

Learning from the Experiences of Older Adult Volunteers in Sport: Implications for Volunteer Management and Retention

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Keywords: older adults, sport volunteers, volunteer management

Abstract

With an increasing older adult population in many countries, recent research has focused on post-retirement and the leisure habits and preferences of this demographic [e.g., 4, 6, 10].

Research indicates that older adults desire meaningful leisure experiences in order to improve their overall life satisfaction during retirement [6, 10].

Volunteering is one "serious leisure" activity [13] that has been shown to enhance the mental, physical, emotional, and social well-being of older adults by giving them an opportunity for personal growth and social interaction, and a sense of purpose and productivity [5, 9, 14].

At the same time, sport organizations can benefit from the contributions of older adult volunteers, and the maturity, experience, availability, and greater loyalty they provide [5, 7, 12].

Although older adults (aged 65 years and older) do not fit the profile of the typical sport volunteer [3, 2], there is great potential for the increased involvement of this demographic. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore older adults' experiences with volunteering in sport, in order to understand what they perceive to be positive and negative aspects of this leisure activity, and to gain insight that may help sport organizations improve volunteer management and retention pertaining to this group.

Serious leisure is characterized by systematic involvement in an activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for the individual to find extended involvement there in the acquisition and/or expression of particular skills, knowledge, and experience [13]. Research indicates that older adults find leisure opportunities that give them choice in what they do [1, 11], provide challenge [6, 10], and facilitate social interaction [4, 8] are most meaningful and satisfying.

The current study builds on this knowledge by examining older adults' leisure experiences as sport volunteers in particular.

As such, research on sport volunteerism also frames the study. Research shows that sport volunteers are most satisfied by the opportunity to use their skills and past experiences to accomplish worthwhile work [3].

They tend to be particularly dissatisfied with insufficient volunteers to do the work, people who do not follow through on assigned tasks, and the time required [3].

This literature provides a further basis for reflecting on the experiences of older adult volunteers in sport.

Open-ended interviews were conducted with twenty older adult sport volunteers who were volunteering with one or more community sport organizations (n=5 women, n=10 men, average age 72 years). Focusing on their primary organization, participants were asked to describe the positive and negative aspects of their involvement, and what they felt the organization could do to improve their experience as a volunteer. Working independently, and then collectively, the investigators identified common sub-themes from the data within the broader categories outlined by the interview questions.

The older adults identified seven positive aspects of their sport volunteer experience: (1) making a difference to the organization by contributing their time, skills, ideas, and positive attitude, (2) being active and busy, (3) social contact and friendships, (4) being involved in youth and sport development, (5) being part of a legacy of sport in the community, (6) positive organizational dynamics, and (7) recognition and awards for their efforts.

They identified five negative aspects of their sport volunteer experience: (1) negative interpersonal dynamics, (2) negative organizational dynamics or politics, (3) time and effort required, (4) credentials required for volunteering, and (5) not enough other volunteers.

Finally, the older adults identified four ways the organization could improve their sport volunteer experience: (1) volunteers working together, sharing jobs, (2) recruiting more, and new, volunteers, (3) improved organizational processes (e.g., communication), and (4) opportunities to learn new skills.

The findings revealed several parallels with known indicators of older adult leisure satisfaction, and positive and negative aspects of sport volunteering.

Meaningful factors that may be unique to older adult volunteers in sport were also uncovered.

The study enhances our understanding of the older adult leisure experience in general, and in sport volunteering in particular.

Further implications for the management and retention of this potentially important volunteer demographic in sport are discussed.

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