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

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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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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
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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\(^1\)\(^\text{-}2\). 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\(^7\).

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.

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.

\(^1\)\(^\text{-}2\): The appreciation and significance of volunteerism is rising in society.
\(^3\): 6.2 million (14%) adults volunteered at least twice in the last year. [Active Lives Adult Survey 2018/19](3)
\(^4\): Office of National Statistics 2016 quantified the immense value of volunteering to be worth £23.9 billion, equating to 1.5% of GDP.
\(^5\): Much of the research surrounding volunteering attempts to uncover why people do it and what makes them want to continue.
\(^6\): Some of these reasons being to give back to an NPO, feeling valued and to boost self-confidence.
\(^7\): 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.
\(^8\): Sport Birmingham's vision is to utilise physical activity to improve wellbeing within the community.
\(^9\): 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)
\(^10\): 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.
Data Collection

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

Interviewees
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
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
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).

Transcripts
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).

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 freelance 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.

**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”

Barriers to volunteer retention
### Retention Predictors

| **Incentives** | **Free kit**  
Volunteers feel valued through free merchandise. “*We have T-shirts/hoodies which give value, meaning and pride*” |
|----------------|------------------------------------------------|
| **Volunteer enjoyment** | **Employability prospects**  
Enhancing employability prospects. “*The opportunity that they could become an employee*” |
| **Volunteer Relationships** | **Access to events**  
Volunteers experience the event. “*That’s why they volunteer... they can give up a couple days and watch some great sport*” |
| **Volunteer Skills** | **Enjoying volunteering experiences**  
Volunteers return due to pleasurable involvement. “*They had fun and they enjoyed it so some will keep doing it*” |
| **Creating a positive volunteer environment** | **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*” |
| **Volunteer Relationships** | **Relationships between volunteers and managers**  
Creating an atmosphere were volunteers feel connected. “*Once they join the family they tend not to leave*” |
| **Volunteer Skills** | **Training for volunteer roles**  
Educating volunteers on event roles. “*We’ll run a training programme then we’ll do specific training*” |
| **Creating a positive volunteer environment** | **Building on volunteer skillset**  
Utilising skills of volunteers. “*It’s making them aware of how they can show their skills and build their skillset*” |
| **Volunteer enjoyment** | **Valuing volunteers**  
Ensuring volunteers feel significant and celebrated. “*That value makes them want to come back, makes them feel important*” |
| **Volunteer Relationships** | **Effective communication**  
Keeping volunteers well informed. “*Create a timeline so you don’t bombard them, but they get the right information*” |
| **Volunteer Skills** | **Utilising volunteer feedback**  
Applying volunteer feedback for future improvements. “*It might help with retention because you can address any concerns*” |
| **Creating a positive volunteer environment** | **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.

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?
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.

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 1**

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).

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.

![Online Engagement Forum]

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).

![Online Engagement Forum]

SUB-RECOMMENDATION

1. Would you say you feel satisfied with your volunteer experience?
2. Do you have access to all the resources you require to carry out your role?
3. In your opinion are you happy with the level of social interaction you gain throughout your experience?

VOLUNTEER SATISFACTION

VOLUNTEER OF THE WEEK

This week's Volunteer of the week goes to.... because of their significant contributions to.... through demonstrating....

ENGAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

Role descriptions
Goal setting
Awards and recognition
Taster sessions
Positive and friendly relations
Skills gained through volunteering
Effective communication
Role variety
Share success stories

SUCCESS STORIES

Celebrate a time when a volunteer made a difference. They then recognise the positive effect their work is having and the significant contribution they make to other peoples lives, encouraging their further commitment.

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Online Engagement Forum
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.

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Acknowledgements

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