

VOLUNTEERS' COMMITMENT TO THEIR SPORT: USING SERIOUS LEISURE AS AN EXPLANATORY FRAMEWORK

Author:
Georgina Brooke-Holmes

email:
bsx278@coventry.ac.uk

University:
Coventry University

Faculty:
Sport and Event Management, Coventry Business School

Abstract

The importance of the volunteer within sport is undisputed (Nichols et al 2005), and many sporting activities are reliant – to a greater or lesser degree – on the support or leadership of volunteers. Whilst sports volunteers have been the subject of many studies, especially over the last 20 years, there is still a shortage of theoretical bases for the understanding of their commitment to their sport, and – more pertinently – there exists a lack of established practice for effectively managing the behaviour of such volunteers.

This paper discusses primary research conducted in the summer of 2009 on a subsection of volunteers who work with physically and mentally handicapped horse riders. The purpose of the work was to assess the levels of volunteers' commitment to their organisation and their role. It was conducted as an email questionnaire to a group of volunteer officials, with a high response rate. The organisation in question, Riding for the Disabled Association (incorporating Carriage Driving) (RDA), is unusual in its structure: approximately 18000 volunteers are regularly active in service delivery across 500 autonomous, federated, groups in the UK. National Office (the 'centre' of the organisation, but not its 'head') is run by fewer than 12 full time equivalent employees. Whilst a very few of the groups are professionally run, the majority remain entirely organised, staffed and funded by voluntary activity.

The activity of the organisation covers the whole range of sport: beginning from 'hippotherapy' – the use of horses as therapy – it runs right up to elite level – six of the World Equestrian Games' gold medal winning para-equestrian dressage team began their riding in RDA and many of them continue to be supported by RDA facilities and trainers even now. This range offers an unusual breadth of voluntary experience to the researcher, aided by excellent access afforded by personal knowledge of the organisation.

Understanding the commitment of RDA volunteers requires a complex framework of analysis which allows for the multi-faceted experiences delivered by work with RDA. As a first stage, the concept of Serious Leisure (Stebbins 1996) is being explored. Serious Leisure is defined as

“the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer activity sufficiently substantial and interesting in nature for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of a combination of its special skills, knowledge and experience.” (Stebbins 1996:215)

Stebbins offers six 'characteristics' of Serious Leisure:

- The need to persevere with the activity
- Leisure activity seen as a 'career'
- The need for significant personal effort
- An activity which generates durable benefits
- The creation of shared attitudes and
- A tendency to identify with the activity.

Findings of this work suggest that RDA volunteers do indeed exhibit the six characteristics of serious leisure. Furthermore, in line with suggestions by Coleman (2002), they suggest that once a volunteer goes beyond a certain degree of involvement, their identity becomes bound up with the organisation's identity (Cuskelly et al 2002) - therefore they are far less likely to leave the role or to question the level of work required and may become willing to shoulder significant responsibility for the organisation.

The paper explores the concept of serious leisure with regard to the management of RDA volunteers and examines whether the understanding generated might be applied to sport volunteers more generally.

References:

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