Community Volunteering
Understanding Motivation
Sustaining Participation
Capturing Benefits

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Research Overview

Background
There are approximately 2000 volunteering-involving organisations in Tasmania. Data collected by Volunteering Tasmania in 2014 noted that the most active volunteers were in the 65-74 year age group. In order to sustain the volunteer workforce, it recommended further research on the motivations for, and constraints to, participation.

Volunteering has been linked to lower rates of mortality, increases in physical health and improved mental health. At a population level, increasing the volunteer workforce may be seen as a preventative, public health intervention, addressing the poor health and wellbeing outcomes of Tasmanians.

There are a range of support organisations for Tasmanian volunteers. These generally focus on only one sector or category of volunteering. Volunteering Tasmania is an organisation that provides a range of material for volunteer coordinators/organisations across sectors and categories and does provide a brief fact sheet on the benefits of volunteering but this is not targeted. The material developed in this project provides a more detailed, evidence-based information sourced from local experience and will address the specific motivations and sustainability requirements of individual categories and sectors of volunteer.

The literature suggests that motivation to volunteer will vary across individuals and groups and will change over time. Understanding the benefits that current Tasmanian volunteers receive from this activity will provide the kinds of key messages needed to sustain this workforce.

Method
An on-line survey gathered information on respondents' demographics, health status, volunteer activity, and motivations for volunteering (N=864). Six in-depth focus group discussions investigated the results in more detail, allowing for follow-up questions, and examples to illustrate the points being made (N=30).

Survey
This project captured Tasmanian data on the physical and psychological health benefits of volunteering measuring: self-esteem, social connectedness, career, environment, altruism, learning and resilience. Respondents ranked the benefits of volunteering in the following order:

- Altruistically express personal values
- Providing learning opportunities
- Expressing environmental concerns
- Growing and develop psychologically
- Fulfilling the expectations of significant people in their lives
- Building resilience in the face of negative experiences
- Furthering their careers
- Career development is not the primary benefit of volunteering, it is a common secondary concern.
Different groups of volunteers experienced different benefits.
- The younger you are, the more you are likely to benefit from volunteering.
- People who were not employed, or who were casually employed, believed that volunteering helped them gain the experience and expertise that would help them get work in the future.
- Health impacts on what activities are undertaken and what benefits are gained.
- Gender matters: women and men have different volunteering experiences.

Focus Groups
Six focus groups were undertaken in the South, North and North West of Tasmania, in order to investigate questions associated with how to encourage more people to volunteer, strategies that volunteer organisations can use to help sustain volunteer involvement over time. The following themes were captured from the focus groups, in order of frequency:

1. Promotion which highlights & offers benefits (including health benefits)
2. People who volunteer are self-motivated and interested in the activity
3. The benefits of volunteering should outweigh the costs
4. Flexibility and diversity in activities
5. Made to feel valued through reward and acknowledgement
6. Volunteers selling volunteering
7. Normalising volunteering

Findings
The study found that volunteers and organisations can do the following to motivate, sustain and capture the benefits of volunteering:

**VOLUNTEERS can ...**
- Motivate others
- Self-motivate
- Understand benefits

**ORGANISATIONS can ...**
- Make benefits outweigh costs
- Provide flexibility and diversity
- Create normalising partnerships

Potential Volunteers
Motivate Others to Volunteer

Our research shows that many have started volunteering after encouragement by other volunteers. In one in three survey respondents volunteers either knew someone who was involved in the volunteering or were asked by someone to volunteer.

“Because you can talk to people about your volunteering experience, it gives them much more insight” - Hobart

Spruiking volunteering
Current volunteers can bring the passion and knowledge to encourage other individuals to engage in volunteering. Modelling volunteering behaviour and spruiking the benefits to like-minded individuals may create the best results when seeking new volunteers. Our study found that volunteers who enjoyed the activities often spoke to others about their positive experience and encouraged their participation in volunteering.

Skill sharing
Teaching others is a satisfying and motivating act. Mentoring other volunteers was highlighted as a key factor for people wanting to pass on knowledge and skills or for those who wanted to learn from experienced individuals. Volunteers expressed enjoyment and motivation to continue volunteering as a result of helping others grow and develop.

Self- Motivate by Seeking Opportunities

Many people volunteer in one or more areas of interest only, such as aged care, land care, or animal welfare and are self-motivated to participate in the cause they are assisting. Our research found that promotion should keep in mind that, while different groups will be motivated by different benefits, when volunteers engage with their particular cause or activities, they also expand and deepen their knowledge and understanding.

For a cause
People who volunteer either care about the activity or the cause, which they volunteer their time to support. Additionally, the level of a person’s involvement is determined by their level of motivation or care for the activity they are undertaking. Organisations need to tap into what people are already interested in and driven by for the best chance of continued commitment. The two key areas of volunteer work identified in the survey were community and the environment.

Community
Caring about others in need and giving back to the community provided motivation for many respondents in our study. Community volunteering referred to supporting children in state care, animals and families as well as volunteering in areas that allowed
for social connection with other community members family and their children. In some cases volunteering was generational and was a family tradition.

**Environment**
Helping preserve the environment for the future motivates many people to volunteer. Environmental protection and improvement of natural areas and animal habitats were highlighted by respondents as factors for volunteering to preserve Tasmania’s environmental spaces for future generations.

**Skill development**
Learning can keep the mind and body active at any age. Our research found that many people engage in volunteering activities because of the training and learning opportunities. Others like to maintain skills they no longer use or enhance those they already have. Learning can be a great motivation to inspire individuals to get involved.

**Understand Volunteering Benefits**

One in three survey respondents in our study sought out volunteering opportunities on their own. People who are interested in volunteering will seek out fulfilling opportunities. Our research shows that the strongest benefit volunteers enjoy is the chance to express their *values in action*.

**Value expression**
Volunteering is a self-less act of devoting one’s time to help other people, care for nature or protect animals. Our Volunteering in Tasmania study found that embraced the opportunity to express their values through their volunteering activities such as giving back to people in need or environmental preservation.

**Health**
The health benefits of volunteering have been widely documented including a reduced risk of disease and improved physical fitness. Our study found that many people chose to volunteer to improve or maintain their health, this was especially true for older people who were now retired and wanted to remain active.

**Social connection**
Older volunteers also valued the opportunities to connect with others that volunteering provided them. Volunteering can reduce isolation provide a sense of worth and enjoyment. Some respondents noted that they volunteered with friends and family members as a social activity they could do together.

**Career**
Younger people will often seek out volunteering activities which provide training and experience to gain employment. While career development was not identified as a primary benefit of volunteering, it is a common secondary motivator for many study participants.

“It challenges me to use my skills in a different way”
– Burnie
What ORGANISATIONS can do

Make benefits outweigh costs

Several benefits for volunteers have been highlighted in our research including skill development, supporting a cause, value expression, health benefits, social connection and career opportunities. However, there are still a number of things that organisations can do beyond what the individual volunteer can control. For example, some volunteering activities require out of pocket expenses such as working with vulnerable people and children checks, police checks, parks passes, first aid certificates, etc. Our focus group discussions found out of pocket expenses can deter individuals from volunteering if they are over and above the benefits received from the experience.

Minimal costs

If organisations can cover some or all out of pocket expenses they are more likely to attract a wider range of volunteers and assist in volunteers feeling valued and appreciated. However, given that many organisations who employ volunteers are charities, covering expenses is not always viable. Keeping the costs low and compensating by providing rewards for volunteers such as free training and certificates of participation can go a long way in still encouraging participation.

Personal values in activities

Research respondents expressed how volunteering gave them the opportunity to express their personal values about the world. This included helping others, the community, the environment or selflessly supporting a cause they felt passionate about and that volunteering allowed them to do this. The results found that people were more than willing to give up their time because being able to volunteer in an area of interest was a benefit that outweighed the cost of their time.

Provide Flexibility & Diversity

What motivates and sustains volunteers can also provide insight into how to increase the number of individuals who sign up including cost free activities, flexibility and benefits. We found that regular utilisation and engagement of volunteers is needed to maintain their interest and volunteering momentum.

Flexibility of time

Providing volunteers with a routine which works for them is important, i.e. some volunteers prefer to volunteer when they are available while others prefer a regular routine like the same day each week. Flexibility was an important factor for study respondents who volunteer regularly and certainly in cases where they also had other commitments.
Activity diversity
As with any activity, motivation can be assisted by varying the activities of volunteers. This issue was highlighted in our research findings.

Volunteer-directed
Volunteer leadership should be recognised, utilised and developed in order to motivate more people to move into the ‘high-commitment’ sub-group. This is the five percent of the volunteer workforce that, in our survey, were involved in many different volunteer groups and/or volunteered a significant percentage of their time.

Create Normalising Partnerships
A key factor in continuing motivation is to have the structural arrangements in place for volunteering to be a normal part of Tasmanian life. Partnership development is an important part of the work of peak bodies such as Volunteering Tasmania http://www.volunteeringtas.org.au/

Work experience
Employing organisations can emphasise the value of volunteering by viewing unpaid work (volunteering) just as valuable as paid work. This would encourage and provide opportunities for people to gain skills and experience to access paid employment. There are a broad range of volunteering opportunities through local government, for example, such as shown in the City of Hobart website: http://www.hobartcity.com.au/Community/Volunteers

Employer support
Employers can provide opportunities and encourage employees to undertake volunteering activities by including this commitment in policies and procedures which accommodate employee participation. Two examples show how this can work in practice: Hydro Tasmania https://www.hydro.com.au/community/community-program/employee-volunteering-program and the Royal Automobile Club of Tasmania http://www.ract.com.au/volunteerprogram

Volunteering in education
The inclusion of volunteering in education also normalises this activity. This can happen at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. The University of Tasmania Vice-Chancellor’s Leadership Program formally recognises and celebrates student contributions to a broad range of areas including volunteering, research and industry experience. http://www.utas.edu.au/students/lead-achieve/vice-chancellors-leadership-program

Work for the dole
Many people undertake volunteering activities as a requirement of receiving income benefits. During the focus group discussions, the importance and value provided to these participants was highlighted and normalising this activity and the benefits it provides individuals beyond receiving a payment should be recognised. More information about this scheme is available at https://www.employment.gov.au/work-dole

“Changing your volunteering if you’re getting a bit stale in a certain area.” - Hobart
**Conclusion**
Both volunteer-involving organisations and volunteers themselves can take effective action to increase, sustain and enhance the volunteer workforce. Some strategies are listed below.

| Increase participation in volunteering | • express values  
| | • enhance career  
| Motivate & sustain the existing volunteer workforce | • life-long learning, development  
| | • strengthen familial, social, community connections  
| | • minimise costs  
| More volunteers into the high-commitment segment | • opportunities for authentic leadership, mentoring  
| | • self-motivation and recognition  
| | • flexibility  
| Will vary by sector, demographics | • people, animals, environment  
| | • benefits younger, marginally employed, women  

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