Integrated Review of Volunteer Retention and Implications for Training

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Abstract

Nonprofit human service organizations rely heavily on volunteers, and the expenses incurred through the volunteer training process amplifies the importance of retention. A review of the literature on human service volunteer retention shows three key factors recurring around the globe and across fields of research: motivation, satisfaction, and socialization. This paper explores these factors and their interrelationships as well as implications for training program design. The small number of studies focused specifically on retention as it relates to training illustrates a gap in the recent research and may be an appropriate avenue for future research.

Keywords: human service, nonprofit, volunteer retention, training

Introduction

Nonprofit human service organizations provide underserved populations with services that fulfill basic human needs, such as food, shelter, and medical care, or services that allow people to fill those needs for themselves (i.e., adult literacy, child care, after school programs). The services are crucial to the health of communities and the well-being of its residents, particularly in countries with privatized care. Volunteers are a necessity for many nonprofit human service organizations because of the financial realities in the nonprofit sector. For example, there are 62.2 million volunteers in the U.S. with an estimated annual value of $184 billion (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2016), whereas over 11 million people are employed by nonprofits in the U.S. with total annual wages of $532 billion (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Budgets are tight, grants carry stipulations about how funds can be spent, and staffing is a major expense for any type of organization. Volunteers ease some of the financial burden, but high turnover coupled with expenses inherent in training remain a constant strain (Pichler, Varma, Yu, Beenen, & Davoudpour, 2014; Selden, Lee, & Thompson, 2013; Selden & Sowa, 2015). Training volunteers is costly, and because human services, including those operating through heavy use of volunteers, save lives and improve the quality of life for those in need, it is important to consider retention during the training and development process.

Though the relationship between retention and training is intertwined (Skoglund, 2006; Claxton-Oldfield, 2016), little research has been done in recent years to connect the two in either a practical or theoretical way. The connection between training and short-term retention is clear, and most of the available literature links the two at this early stage (Bright, Shovali, & Cooper, 2016; Zhou & Shang, 2011). Conversely, the research has not explored fully the relationship

between long-term retention and training or the continuing effects of initial training, retraining, and cross-functional training, which may remain relevant to volunteer retention regardless of duration of service.

Although the literature has not fully developed theories on training's effect on volunteer retention in nonprofit human service organizations, a significant amount of research has found a few key elements that are crucial to retention: motivation, satisfaction, and socialization. In addition to an investigation of training-specific research findings, this review of available literature will include the motivation, satisfaction, and socialization retention factors and their implications for the design of training programs.

Search Methods

The search performed for this review utilized online databases of scholarly content, consisting primarily of by-proxy searches through Google Scholar. Results were pulled from more than 300 online information services through libraries at University of Phoenix as well as all available resources at Purdue University libraries. The method provided full text journal articles as well as dissertations, theses, and other peer-reviewed content. Additionally, searches of related journals were performed, including *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership, The Nonprofit Quarterly, Nonprofit Management and Leadership, Journal for Nonprofit Management,* and *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*. Key words included "human service", "volunteer retention", nonprofit, non-profit, not-for-profit, training, learning, and/or "learning theory". As the primary interest was recent research, results were limited to content published between 2006 and 2016. When possible, only human service-specific information was considered, though

research that encompasses other types of nonprofit organizations may have been included if

particularly relevant.

Scope of Literature Review

In total, the literature search resulted in 50 sources. Medical and sports volunteerism are

the two most prominent and frequent fields, several of which have been included, though the

intent of this review is not to highlight particular fields of research. Popular topics in the

literature include burnout and retention of certain age groups, both of which have been included

peripherally. The sources also offer insights from around the world. Many have a global focus

while others provide case studies from particular countries. All appear in the review because

motivation, satisfaction, and socialization cross cultures. The primary focus of the review,

however, is the underlying reasons for an organizations' success or failure to retain volunteers

and the implications for training.

Training

Researchers agree that initial training is crucial for volunteer retention (Haski-Leventhal

& Bargal, 2008; Galindo-Kuhn & Guzley, 2001). The effects of training can be far reaching

because volunteers expect to receive training and gain new abilities in return for time donated to

an organization (Stirling, Kilpatrick, & Orpin, 2011). Furthermore, "organizations attempt to

address their needs for learning through developing and implementing training programs or

providing such opportunities to their employees in other venues through outsourcing them"

(Azevedo & Akdere, 2011, p. 399). Opportunities for professional growth and development

through charitable pursuits are expected to such a degree that even for-profit businesses

sometimes encourage employee involvement in philanthropic activities to improve the hard and

soft skills of their workforces (Perigo, 2010). In the nonprofit sector, role mastery leads

volunteers to feel committed to organizations and their roles within them (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008), but this mastery requires support from the institution as well as a strong training program. As might be expected, the complete or partial absence of training can be problematic, particularly where retention is concerned. If training consists primarily of on-the-job and hands-on training with supervision from staff or long-term volunteers, trainees may feel overwhelmed and unsupported (Haski-Leventhal & Bargel, 2008). If training is insufficient for the tasks required, volunteers will struggle to fulfill their roles and burnout more quickly than their well-trained counterparts (Zhou & Shang, 2011).

Initial training is inarguably important, but continued learning is also essential and may become necessary as volunteers reach the critical burnout stage, as training has shown to be an effective means of combatting and/or preventing burnout (Worthington, 2008; Claxton-Oldfield, 2016). Improved skills and experience enrichment are both benefits of providing opportunities for learning long after a volunteer begins service, and one study showed the practice to be a "very important factor" for 59% of those who continued working with an organization (Stamer, Lerdall, & Guo, 2008). Claxton-Oldfield (2016) suggests ongoing workshops and other educational activities to reduce stressors that lead to burnout as well. Conversely, a lack of training and learning opportunities may lead to high rates of attrition. Burnout may begin to occur for volunteers who have worked at an organization for 10 hours or more per week for 10 months (Jansen, 2010). The stress and emotional costs begin to decrease satisfaction and lead to feelings of burnout, especially for those involved in social work. For example, an empirical study by Andrea Galiette Skoglund (2006) found that inadequate training was the most common reason for burnout among grief counselors.

Retention Factors

The literature highlights many key elements involved in the retention of volunteers. However, the three most common and, seemingly, most fundamental are motivation, satisfaction, and socialization. There is a considerable amount of overlap for the three factors as well. Satisfaction relates strongly to motivation. If the realization of a volunteer's motivation is not met, he or she may become dissatisfied with their volunteer experience (Hyde, Dunn, Wust, Bax, & Chambers, 2016). Conversely, if the motivation is realized, volunteers will be more satisfied with the experience (Ferriera, Proença, & Proença, 2015). Self-satisfaction also appears as a motivational factor (Phillips & Phillips, 2011; Waikayi, Fearon, Morris, & McLaughlin, 2012). A number of studies have linked satisfaction levels with socialization as well (Huynh, Metzer, & Winefield, 2011; Hyde et al., 2016).

Motivation Factor

Motivation is possibly the most common factor studied in retention research, and the motivational elements that occur most frequently are altruism, social, and learning. Although stated in countless ways, "altruism" generally relates to an individual's values and desire to help people or their communities. Social motivations may include intrapersonal relationship building, strengthening ties to the community, and third-party encouragement to participate, while learning relates to skills and experiences that could enhance a volunteer's life or career.

At times, the literature makes a distinction between motivation to volunteer and motivation to continue volunteering (Bussell & Forbes, 2002; Okun & Eisenberg, 1992; Rundle-Thiele & Auld, 2009). The motivation behind the initial decision to volunteer is an important consideration for recruitment and retention, but a volunteer's motivation to continue providing volunteer services also may be essential to understanding training's role in retention, as

opportunities to learn new skills have been shown to play a role in duration of volunteer service (Stirling et al., 2011). For this reason, motivations for both initial and continued volunteerism have been included.

Motivation to be altruistic

Altruism is likely the first motivational factor that comes to mind in relation to volunteerism, and for good reason: It is one of the most frequently cited and studied reasons for volunteering, though terminology may differ. The desire to "make a difference" is a primary reason for volunteers' involvement in a nonprofit organization (Bright, et al., 2016). One empirical study found that values, including the desire to improve the community and help people, were the top motivation for 94.8% of volunteers surveyed (Phillips & Phillips, 2011). The self-satisfaction and deeper connections with the community gained from helping others, however, is often viewed as a personal gain as well (Bright, et al., 2016), which creates overlap with other categories of motivation. Based on the literature (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008; Galindo-Kuhn & Guzley, 2001), volunteer training programs will be more effective if they address altruistic motivation by clarifying who will be helped, how they will be helped, and the magnitude of the work's importance.

Motivation to socialize

Social opportunities provided by voluntary human service is another strong motivator for many volunteers. The social factor consists of groups including fellow volunteers, the organization's staff members, and community leaders. Haski-Leventhal and Bargal (2008) found that social and altruistic reasons were two primary motivations for the first stage of volunteering (i.e., the application stage). Building new friendships and romantic relationships were both connected with the desire to begin the volunteer signup process. Developing soft skills and

experience in working with people who have diverse backgrounds and cultures also is appealing

to many volunteers (Waikayi et al., 2012), especially younger volunteers who have had fewer

life experiences. In addition to socializing with the aforementioned groups, the prospect of

building relationships with those in need is a social motivator that overlaps with altruism.

Volunteers may want to help, "save", or make a difference in the lives of the people receiving

aid from the organization (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008). Orientation training programs that

emphasize relationship building and provide means to socialize with other volunteers and staff

members may address the social motivation at the earliest possible stage in the volunteer process,

leading to improved retention rates (Akdere & Schmidt, 2007a).

Motivation to learn

The opportunity to learn is the motivational factor that has the most obvious connection

to training, as learning is a fundamental part of training and development in general (Noe, 2016).

The desire to learn new skills attracts not only individual volunteers (Waikayi et al., 2012) but

also private sector companies looking to further develop employee skills through volunteer

opportunities (Perigo, 2010). Organizations that allow volunteers to develop relationships with

mentors and match career interests with service tasks retain more volunteers (McBride & Lee,

2012). According to Waikayi et al. (2012), this is particularly true for younger volunteers, for

whom a key reason for volunteering is the ability to learn new skills that may be useful for their

future careers or studies. In fact, for volunteers under the age of 25, simply experiencing a work

environment can be a major motivator. Young volunteers seeking to gain work experience and

skills may have shorter lengths of service than older volunteers, which has led to

recommendations of student volunteer tracks of shorter duration (Bright et al., 2016). Despite the

shorter service durations, opportunities to learn is a deciding factor in whether young volunteers

remain with an organization. While older volunteers may be satisfied with short training, their

younger counterparts prefer a deeper understanding of their tasks (Stirling et al., 2011). The

depth and quality of training may differ among volunteers across a range of ages, but offering

thorough skills training and future development opportunities, particularly as elective options,

will aid in both short- and long-term retention.

Self-fulfillment and personal satisfaction factor

Self-fulfilment and personal satisfaction is a retention factor that relates strongly to

training as well as both the motivation and socialization retention factors. Existing literature

indicates that high levels of satisfaction may be achieved through a focus on enjoyment and

social opportunities in the organization (Hyde et al., 2016; Galindo-Kuhn & Guzley, 2001) as

well as task-related traits like increased job autonomy (Ching-Fu & Ting, 2014; Galindo-Kuhn &

Guzley, 2001). Another frequent finding is the need for volunteers to know what to expect when

service begins, both environmentally and their roles in the organizations. Role specificity in the

form of requirements, responsibilities, and role boundaries may be viewed as essential

requirements of training (Hong, Morrow-Howell, Tang, & Hinterlong, 2009) but have the

potential to be overlooked in an organization's haste to put volunteers to work. Burke (2015)

takes the philosophy a step further, stating that both establishing expectations and "creating

routines" during training helps to sustain a volunteer program (Burke, 2015). There is some risk

in creating fun, social, and entertaining orientation experiences for volunteers because of the

potential for creating an upbeat tone contradictory to the magnitude of the services provided.

However, orientation programs designed to encompass structural elements related to the work

performed as well as fun and social aspects may provide balance and lead to higher retention

rates.

Imparting the importance of the service provided by volunteers is crucial to high levels of satisfaction as well, which relates back to the altruistic motivation. Volunteers want to help people and will be more satisfied if they perceive their work as useful. As such, it is important to communicate to volunteers the significance and value of their contributions. In addition to providing further balance to a "fun" orientation program, explaining the value and importance of services provided fosters stronger commitment to the organization as a whole and functions as part of socialization during training (Ching-Fu & Ting). This finding is illustrated by the five stages of volunteer service researched by Haski-Leventhal and Bargal (2008). These stages include *nominee* (one to two months prior to volunteering), *newcomer* (entrance to three months of service), *emotional involvement* (four to eight months of service), *established* (after one year of service), and *retiring* (between one and two years of service). Satisfaction is lowest during the application period and first few months of service (the nominee and newcomer stages, respectively) because volunteers have not yet witnessed the positive effects of their work. The emotional involvement stage has the highest satisfaction rate, as volunteers have a deep connection to the organization and have developed relationships with the service recipients, increasing the perceived meaningfulness of the volunteer activities. However, it is important to note that the high satisfaction rate in the third stage comes with high emotional costs as well. Taking into account these findings, human service organization's volunteer retention rates may be improved by bolstering satisfaction levels during initial training and offering later training and development for stress reducing techniques.

Socialization Factor

Socialization has been defined as "the process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role" (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979;

p. 211). Providing volunteers with an understanding of the organizational culture is crucial to the socialization process. A study conducted on reasons for volunteer attrition in Oregon's Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program found that 34% of the most discouraging factors to the continuation of volunteer activities related to the organization itself (Nelson, Netting, Borders, & Huiber, 2004). Of the organization-related factors, "poor program support" and "conflicts with the central office" had the highest response rates. By comparison, personal factors, such as health issues and a lack of time or transportation, were chosen only 10% of the time. Some of the issues can be resolved before they begin by allotting time during orientation training for explaining proper lines of communication, including who volunteers report to during regular service activities, who to contact during emergencies or for special circumstances, and how the volunteer roles relate to the organizational structure.

Though training should explain communication and organizational structure, the flow of information and development should continue long past orientation. Support from the paid staff and/or the organization itself, which may take the form of constructive feedback, strong lines of communication, and other work resources, appears frequently as criteria for retention (Sellon, 2014; Ching-Fu & Ting, 2014; Studer, 2016). These factors are necessary to build organizational commitment, which is essential to volunteer retention, particularly for long-term volunteers. Long-term volunteers need strong ties to the mission and values of the organization to maintain volunteer status, whereas engaging volunteers for short periods of time requires increasing satisfaction through emphasis of social and enjoyment motives (Hyde et al., 2016). This appears to be true across situations and countries. In an examination of high-turnover through the European Voluntary Service (EVS) program, which provides volunteers to organizations for one year or less, Burke (2015) argues that preserving institutional memory is necessary for improving

volunteer commitment. Essentially, if the more established volunteers embrace the

organization's culture and share their collective skills and experiences, it could aid in retention

and provide needed stability. All further training and development programs for volunteers

should reemphasize the organization's values and explain how the new skills or information will

support its vision, mission and goals.

If an organization's processes are not compatible with inspiring commitment, changes

may be required. Increasing institutional capacity, an organization's ability to create roles for

volunteers, is the most effective method for maximizing the benefits of volunteerism (Hong et

al., 2009). Increasing institutional capacity may involve changes to training programs, increased

job flexibility, and the provision of resources to create a better fit for the volunteer. Resources

alone may not be enough, however. A feeling of connectedness with the organization has been

shown to mediate the relationship between resources and satisfaction as well as resources and the

desire to continue volunteering (Huynh et al., 2011). Connectedness and commitment may be

gained by incorporating management styles that are friendly and positive toward volunteers

(Waikayi et al., 2012). It may be useful to provide volunteers with a glimpse into the daily

activities of staff members working in high-stress environments because empathy may help to

offset perceived negativity.

Implications for Training

The literature on training suggests that orientation training should not be skipped or

shortened. Retention rates may improve through provision of an in-depth orientation training

program to explain who will benefit from services provided and to provide clear expectations

before beginning on-the-job training. Because satisfaction levels are strongly tied to altruistic

motivations, there may be advantages inherent in explaining who volunteers will serve and how

the community will benefit from their service. The relationship between satisfaction and socialization is supported as well. Ensuring that role specifications are communicated before on-the-job training begins may allow trainees to feel less overwhelmed and better supported, which may prevent early burnout. Organizations also may want to consider inclusion at orientation sessions of a volunteer who has worked for several months. The freshness of their own training may help the experienced volunteer to better prepare trainees for environmental expectations.

A thorough orientation period also will provide an opportunity to introduce new volunteers to the organization, which aides in socialization of volunteers and may increase satisfaction levels (Akdere & Schmidt, 2007b). The orientation period allows an organization to begin the on-boarding process needed for commitment. The mission and vision should be communicated in a manner that may serve as a foundation for volunteer buy-in, increasing the desire for involvement. Explicit descriptions of the volunteers' roles in accomplishing the mission and vision also may strengthen connectedness with the organization and cause (Schmidt & Akdere, 2007). Additionally, orientation is a reasonable time to explain the organization's lines of communication. If volunteers know how to get help or feedback from the onset, they may feel more accepted and supported in the organization.

All forms of training, including orientation, on-the-job, cross-functional, and retraining activities, may be most effective at reducing retention if done in teams. Because one of the primary motivations for volunteerism is social, group training may provide interactions from the onset in addition to ensuring that volunteers will not feel alone when they begin on-the-job training (Akdere & Schmidt, 2007c). Similarly, retraining or preparing volunteers for different roles within an organization may be perceived as more "fun" and less stressful if provided in a team training environment. Some 'team-building' and 'get-to-know-your partner' activities could

be useful during these training sessions and may serve as the foundation for long-term relationships that could increase organizational connectedness. The motivation to learn is, perhaps, the easiest to support and accommodate through training. In addition to helping volunteers learn more about the roles they will serve in the organization, it may be beneficial to explain what skills the trainees will learn immediately and to describe what continued learning opportunities are available to them, particularly if future opportunities align with the volunteers' interests (Saksida, Alfes, & Shantz, 2016). Furthermore, engaging volunteers in continuous learning presents unique development opportunities to volunteers, which supports the enhancement of service quality, provides a sense of belonging to the organization, and increases volunteer intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Conclusion

There is a need for further research to support the development of best practices for reducing attrition rates through the training of nonprofit human service volunteers. The absence of literature on continued training for long-term volunteers is particularly noteworthy. As learning repeatedly has been found to be a key element of motivation, an absence of further training has the potential to increase the levels of attrition and burnout in human service organizations. Building on the work of Haski-Leventhal and Bargal (2008), research that might aid in the creation of learning programs for each stage of volunteering could be beneficial. Other elements with infrequent inclusion in the literature are the learning theories associated with retention and the phenomenon of volunteers quitting immediately after the completion of initial training. Future research on any of these topics could provide a more solid foundation for the design of human service volunteer training programs.

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