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## Understanding the volunteer market: the what, where, who and why of volunteering

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**UNDERSTANDING THE VOLUNTEER MARKET: THE WHAT, WHERE, WHO AND  
WHY OF VOLUNTEERING.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Although the work of the voluntary sector is growing the number of people volunteering is not increasing at a comparable rate. This paper argues that the key to an organisation's success in recruiting and retaining its volunteers is to have an understanding of its target group. As a means to developing this understanding this paper reviews the prior research on volunteering and outlines the current situation in the voluntary sector with regard to the donation of time. The review shows that those who volunteer are an extremely diverse group active in a wide variety of contexts. This makes the definition of a volunteer a more complex task than one would expect. It also demonstrates that individuals and organisations may volunteer for reasons other than purely altruistic motives. Finally, the paper identifies gaps in this area of research and presents topics for further research.

## INTRODUCTION

The last twenty years have seen a fundamental reappraisal of social policy resulting in the emergence of a new role for voluntary groups in the United Kingdom. Key aspects of the welfare state and community development are now dependent on the voluntary sector and volunteer involvement. The voluntary sector has become a sizeable part of the UK economy with assets of £40 billion and annual spending of nearly £11 billion <sup>1</sup>. It has been estimated that half the population of the UK volunteer time to community activities <sup>2</sup>.

In order to cope with the range of work the number of voluntary organisations has grown quite rapidly leading to greater competition for limited resources (financial and human). Although levels of volunteering are high, there are signs that this may have peaked <sup>3</sup> so that public sector and voluntary organisations are now striving to recruit from a decreasing pool of volunteers <sup>4</sup>. Recognising the value of volunteer time and the benefits to individuals of volunteering the Government has led a number of initiatives to increase the level of volunteering (such as the Millennium Volunteers <sup>5</sup>) and also plans to include citizenship education in the National Curriculum for England and Wales <sup>6</sup>.

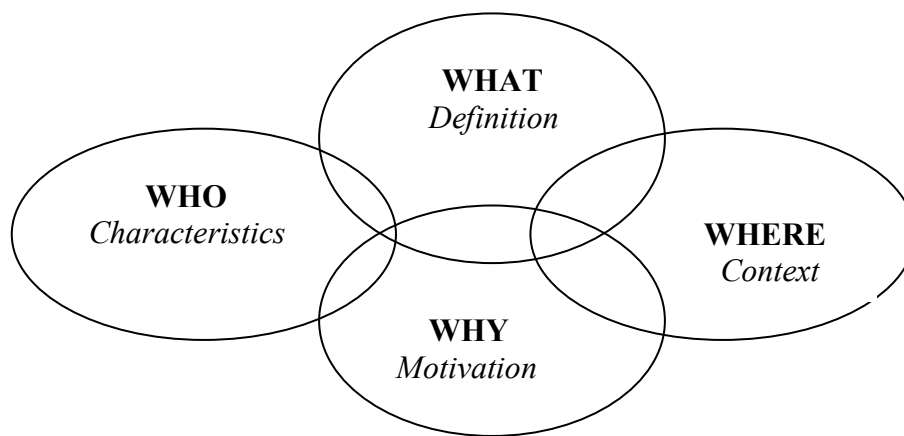
The study of volunteerism has always attracted a multi-disciplinary approach <sup>7</sup>. As the competition for volunteers becomes more acute and volunteer managers have become increasingly concerned with the recruitment and retention of volunteers marketing techniques are playing an ever more important role in this sector. Consequently, there is much interest in this area among marketers. A great deal of work has been carried out in the United States <sup>8</sup> with many studies examining volunteerism in specific organisations (for example, hospice volunteers <sup>9</sup>) or amongst particular groups of people (such as African American Men <sup>10</sup>).

As a prelude to an investigation of volunteering in a specific region of the United Kingdom the authors have reviewed the current literature. The aim of this paper is threefold. Firstly, to summarise the research in this area to assist those involved in volunteer management in developing effective marketing strategies for the recruitment and retention of volunteers. Secondly, to assist those

marketers engaged in research in this area. Finally, to outline current knowledge to identify areas for future research. It was discovered that there were four key aspects to the literature on the volunteer market so the authors have developed the classification model of the “Four W’s of Volunteering”:  
What (definition), Where (context), Who (characteristics of volunteers) and Why (motivation). (See Fig 1 below).

Fig. 1: The Four W’s of Volunteering

(A model for understanding the volunteer market)



### **WHAT IS A VOLUNTEER?**

It is extremely difficult to define what is meant by a volunteer as there is no standard practice in volunteering <sup>11</sup>, volunteers operate in thousands of different organisations taking on extremely varied roles. Also volunteers can not be considered to be one large, homogenous group <sup>12</sup> as volunteers are of all ages and diverse backgrounds with a range of experiences and skills

Most definitions demonstrate that there is an element of exchange in volunteering in which volunteers respond to costs and benefits <sup>13</sup>. Although volunteering usually “*involves contributions of time without coercion or remuneration*” <sup>14</sup> the great variety of situations in which people volunteer invalidates such a simplistic definition. Cnaan et al. prefer to use a continuum on these points with free choice ranging from “free will” to “obligation to volunteer” and remuneration from “none at all” to “stipend or low pay”. They conclude that the perception of what is a volunteer depends on the

relative costs and benefits to the volunteer. *“The greater the net costs to the volunteer, the purer the volunteering activity and hence the more the person is a real volunteer”*<sup>15</sup>.

These definitions suggest that to be regarded as a volunteer one must have some altruistic motive. Such a definition would exclude those involved in what Johnson-Coffey calls “involuntary volunteering”<sup>16</sup>. This would include those who donate their time under the Government’s planned citizenship education or those involved in community service on the ‘welfare to work’ schemes or as part of a Community Service Order. These volunteers would undoubtedly be nearer to the “obligation to volunteer” end of Cnaan’s et al continuum.<sup>17</sup>

We may also need to make a distinction between those who donate their time to a project for the common good and those who participate as a member of a not-for-profit organisation<sup>18</sup>. There are also those who volunteer not so much to provide a service to help individuals and communities to improve the quality of their lives but to campaign to change laws or policies which affect them<sup>19</sup>. We may wish to differentiate between those who provide help during emergency situations and those who take part in non-emergency helping behaviour. It is this latter group which we think of as volunteers<sup>20</sup>. It has also been suggested that volunteers could be classified according to the actual number of hours donated<sup>21</sup>.

One could also question whether volunteers, as time donors, should be treated differently from those who donate other items, such as money, gifts in kind, anatomical parts? Yavas & Riecken found that time donors shared certain demographic and attitudinal characteristics with those who donated money or anatomical parts<sup>22</sup>.

Many people state that they would like to volunteer but are unable to do so because of work commitments<sup>23</sup>. In order to increase the pool of volunteers some firms are allowing employees to have time off work (either paid or unpaid) to undertake voluntary work in the community. In recent years the UK government has identified and has been active in encouraging business organisations to

support the concept of volunteering. Some examples of such initiatives and charities involved in corporate volunteering include Business in the Community (BITC), Project 2001 (a mentoring scheme set up by the RSA), Employees in the Community, VSO business partnership scheme, Nat West Face 2 Face with Finance and City Cares.

Two distinct categories of such volunteering are apparent. Employer Supported Volunteering tends to be employee-led, usually in the employee's own time, unpaid, encouraged and supported by the employer but not compulsory. Employer Directed Involvement is employer-led, in work time with projects chosen to match the organisation's needs and used as a personal development tool. Both types of voluntary work are on the increase<sup>24</sup> with one survey estimating participation in the UK by some 15,000 organisations<sup>25</sup>.

Geroy et al attempt to identify what constitutes corporate volunteering<sup>26</sup>. They point out that employing organisations may be involved in varying degrees. For example, organisations may act only as clearing houses (i.e. by identifying opportunities for employees). BITC see their role as one of three activities: helping to make the link between community assignments and its organisation members, arranging and organising activities for employees at weekends or after hours or donating money to charities for which employees volunteer ("*dollars for doers*"). This latter role has also been adopted by Barclays where the bank matches hour for hour the time staff give to the local community<sup>27</sup>.

## **WHERE DO PEOPLE VOLUNTEER?**

Just as it is a complex task to define the term volunteer, it is also difficult to outline the context in which volunteering occurs. This is an important area to consider as it describes the environment in which the volunteer participates<sup>28</sup>. Participation may take place among those who work full-time. Here volunteering may be within a corporate programme (as highlighted above) or in the volunteer's leisure time. For those not in full-time employment volunteering may be an alternative to work or a means to achieving marketable skills<sup>29</sup>. Volunteering may be a single act or may be "*the systematic*

*pursuit of ..... volunteer activity that participants find so substantial and interesting that .... they launch themselves on a career centred on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge and experience”*<sup>30</sup>

Smith highlights that a key problem in this area is the paucity of research and he points out that ‘*many important differences in organisations have not been examined*’<sup>31</sup>. Research in this area has either taken place as part of a general discussion on volunteering<sup>32</sup> or has focused on volunteer activity in specific organisations<sup>33</sup>. Based on a USA sample of 1058 volunteers, Wymer uses six key groups when carrying out work on segmenting volunteers: human service, arts and culture, religion, youth development, education and health<sup>34</sup>. In a UK study of volunteer care and feeding Wilson & Pimm group volunteer organisations along similar lines (charities, sports clubs, business associations, social clubs, health self-help groups, political groups, religious groups and supportive agencies)<sup>35</sup>.

A less specific form of grouping was identified by Geroy et al : production, service and sales industries<sup>36</sup>. What is interesting to note is that they believe there is no relationship between company type, commitment or support by volunteers. In his research Smith identifies two subcategories as being salient territory and organisation<sup>37</sup>. Earlier work by Handy<sup>38</sup> distinguishes between three categories of voluntary organisations: mutual support, where people with mutual enthusiasms come together<sup>39</sup>; service delivery (which tend to be organised along professional lines, focusing on effectiveness and low costs through formalised roles, responsibilities and accountability) and campaigning or cause specific.

Organisational structure may also affect the experience a volunteer encounters. Robinson argues that the matrix system may be the most appropriate<sup>40</sup>, although Courtney<sup>41</sup> stresses the value of a small, flat, accessible structure. Research and commentary highlight different roles available for volunteers in organisations from operational through to manager and board level<sup>42</sup>.



The issue of managing volunteers is of prime importance as it is significant in both the recruiting and retaining of volunteers<sup>43</sup>. Investigating sporting organisations Nichols, Taylor and Shibli<sup>44</sup> identify the tensions that need to be managed between members who volunteer and those who do not.

## **WHO VOLUNTEERS?**

Although the population of volunteers is diverse, Wymer<sup>45</sup> suggests that homogenous subgroups of volunteers can be segmented for target marketing purposes. The level of educational attainment (determined by the number of years in education) has been considered to be particularly useful<sup>46</sup>. Riecken, Babakus and Yavas found that those donating time to educational institutions were more likely to be better educated and to have higher incomes than non-donors<sup>47</sup>. This is also the case among young volunteers. Davis Smith found a marked difference in relation to the school leaving age of young volunteers, with a small minority of his sample (15%) leaving school at 16 or earlier and higher participation rates among the higher socio-economic groups<sup>48</sup>.

Several studies<sup>49</sup> have found volunteering to be gender specific with more females than males volunteering, although political volunteers are more likely to be male<sup>50</sup>. Age-related variables are also important. Individuals over the age of 50 are more likely to volunteer than younger people<sup>51</sup> although, as one would expect, the age of youth leaders is much younger<sup>52</sup>. Marriott Senior Living Services<sup>53</sup> estimate that over 40% of adults age 60 and over engage in organisational volunteering.

Family background has also been shown to be significant. Shure found that young people were more likely to volunteer if their parents had also volunteered<sup>54</sup>. Having participated in the organisation as a child or having a child involved were additional factors to consider<sup>55</sup>.

Davis Smith also found differences in employment status among young volunteers<sup>56</sup>. Those working part-time were more likely to be involved than those not working or working full-time.

There has been much interest in identifying the sociodemographic characteristics of volunteers as these have been seen as valuable variables in predicting the level of voluntary activity<sup>57</sup>. Establishing meaningful segments of the volunteer “market” could lead to more effective targeting of particular groups and, thus, more effective recruitment and retention strategies. In effect, creating a recruitment niche. However, Nichols and King point out that the shortage of volunteers may lead to organisations having “*to compromise this definition of their recruitment niche to allow them to recruit more widely*”<sup>58</sup>. McPherson and Rotolo discovered that there was greater heterogeneity in terms of educational attainment amongst groups of volunteers in those organisations facing competition for volunteers<sup>59</sup>. In other words, these organisations were forced to widen the pool from which they drew their volunteers.

## **WHY VOLUNTEER?**

The key to an organisation’s success in recruiting and retaining its volunteers is to have an understanding of the motives of its target group of volunteers<sup>60</sup>. Many studies have been undertaken to discover why people volunteer and what benefits volunteers gain from helping others.

In defining what is meant by a volunteer it was suggested above that, to be considered as a volunteer, altruism must be the central motive where the reward is intrinsic to the act of volunteering. The volunteer’s motive is a selfless one. There is indeed evidence that altruism exists in many types of voluntary activity<sup>61</sup>. Nichols and King found the desire to help others was the most frequently cited reason for volunteering in the Guide Association<sup>62</sup>. Helping others has been found to be an important factor amongst volunteers of all ages; student volunteers<sup>63</sup> and those over the age of sixty<sup>64</sup>.

It is undoubtedly true that many volunteers find the activity to be a rewarding experience but Cnaan and Goldberg-Glen demonstrate that, as well as an altruistic motive, volunteers tend to also act on egoistic motives. People volunteer to satisfy important social and psychological goals<sup>65</sup>. Different individuals may be involved in the same activities but have different goals<sup>66</sup>. These goals are so diverse that Mueller uses four main categories to classify the benefits gained. As well as altruism he

lists the family unit consuming the collective good (for example, having a child in the unit), the volunteer enjoying a “selective incentive” (for example, prestige, social contact), and the improvement of human capital <sup>67</sup>.

The idea of volunteering because a family member is benefiting from the organisation is supported by studies both in the U.S.A. and the U.K. Smith found that many voluntary organisations in the U.S.A. were providing services not supplied elsewhere so people volunteered in order to maintain the required service <sup>68</sup>. Many volunteers in the Guide Association in the U.K. volunteered because they had a child in the unit and volunteered to prevent closure <sup>69</sup>. Investigating family volunteering, Johnson-Coffey found that families believed this strengthened the unit, creating “family togetherness” <sup>60</sup>.

The “selective incentive” concept is apparent in many studies <sup>61</sup>. A sense of belonging, the need for affiliation, gaining prestige or self-esteem, a way of making friends is evident in a variety of volunteering contexts. Okun found that the strongest correlate of frequency of volunteering among older volunteers was the need to feel useful or productive <sup>62</sup>.

Improving human capital appears to be becoming an important motivator for volunteering. Rifkin points out that volunteering provides employment to the unemployed <sup>63</sup> and one-third of the sample in Anderson and Moore’s study of volunteers in Canada volunteered in order to occupy spare time <sup>64</sup>. Volunteering is sometimes seen to enable the volunteer to develop skills which may be useful in a future career <sup>65</sup> or help to obtain employment <sup>66</sup>, gain academic credits <sup>67</sup> or even aid career advancement <sup>68</sup>. Indeed many of the initiatives in the U.S.A. and the U.K. encouraging the young and the unemployed to volunteer stress that by volunteering one can gain confidence, prepare for the workplace and gain marketable skills.

Many volunteers do so as they believe they can contribute positively to the organisation as he/she has specific skills which would bring benefits to the organisation. Nichols and King found that many Guiders had been members when younger and wanted to give something back to the association <sup>69</sup>.

Wilson and Pimm discovered some less obvious reasons why people may volunteer including wanting to wear a uniform, perks obtained, mixing with celebrities, health and fitness, travel opportunities <sup>70</sup>.

The primary motivator for many volunteers is the importance placed on certain values <sup>71</sup>. Snyder and Debono have termed this the “value-expressive function”<sup>72</sup>. Volunteering allows the individual to act on his / her underlying values and be his/ her true self. Volunteering may give the individual the opportunity to express these core values and beliefs <sup>73</sup> or to pass them on to others<sup>74</sup>. For example, religious involvement and religious beliefs have been shown to be associated with a greater likelihood to volunteer<sup>75</sup>.

Having looked at the benefits which volunteers may gain one is still no closer to understanding why some people volunteer when others do not. The process of how people become volunteers is one which requires closer investigation. In his study of volunteers in Oxfam, Bales identifies three stages to volunteering: the predisposition to volunteer, making the decision to volunteer and finally volunteering<sup>76</sup>. Okun and Eisenberg suggest that there is a social-adjustive motive<sup>77</sup>. People volunteer because someone they value asks them to. This view is supported by Wymer who cites a national study in the U.S.A. by Gallup which reported that *“People are more than four times as likely to volunteer when asked than when they are not”*<sup>78</sup>. He also found that volunteers are more likely to volunteer if they have a friend or family member in the organisation. In studying volunteer recruitment in four different organisations Riecken, Babakus and Yavas found that personal contact was important as it reduced the perceived social risk which deterred some from volunteering<sup>79</sup>.

The growth in corporate volunteerism was discussed above. Why are a growing number of organisations becoming involved with this? Geroy et al believe *“employee volunteer programmes*

*can be seen as positive interventions which have much to offer employees and employers*”<sup>80</sup>.

However, it has been argued that it is not just altruism which is driving this growth but changes in the organisations’ operating environments, such as cutbacks in funding<sup>81</sup> and downsizing<sup>82</sup>. Another view is that presented by Caudron who suggests that “*to the cynic corporate volunteer efforts are thinly veiled attempts to generate good public relations*”<sup>83</sup>. Hill feels it gives the organisation “*an enhanced reputation in the community*” or “*benefits the company’s consumer profile*”<sup>84</sup>. Other views state that companies are influenced by ethics and social responsibility. For Caudron it is “*a way to address serious social problems*”<sup>85</sup> or as Master states corporate volunteering by chartered accountants will “*add some real value to the communities in which they live and work*”<sup>86</sup>. Geroy et al believe corporate volunteerism is being driven by “*the increased pressure that corporations face to assume responsibility for the community in which they operate*”<sup>87</sup>.

Benefits are also delivered to organisations in the form of increased profitability<sup>88</sup>, improvements in employee morale and productivity<sup>89</sup> and better ideas<sup>90</sup>. For employees the benefits of being involved in work sponsored volunteering can include developing networks with other organisations, such as the government and the private sector<sup>91</sup> and, according to Crouter non-work activities “*can support, facilitate or enhance work life*”<sup>92</sup>

Having acquired volunteers the volunteer organisation must seek to retain their support. In a dynamic changing environment, where the number of voluntary organisations is growing and the volunteer pool is diminishing, organisations must understand not only what motivates volunteers to join but also what keeps them. McPherson and Rotolo found that when competition is intense a group will have difficulty recruiting and retaining members and when competition is low groups will be more likely to recruit and retain members<sup>93</sup>. The very composition of the organisation is redefined as members leave and new members are added.

Retention issues are also addressed by Mitchell & Taylor who argue retention is enhanced by positive relations between paid staff & volunteers<sup>94</sup> and Wilson & Pimm explore the dynamics of staff and volunteers<sup>95</sup>.

Hobson & et al propose that a volunteer friendly environment would support retention<sup>96</sup>. In Wright et al this friendliness was reiterated in their study of house building in the Appalachian mountains, where having fun helped to prevent volunteers leaving<sup>97</sup>. Omoto and Snyder stress that it is increasing the satisfaction of volunteering which will lead to increasing the length of service<sup>98</sup>. In some instances, the decline in the numbers volunteering often means that the work is left to fewer people and this discourages volunteers from continuing<sup>99</sup>. Some are deterred from pursuing their involvement in an organisation as current volunteers may form a distinctive group which is not particularly welcoming to new recruits<sup>100</sup>.

In some instances commitment levels may be low, perhaps just a few hours a week. Here leaving will cause little or no disruption to lives or reputation<sup>101</sup>. The issue of time available to volunteer is highlighted by Nichols and King<sup>102</sup> and Davis Smith<sup>103</sup> who demonstrate that people want to volunteer but conflict sometimes develops between volunteering and paid work and also family commitments. Individuals have finite resources to devote to organisations<sup>104</sup>. Yavas and Riecken focus on the busy hedonistic lifestyles people pursued in the 1990's<sup>105</sup>. The affect of the age of children on parents' ability to volunteer has been recognised from early research in the 1960's<sup>106</sup> and seems as relevant today<sup>107</sup>. Several studies show that parent volunteers resign when their child's involvement in the organisation ends<sup>108</sup>. Motivation issues explored earlier may also affect retention of volunteers, for example Rubin and Thorelli state if your volunteer joins for egotistic reasons then their length of tenure is likely to be small<sup>109</sup>.

Recruiting can raise unrealistically high expectations<sup>110</sup>. The expectations and perceptions of new recruits may differ from reality. Having a friend or family member involved in the organisation may

give more realistic expectations to potential recruits. Furthermore, it has been shown that the image of volunteering often deters younger people from donating their time<sup>111</sup>.

To retain volunteers the organisation must offer something particular for its own members<sup>112</sup>. Okun and Eisenberg suggest that for elderly volunteers this differentiating factor could be either connected to the need for visibility and status or satisfied by the rotation of activities<sup>113</sup>. This emphasis on activities as a means of satisfaction and commitment is highlighted in the work of Dailey who shows that, for political campaign workers, commitment was linked to the job characteristics, such as feedback, involvement and autonomy<sup>114</sup>. This element of recognition is also raised by Gidron<sup>115</sup>. Brown and Zahrly suggest that some volunteers require activities to improve skills as against generalist activities<sup>116</sup>. This is interesting in the light of the ongoing discussion on the potential of N.V.Q.'s as a motivator and retention tool, although in a sample of 21 non-governmental organisations Amos-Wilson found that only 6 organisations provided training for their volunteers and this tended to be driven by organisational requirements rather than individual need<sup>117</sup>.

Despite efforts by volunteer groups to develop intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, it has to be recognised that volunteers do leave because of factors outside the volunteer organisation's control. The organisation has to be prepared to accept this. *'You will lose volunteers, don't berate yourself for every loss, but tackle avoidable losses'*.

## **CONCLUSION**

It has been said that volunteers are the most important group of customers for a voluntary organisation<sup>118</sup>. Those needing the organisation's services are plentiful but the supply of volunteers is scarce. Although there is undoubtedly a hard core of long-serving volunteers there are fewer new volunteers coming forward to replace the ones who leave<sup>119</sup>. It is, therefore, becoming increasingly important to understand this important group of customers. This overview of the literature on volunteering has outlined the context in which volunteering is occurring and highlighted thinking on

*Insert Figure 2*



what is a volunteer, who may become a volunteer and why as well as the context in which people may volunteer (see Fig 2.).

As there are so many different contexts in which one can donate one's time the vast, and growing, literature in this area demonstrates that further investigation is required. This review of the literature shows that much work has been carried out into many aspects of volunteering but little account has been taken of local variations in volunteering. Although many studies have been undertaken on how organisations may recruit volunteers much less has been written on the process of becoming a volunteer. How volunteers are retained has been examined to a certain extent but there appears to have been no investigation of how organisations can reactivate former volunteers<sup>120</sup>.

The current government has introduced a number of initiatives to promote volunteering and improve the training of a volunteer workforce. The impact of these has yet to be measured and evaluated. In order to do this researchers should have an understanding of the key issues in volunteering. It is hoped that this paper will provide a step towards this understanding for future researchers.

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