came from this were **barriers** to **volunteer retention** and **predictors increasing** the chances of **volunteer retention**. From this, we sectioned the reasons into **sub-themes** providing us with **clear rationales** why volunteers did and did not return.



## Barriers to volunteer retention



### Lack of volunteer time

Volunteers do not have enough time to dedicate.

*"It's the additional time...they've told me it's a bit too much of their time"*



### Lack of organisation funding

Organisations are limited with what they can offer because of funding.

*"We're limited because of the funding. I went to my company where I worked separately and asked for some funding"*



### Lack of volunteer support

Positive relations are lost through needs not being met.

*"There was never a thank you at the end of it... you've gone out of your way and it wasn't appreciated"*



# Retention Predictors

## Incentives

Elements of direct benefit to attract the volunteers



## Free kit

Volunteers feel valued through free merchandise. *"We have T-shirts/hoodies which give value, meaning and pride"*

## Employability prospects

Enhancing employability prospects. *"The opportunity that they could become an employee"*

## Volunteer enjoyment

Volunteer gratification from what they do



## Access to events

Volunteers experience the event. *"That's why they volunteer... they can give up a couple days and watch some great sport"*

## Enjoying volunteering experiences

Volunteers return due to pleasurable involvement. *"They had fun and they enjoyed it so some will keep doing it"*

## Volunteer Relationships

Relations the volunteers build with each other and managers



## Volunteer Social interactions

Friendly relations between volunteers. *"They do it for the social, I pair them with someone they've got something in common with"*

## Relationships between volunteers and managers

Creating an atmosphere where volunteers feel connected. *"Once they join the family they tend not to leave"*

## Volunteer Skills

Volunteers already possess many of the desired skills from previous experiences



## Training for volunteer roles

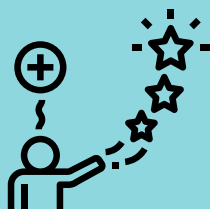
Educating volunteers on event roles. *"We'll run a training programme then we'll do specific training"*

## Building on volunteer skillset

Utilising skills of volunteers. *"It's making them aware of how they can show their skills and build their skillset"*

## Creating a positive volunteer environment

Building a setting, promoting a positive occasion and atmosphere



## Valuing volunteers

Ensuring volunteers feel significant and celebrated. *"That value makes them want to come back, makes them feel important"*

## Effective communication

Keeping volunteers well informed. *"Create a timeline so you don't bombard them, but they get the right information"*

## Utilising volunteer feedback

Applying volunteer feedback for future improvements. *"It might help with retention because you can address any concerns"*

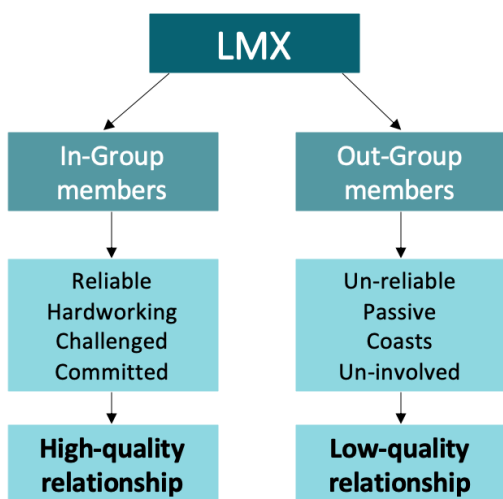
## Matching roles to volunteer's and preferences

Role alignment with volunteer preferences. *"We ask the volunteers interests, depending on that they'll do different things"*

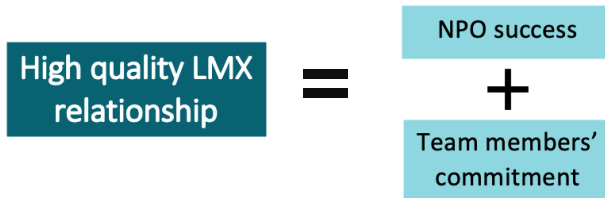
# Leader-Member Exchange Theory

Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory reveals how **leaders develop relations** with their **team members**. Specifically, how a relationship can become **fruitful or unfavourable** between an employee and their manager(18). Using this theory to investigate this relationship could then **aid retention**(19).

LMX theorists have expressed the **success of an NPO** is influenced by the **quality of the leader-member relationship**(20). Furthermore the manager's behaviour directly impacts the employees' outlooks, meaning a **poor** leader-member relationship. This will **negatively impact** the members' experiences and prospects, adversely influencing the volunteers' commitment(21).



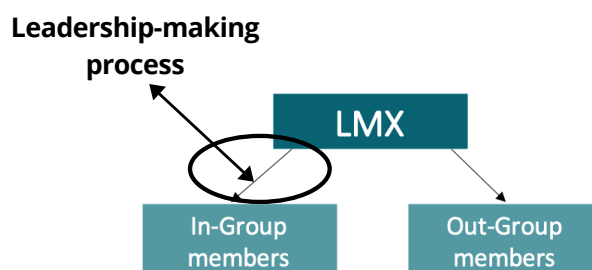
Therefore, to aid **retention**, emphasis needs to be placed on the **leadership-making process**. This will ensure high-quality relationships with **all** members are made, and to **not rule out** the 'out-group'(24). The making process occurs in phases of stranger, acquaintance, and finally mature partnership. The process is facilitated by aspects such as **mentoring** (training) and **supportive behaviour**(25) which are aspects my recommendations will utilise.



Relationships of **high quality**, termed '**in-group**', materialise through the **interchange of prized assets**. When the leader provides support, guidance and expansion prospects, the member reacts with endeavour and commitment, increasing retention(22).



However, **low quality relationships** are formed between members whom the leader **does not trust or dedicates time to**. These 'out-group' individuals exhibit a lack of motivation and capability and display the **highest job change rates**(23).



*Therefore, based upon the evidence, how can organisations ensure that volunteer managers are supporting their volunteers through the stages amounting to high-quality relations, in order to better retain them?*

# Recommendation 1

*Partner with large employers to provide training for the volunteers to enhance their employability prospects.*

## Evidence

For organisations to **better retain volunteers**, they need to explore **what motivates them**(26). Our research and the literature suggests the **advancement of employability prospects increases their volunteering interests**(27-28). For example, networking, CV writing, gaining new skills and building on existing skillsets.

"the volunteers are trying to get somewhere with their educational career so it's more about motivation in that way"



Research supports volunteering presenting a **"springboard effect"** leveraging them to their next steps and **creating the foundations** of 'individual employability' elements(29).

70,535 people found when unemployed for 1 year, those who volunteered had a 27% higher chance of being employed in year 2, compared to those who didn't volunteer(30)

As LMX theory states, the volunteers who **manifest commitment** behave this way due to the manager's provision of **prized resources** such as training, qualifications and communicative skills. Thus creating the identified and desired high-quality LMX relationship.

## Recommendation

I recommend partnering with **large employers** to **provide** the volunteer **training** element.



For example, Sport Birmingham partner with Birmingham Airport or the University of Birmingham **Human Resources** (HR) department to host **Careers Workshops**. Literature supports the **positive effects** HR departments exhibit on **volunteer outcomes**, such as commitment and conduct(31).



The HR departments could **host workshops** on, for example, **writing** a successful CV, what elements to include, and how volunteering can significantly enhance your CV. In return, the employer company could benefit from **company promotions** at the volunteer events.

Additionally, **other volunteer organisations** such as the The Conservation Volunteers have established training programmes. This would make a **rewarding** partnership link to conduct training, enhancing the volunteers **employability** and **foster high quality relations** all amounting to the acquisition of their **retention**.



## However...

Complications could arise when **implementing** the training. Firstly, **sourcing** the trainers and ensuring that their **quality** of training would **satisfy** the volunteer requirements will take time. Secondly, **establishing and agreeing a partnership** with large employers could take a long time to finalise, meaning potential **delays** in the **establishment** of the workshops.



## Recommendation 2

*Create an Online Engagement forum to ensure volunteer managers and NPOs can effectively satisfy and engage their volunteers.*

- Sub-recommendation A= Managers need to satisfy their volunteers' needs
- Sub-recommendation B = Managers need to engage their volunteers

### Evidence

Our data highlighted that volunteers are **discouraged** by a **lack of adequate support** from their manager or NPO. In order to **yield better support**, the volunteers' **requirements** and **interests** need to be better catered for(27).

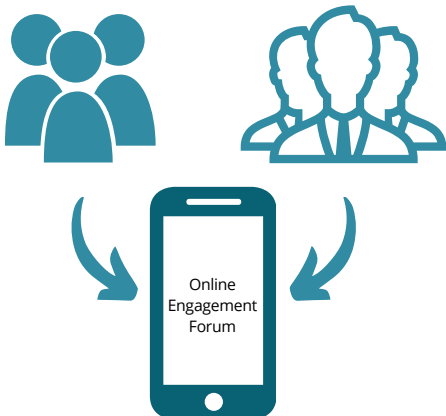
"When I volunteered.... all my mates I used to volunteer with have stopped, you just want a "well done" or "I appreciate your time".

As identified, **richer interpersonal relations** between volunteers and managers will arise through addressing the volunteers' **needs and engaging them**. This will heavily enhance their feelings of value, satisfaction and **intent to remain** with the NPO(21).

"That's a real turnoff for them [the volunteers] they're signed in and they're off so you're at the mercy of the managers to do spot checks".

### I recommend

I recommend creating an **Online Engagement forum** to **meet the needs** and **engage** the volunteers. Online engagement is a **virtual venue** that **captures the audience** and keeps them in **orbit**(32).



This would **connect volunteers** and **managers** through the form of social media, an online discussions page or an app(33). **Social communication** is accelerated through the platform these virtual communities supply(34). This would allow volunteers the **opportunity to voice** their opinions and the managers the **chance to understand** their volunteers better through addressing their thoughts. These sites are valuable for **reaching larger groups**(33) and provide the **privacy** to raise concerns(35).

### However...

It is important to be aware that devising this would require substantial **technical capabilities**, and would not be a quick process. Furthermore, an online site requires all intended users to have **internet access and understanding**. Depending on the **age** and the **socio-economic demographic**, this could potentially be an **unrealistic assumption** for some volunteer communities(36).

### Sub-recommendation A

#### Managers need to satisfy their volunteers' needs.

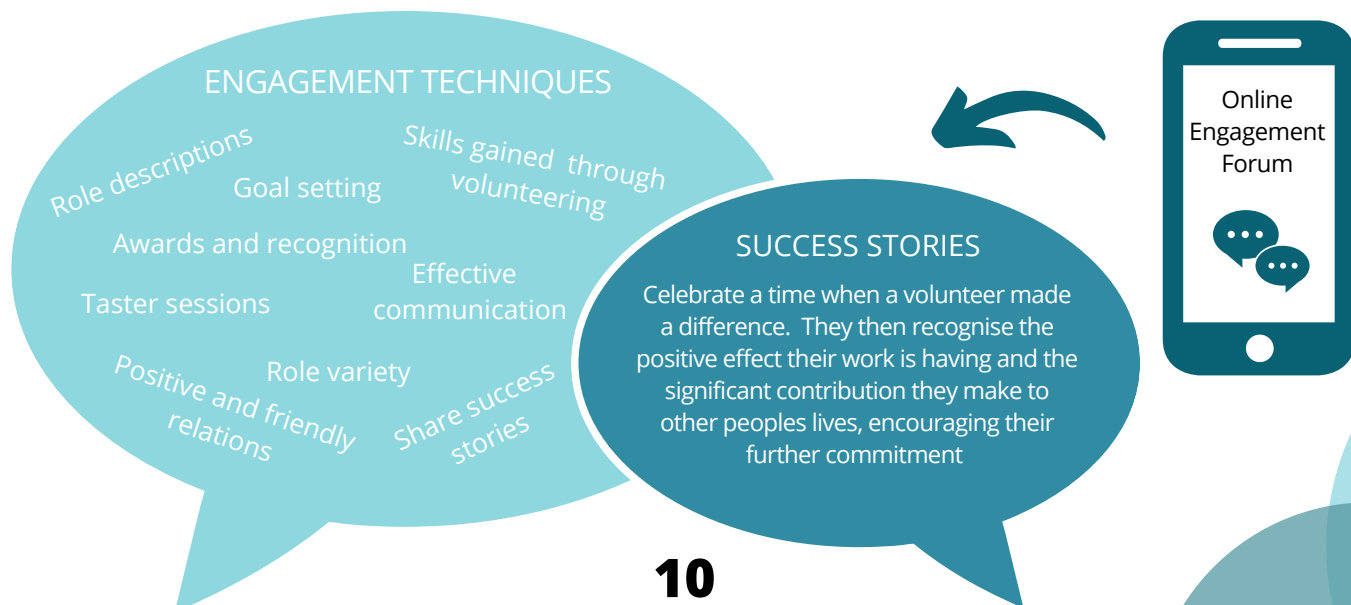
Volunteers are **contented** when managers **fulfil** their **requirements**(37). Contented volunteers also express the desired **high quality LMX relations**(38). Therefore, volunteer **commitment** levels are facilitated when managers **satisfy** their volunteers' requirements(39). Through the online engagement venue, managers could create a **survey** to decipher how satisfied their volunteers feel. Based on the survey responses, managers could adapt their techniques accordingly to increase satisfaction. For example, organise more **social occasions** for the volunteers to attend. Additionally, I suggest that the managers aspire to **better meet** the volunteers' **needs** to achieve **satisfaction**. For example, having a weekly updated **Volunteer Award** to donate recognition and value to the volunteers.



### Sub-recommendation B

#### Managers need to effectively engage their volunteers.

Research has proven that **potent individual engagement** is the most successful way to **secure loyalty**(34), declaring that **engaged** volunteers are **better retained**. Managers could use the online forum to engage their volunteers through creating a section **illustrating techniques** to **attract** and **capture** the volunteers. For example, setting goals(40) describing all job roles and publicising volunteer success stories. I also suggest a **discussions board**, allowing the volunteers to reveal what they would like to see implemented. This is because **matching their obligations** will promote their **engagement levels**, fostering **high quality relations** and therefore result in **commitment** in the form of retention(41).



# Limitations

## Not interviewing volunteers



We **did not** interview any volunteers which, on reflection, could have significantly benefitted our project. We felt that interviewing volunteers could have **generated many issues** such as **breaching GDPR** regulations, **scope** of volunteers and **time** and **location** restrictions(42). However, I acknowledge that, through careful planning it would have been **advantageous** to gain the **perspectives** of volunteers **to better inform** NPOs and their practices.

## Need to explore the barriers to retention further



As our data demonstrates, many more predictors were identified than barriers to retention. This could suggest **weaknesses** in the **knowledge** and **understanding** as to **why volunteers stop volunteering**(43). If we made this more significant in our interviews, we could have potentially constructed **effective strategies** for volunteer managers to **retain** their volunteers.



# Future directions

## Investigate barriers to volunteer retention

I suggest future research specifically investigates the **barriers** to volunteer retention, through **interviewing volunteers and managers**. This would obtain **multiple perspectives**(44) proving beneficial for **NPOs** to **devise and implement policies** to **tackle** the issues. Additionally, exposing what deters volunteers would help managers **understand** and **build relationships** through **engaging** with their volunteers and planning to **better suit their needs**. These constructs have all been identified as **key components** to the **success** of the **high quality LMX theory relations**.

**Sport England**(45) produced a report providing **guidance** to volunteer managers on how to **better understand their volunteers** through utilising **surveys**. This could be a helpful starting point to assist in **formulating questions**. Going beyond this, managers could **utilise the Online Engagement Forum** to create surveys/questionnaires online so the volunteers can complete them easily in their own time.

A **LMX survey** could also be included on the forum to interpret the **quality** of the volunteers **relationship** with their managers(25). Having this online will positively affect the relationships through increasing the opportunities for connecting(46). This will determine what **stage** the relationship is at. Managers can then work to achieve **high quality relations** with **all** individuals, increasing retention likelihood.

- 1.Are there any factors that put you off volunteering?
- 2.How satisfied are you with your volunteering experience? (1=very satisfied - 5= very dissatisfied)
- 3.Do you find any drawbacks with your NPO?
- 4.Rank in order the factors most likely to end your volunteering career - time restrictions, role too demanding, no thanks, travel restrictions, lost interest, not meeting your values/needs, poor organisation.

- Scale of 1 = strongly agree - 5 = strongly disagree)
- 1.Do you feel that your leader supports you well?
  - 2.Does your leader dedicate much time to you?
  - 3.Does your leader set you many challenges/projects to work on?
  - 4.Do you think your leader utilises you to your full potential?
  - 5.Do you think that your leader would trust you with a job of high importance?
  - 6.Do you think you have a positive and effective relationship with your leader?

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