



Understanding Event Volunteer Motivations

Nicole Pinkham, MBA, Linda M. Robson, PhD, William Samenfink, PhD
School of Hospitality Management
Endicott College

Corresponding Author: Linda Robson, School of Hospitality Management, Endicott College, 376
Hale Street, Beverly, MA, 01915. Email: lrobson@endicott.edu

ABSTRACT

Event execution requires staff, which is usually a combination of paid personnel and volunteers. Event volunteer motivation has received a significant amount of attention; however, there has been limited research conducted on the effect of age on volunteer motivation. This study conducted an exploratory examination of Gen Y event volunteer motivations. In contrast to previous research related to Gen Y's volunteer motivations, this study suggests intrinsic factors, such as experiencing a feeling of responsibility, are more important to this generation than previously believed. Based on this research, if event professionals form partnerships with local schools they will have access to a larger pool of experienced volunteers.

KEYWORDS: event volunteer motivation, Gen Y, satisfaction, retention

INTRODUCTION

Executing any type of event requires people, and depending on the size and/or complexity this could mean a lot of people. These people generally take the form of both event staff and volunteers (Downward & Ralston, 2005; Formadi & Mayer, 2009; Nassar & Talaat, 2009). Event staff can be defined as full time or part time paid personnel who provide services for tasks associated with events; whereas volunteers can be defined as people spending time doing unpaid work that benefits a group or individual (Convention Industry Council, 2007; He, Murrmann & Perdue, 2010; Nassar & Talaat, 2009; Randle & Dolnicar, 2009). Event staff usually receives some type of formal training and/or education in events and have been involved with the planning of the event (Fenich & Hasimoto, 2010; Formica, 1998; Getz, 2008; He, et.al, 2010; Kreutzer & Jager, 2010; Walsh & Taylor, 2007). These individuals are looking for growth opportunities and/or plan a career in events.

A volunteer's involvement with an event is generally limited to on-site activities, such as working a registration table (Nassar & Talaat, 2009; Randle & Dolnicar, 2009). With the exception of volunteer organizations, it is rare for event volunteers to be involved with the planning process. This does not diminish their importance to events, in fact many events would not be able to function without an influx of volunteers as they represent a way to lower expenses (Downward, Lumsdon, & Ralston, 2005; Solberg, 2003). In addition, research suggests that the retention of volunteers can be a factor in increasing the success of an event (Clary & Snyder, 1999; Solberg, 2003). Further it has been implied that developing a core group of volunteers who age with the event and who develop core competences in running the event is another event success factor (Downward, et. al., 2005; Solberg, 2003).

As a result of their importance there has been a lot of research that focuses on volunteer motivation and retention (Downward & Ralston, 2005; Karl, et. al., 2008; Nassar & Talaat, 2009; Shields, 2009; Tractenberg, 2006). Some general factors that have been identified as motivation include: helping others, doing something to benefit society, feeling a sense of duty or obligation,

personal development, and social rewards (Downward & Ralston, 2005; Karl, et.al., 2008; Nassar & Talaat, 2009; Tractenberg, 2006).

General volunteer research has indicated that motivations can be influenced by age (Downward & Ralston, 2005; Nassar & Talaat, 2009; Shields, 2009). Younger volunteers, ages 18-24, are known as Generation Y, or Millennials. Some common characteristics of this generation include being numerous, affluent, better educated, and more ethnically diverse (Atkinson, 2004; Hogg, 2013; Howe & Strauss, 2000; McGlone, Spain & McGlone, 2011). In addition, they demonstrate positive social habits, such as teamwork, achievement, modesty, and good conduct (Bland, Melton, Welle, & Bigham, 2012; Miller & Rahe, 1997). Further members of Generation Y tend to be conformist, and want to have an impact on the world, while demonstrating a propensity toward materialism (Atkinson, 2004; Bland, et. al., 2012; Howe et. al., 2000). In terms of volunteering, research suggests they tend to be motivated by the satisfaction received from forming interpersonal relationships (Downward & Ralston, 2005; Nassar & Talaat, 2009; Shields, 2009; Tractenberg, 2006). This is important to young volunteers because they want to be involved in more opportunities where they can expand their professional network or learn new skills and forming these relationships will help them do that (Downward & Ralston, 2005; Nassar & Talaat, 2009; Shields, 2009).

Research also indicates other factors that influence volunteers' motivations (Macduff et. al., 2009; Nassar & Talaat, 2009; Randle & Dolnicar, 2009; Tractenberg, 2006). These are recognition, reward, and satisfaction (Macduff et. al., 2009; Randle & Dolnicar, 2009; Tractenberg, 2006). When volunteer's contributions are recognized they are more likely to stay committed to an organization (Randle & Dolnicar, 2009; Tractenberg, 2006). Simple praise and recognition can keep volunteers motivated and willing to work (Nassar & Talaat, 2009). Organizations sometimes reward their volunteers with a t-shirt or a gift card to show their appreciation. This creates even more loyalty between volunteer and organization (Downward & Ralston, 2005; Karl et. al., 2008; Nassar & Talaat, 2009; Tractenberg, 2006). Satisfaction levels influence motivations and retention because people want to feel like they are contributing to the cause of the event as a volunteer (Clary & Snyder, 1999; Downward, et. al., 2005). If a volunteer is satisfied with their experience, they are likely to volunteer again (Downward, et. al., 2005; Solberg, 2003).

Retention is also affected by the volunteer's evaluation of the organization (Downward & Ralston, 2005; Karl et. al., 2008; Nassar & Talaat, 2009; Tractenberg, 2006). The volunteer will familiarize themselves with an organization's mission, vision, goals and objectives to see if it fits with their motivations to create a relationship between volunteer and organization (Macduff et. al., 2009; Tractenberg, 2006). This sense of relationship then creates a sense of loyalty which can result in returning volunteers (Karl et. al, 2008; Nassar & Talaat, 2009; Tractenberg, 2006).

A volunteer will also evaluate an organization based on the training they receive in preparation for an event (Downward, et. al., 2005; Karl et. al, 2008; Nassar & Talaat, 2009; Tractenberg, 2006). Research suggests that training should be provided according to the specific tasks the volunteer will be performing and should effectively match the type of skills the

volunteer possesses (Downward, et. al., 2005; Nassar & Talaat, 2009). If training is provided, volunteers' work within the organization and their commitment to the organization will be enhanced because of the familiarity and understanding they will have (Karl et. al, 2008; Tractenberg, 2006).

Although research has been conducted on volunteer motivations and retention, there has been little research that studies the relationship between them. In addition, the existing research lacks depth in examining the motivation of younger volunteers. Limited research indicates that younger volunteers, ages 18-24, tend to be motivated by the satisfaction received from the event (Downward & Ralston, 2005; Nassar & Talaat, 2009; Shields, 2009; Tractenberg, 2006). In an attempt to fill this gap this research will survey event volunteers, ages 18-24, in order to discover the relationship between motivations and retention.

METHODOLOGY

Questions for the instrument were developed through the literature review process, and consisted of closed-ended, open-ended, and scale questions. A 5-point Likert Scale was used in many of the survey questions in order to measure the attitudes of volunteers; 1 being very unimportant or very dissatisfied and 5 being very important or very satisfied. A pilot survey was tested with the target population and other academics. The focus of this pilot survey was on content, ease of understanding, coherence, spelling and grammar. Minor changes were made to the survey after the pilot survey was administered and feedback was received.

The target population for this research was volunteers, ages 18-24, who worked an event within the last year. The questionnaire was distributed in two forms, the first using an online survey company, Survey Monkey; the second a hard copy distributed at an actual event. The online distribution of the questionnaire was done through social network groups as well as sent out to personal contacts. This allowed for a greater geographic distribution. Additionally, the questionnaire was distributed at the Special Olympics of Massachusetts Bowling Tournament. Through a personal acquaintance, the researchers knew the volunteers at this event would be part of the target population because most volunteers would be college-aged students

The questionnaire went live on Facebook on March 2, 2011. The purpose of the questionnaire was explained and potential respondents were invited to participate using a link to Survey Monkey. The questionnaire was open until March 18, 2012. Hard copies of the survey were distributed on March 25th at the Special Olympics of Massachusetts Bowling Tournament.

A total of 55 of questionnaires were started. After removing unqualified respondents and those questionnaires that were incomplete, a total of 42 usable questionnaires remained. In hospitality and tourism exploratory research, convenience sampling is the most commonly used non-probability sampling method (Baloglu & Assante, 1999; Cooper & Schindler, 2000; Salant & Dillman, 1994; Smith, 2010). In addition, it is generally accepted that with exploratory research a smaller sample size is acceptable (McMillan & Schumacher, 1989). The limitations of a convenience sample are well known but in this type of exploratory research; the researchers deemed them to be acceptable as the results would not be generalized to the larger population.

RESULTS

A total of 33 of 42 respondents, or 78.6% were female. Respondents indicated they had obtained some college education (73.8%), with the majority ages 21 (38.1%) and 20 (28.6%). Well over half of the respondents (69.0%) had volunteered previously, and had an average of 3.5 volunteer experiences in 2011.

Helping others (92.9%) and for a good cause (76.2%) were the most common reasons for volunteering, followed by gaining new experience (69.0%), giving back to the community (69.0%), and interest in the event (62.0%). With the exception of “meeting celebrities/famous people”, the motivational factors ranged from neither important nor unimportant to very important.

Table 1. Motivation Importance

Criteria	Mean
Helping others	4.6
For a good cause	4.6
Gaining new experience	4.4
Giving back to the community	4.4
Interest in event	4.4
Career experience	4.2
Looks good on resume	3.8
New skills	3.8
Personal development/Self-confidence	3.8
Requirement (school, job, church, etc)	3.7
Desire to meet new people	3.6
To socialize with friends	3.4
Group belonging	3.3
Meeting celebrities/famous people	3.0

N=42

Respondents were overwhelmingly satisfied with their most recent volunteer experience. Correspondingly 90.4% indicated they would be likely to volunteer again. Interestingly 12.0% of respondents felt they received nothing from their volunteer experience, while 76.2% indicated a feeling of responsibility as a result of their volunteer experience.

Table 2. Volunteer Experience

Characteristic	Percentage
Satisfaction	
Very Dissatisfied	0.0
Dissatisfied	0.0
Neither Dissatisfied or Satisfied	7.0
Satisfied	45.0
Very Satisfied	48.0
<i>N=42</i>	
Likelihood to Volunteer Again	
Very Unlikely	4.8
Unlikely	2.4
Neither Unlikely or Likely	2.4
Likely	45.2
Very Likely	45.2
<i>N=42</i>	
Received as Part of Experience	
Training	23.8
Recognition	33.3
Rewards	19.0
Feeling of Responsibility	76.2
None	12.0
<i>N=42</i>	

The feeling of responsibility was skewed toward very important as related to respondent satisfaction. Although only 23.8% of respondents received training, this factor was skewed toward important in relation to satisfaction. Similarly 33.3% of respondents received recognition, which was skewed toward important in terms of their satisfaction. Interestingly, rewards were considered neither important nor unimportant to volunteer satisfaction.

Table 3. Volunteer Satisfaction

Criteria	Mean
A feeling of responsibility	4.2
Training	3.7
Recognition (praise, award, thanked publically)	3.4
Rewards (gifts, money, t-shirts)	2.9

N=42

CONCLUSIONS

Gen Y and Volunteer Motivations

The overall body of knowledge on volunteering indicates that helping others, doing something to benefit society, feeling a sense of duty or obligation, personal development, and social rewards are the most common motivations (Atkinson, 2004; Bland, et. al., 2012; Downward & Ralston, 2005; Karl, et.al., 2008; Nassar & Talaat, 2009; Tractenberg, 2006). The research on the motivation of younger volunteers suggests they tend to be motivated by the satisfaction received from forming interpersonal relationships (Downward & Ralston, 2005; Nassar & Talaat, 2009; Tractenberg, 2006).

Results from the current study indicate that Gen Y motivations are more in line with the overall volunteer motivations. Motivations related to career development and/or advancement and developing interpersonal relationships were skewed toward neither important nor unimportant; whereas motivations of helping others, a belief in a good cause, or to give back to the community were skewed toward very important. This can be explained by the inclusion of volunteer experiences in the graduation requirements for many high schools. This curriculum places an emphasis on volunteer experiences as benefitting the individual by making them a “global citizen”, and an active contribution to their community. In addition some colleges require a volunteer experience as part of service learning courses, meaning students are able to continue this experience.

Gen Y Experience and Satisfaction

The literature suggests that when volunteers’ contributions are recognized they are more likely to stay committed to an organization (Randle & Dolnicar, 2009; Tractenberg, 2006). This recognition can occur in the form of simple praise or gifts such as a t-shirt or a gift card (Downward & Ralston, 2005; Goldblatt, 2010; Karl, et al., 2008; Nassar & Talaat, 2009). It is suggested that this creates even more loyalty between the volunteer and organization (Downward & Ralston, 2005; Karl et. al., 2008; Nassar & Talaat, 2009; Tractenberg, 2006). Respondents in the current study indicated that rewards were neither unimportant nor important and that recognition was unimportant; however, they did indicate that experiencing a feeling of responsibility as a result of the volunteer experience was important. This suggests that intrinsic rewards are more important for satisfaction levels than tangible, generic rewards.

In addition to recognition and gifts, the literature suggests that training plays an important role in volunteer satisfaction and retention (Downward, et. al., 2005; Nassar & Talaat, 2009). To be effective training should be tailored to the specific tasks the volunteer will be performing and match the type of skills the volunteer possesses. By doing this, volunteers’ work within the organization and their commitment to the organization will be enhanced through a sense of familiarity and deeper understanding of the organization’s mission (Karl et. al, 2008; Tractenberg, 2006). In the current study, results indicated that training was important to respondents. Although respondents were asked about overall training versus task specific training, the level of satisfaction suggests specificity is not always necessary. All respondents

reported receiving general training, an interest in the event, and an intention to repeat their volunteer experience. It could be inferred from this data that task specific training is not necessary for retention, instead training should be focused on increasing a volunteer's familiarity with the event thus resulting in a higher level of retention.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A recommendation for future research would be to target an equal gender distribution for respondents. This would test the existing assumption that gender does not have an impact on volunteer participation. An article in Forbes has indicated that the ratio of male to female students is 43.6-56.4 (Borzelleca, 2012). The respondents from the current study were from a local college, which would explain the dominance of females.

Conducting research at multiple and differing types of events would allow for the collection of more diverse data. This would allow for an examination of the effect of the type of event on volunteer motivations and retention. The current study primarily focused on one event which limits the degree to which connections can be made to other types of events.

Studying the organizations would be another avenue for future research. This would allow for an examination of techniques and practices used by different organizations for volunteer recruitment, training and retention. This type of study would collect data that could be tested for effectiveness which could lead to the development of best practices.

SIGNIFICANCE

This study conducted an exploratory examination of Gen Y event volunteer motivations. In contrast to previous research related to Gen Y's volunteer motivations, this study suggests intrinsic factors, such as experiencing a feeling of responsibility, are more important to this generation than previously believed. Becoming a global citizen and contributing to the community through volunteering is part of their high school education, making it part of the generation's culture. Based on this research, if event professionals form partnerships with local schools they will have access to a larger pool of experienced volunteers.

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