

Examining the volunteer lifecycle: a case study of sport volunteerism

Authors: Daniel C. Funk, Kevin Filo, Jeremy S. Jordan, Ceridwyn King,

Institutions: Griffith University & Temple University

E-mail: dfunk@temple.edu

Aim

Volunteers have become a critical resource in the design and implementation of sport programs and events (Green & Chalip, 1998). Accordingly, organisations relying upon volunteers face challenges including costs associated with volunteer recruitment, training, maintenance and withdrawal. Hence, exploring potential temporal phases associated with volunteer tenure to optimize the volunteer experience and retain volunteers is needed. The purpose of this research is to investigate volunteers for a non-profit organization targeting the homeless population using a volunteer lifecycle approach. Specifically, this research examines psychological determinants and temporal phases to help understand volunteer stages and transition to identify when volunteers are at risk of withdrawing from Back on My Feet (BoMF).

BoMF is a non-profit organisation serving people experiencing homelessness, by engaging them in running as a vehicle to promote self-sufficiency, build confidence, and self-esteem. BoMF depends heavily on its volunteers to lead weekly morning running sessions at 5:30am. Homeless individuals must attend three sessions per week and maintain a 90% attendance record.

Theoretical background

Social exchange theory guides this examination of the volunteer lifecycle for BoMF. Social exchange theory posits that social exchanges comprise actions contingent on the rewarding actions of others, which can provide for rewarding relationships (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Hence, human relationships are formed by the use of a subjective-cost benefit analysis and the comparison of alternatives (Homans, 1958). In the BoMF volunteering context, social exchange theory would suggest that volunteers are more likely to continue volunteering for the organisation when the benefits outweigh the costs. Furthermore, previous research suggests volunteers' transition through distinct stages and withdraws after 1-2 years (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008). The transition and stages can be conceptualized as representing a temporal involvement trajectory similar to the product lifecycle. Hence, this research examines the cost-benefit analysis within social exchange theory from a volunteer lifecycle perspective. Given the substantial time and physical requirements related to BoMF volunteerism, we hypothesize a shorter volunteer lifecycle years will emerge.

Methodology

Quantitative data were collected from registered BoMF volunteers in November 2011. A questionnaire was

administered to 487 registered volunteers who had provided BoMF with a valid email address. Of those, $n = 439$ completed the survey providing a response rate of 90%. Demographic analysis revealed that BoMF volunteers are affluent, well educated, and are predominantly Caucasian. Sixty-eight percent of respondents were female and 87% of respondents indicated that they were still active BoMF volunteers. The questionnaire assessed three psychological measures (Involvement with BoMF 9-items, Volunteer Satisfaction 3-items, and Intention to Continue Volunteering 3-items) All measures were assessed on 7-point Likert scales. Length of volunteer service was collected using categories of: 1 month, 2-3 months, 4-6 months, 7-12 months, 13-18 months, and nineteen months plus.

Results

Respondents length of service ranged from one month ($n = 35$) to over nineteen months ($n = 59$), with the highest proportion of volunteers in the 7-12 month range ($n = 91$). Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to compare length of service category across each psychological measure. Results revealed a linear growth pattern from initial volunteering to a peak of 7-12 months for BoMF Involvement ($M=6.17$) and Satisfaction ($M = 6.54$) before declining. The growth pattern for Intentions to Continue Volunteering ($M=6.61$) peaked at 4-6 months before declining. Notably, although the mean scores for the psychographic measures decreased after the 7-12 month period, a second increase was observed for those who had volunteered beyond 18 months.

The results confirm our hypothesis that the volunteer lifecycle that exists for BoMF may be shorter than reported in other contexts. The lifecycle appears to begin with a growth stage in the first three months, followed by a stabilization stage between 4-7 months. A maturity stage appears to occur between 7-12 months followed by a decline stage that occurs between 12-19 months. However, results suggest that a fifth stage of resurgence occurs at nineteen months, wherein the psychological indicators begin to increase again. This lifecycle suggests that BoMF volunteers with more than a year of service may perceive the cost of involvement beginning to outweigh the benefits and are at risk of withdrawing due to dissatisfaction. However, volunteers who have advanced past this point, demonstrate renewed vigour towards volunteering and the organisation. These results suggest BoMF should introduce various activities and interventions across the different lifecycle stages. Such efforts could allow BoMF to lengthen the maturity stage of the volunteer lifecycle to help postpone the loss of trained volunteers, as well as develop strategies for addressing the factors that contribute to volunteer loss.

References

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