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Challenges in Volunteer Management: 
Factors of Undesirable Volunteer Behavior 

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Abstract

This paper compares different perspectives on factors that drive volunteer behavior in a direction against an organization’s policies, principles, or desired preferences. Often volunteer managers are challenged to enforce rules and policies in response to volunteer’s disruptive behavior while being afraid to cause volunteer withdrawal. This exploratory research provides an analysis of undesirable volunteer behavior by using two different approaches. Through an examination of possible factors, which may influence and direct volunteer behavior, two key concepts — perceived organizational support and psychological contract fulfillment — were identified as those towards which organizations should direct their efforts to prevent withdrawal of volunteers. The implementation of good managerial practices in volunteer management is recognized as necessary. Therefore, a synthesized guide to direct organization’s efforts is suggested. Future research in this field should test a relationship between an increase of organizational investment in volunteer management capacity and perceived organizational support and psychological contract fulfillment.

Keywords: volunteer behavior, volunteer withdrawal, rule-breaking, psychological contract, perceived organizational support

Today, volunteer experience is listed in a curriculum vitae of almost every job applicant, as it seems to be a social norm and a good predictor of a future employee’s social behavior and ethical values. On the other side, however, the professional and academic field of volunteerism is still relatively young, in the process of continual development, and without agreement on the definition of the profession (Spink, 2016). In the search for a right definition, one may consider the United Nations Volunteers (2015) rationale for volunteerism, which focuses on three main characteristics: it is “an activity undertaken out of free will, for the general
public good and where monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor” (p. 3). All three aspects underline the altruistic nature of volunteering activities and focus on the act itself, while leaving hidden the relationship between the organization and volunteers. The lack of a unified and broad definition may contribute to a general misperception of the volunteer role by the nonprofit staff and negatively impact practices used by managers and organizations when operating volunteer programs.

Volunteerism has been also defined in academic literature as an activity which provides reciprocal benefits for each of the three involved parties: nonprofit organizations, volunteers, and beneficiaries of the service. These three “actors” are included in the definition of volunteer work by Snyder and Omoto (2008), who describe it as comprised of, “freely chosen and deliberate helping activities that extend over time, are engaged in without expectation of reward or other compensation and often through formal organizations, and that are performed on behalf of causes or individuals who desire assistance” (p. 3). This definition provides more context on the type of relationships within the volunteering sector. However, it still does not capture all the dimensions of volunteerism. Types of volunteer activities, reciprocal relationships, and motives to volunteer are numerous, which may explain the elusiveness of one unified definition. However, this uncertainty may cause some challenges in the field, which will be discussed further in this paper.

While it may be straightforward to understand the benefits of volunteerism to beneficiaries, what might be possible benefits in this reciprocal exchange to volunteers and nonprofit organizations? For volunteers, the benefits from engaging in socially responsible activities may be attributed to enhancing personal well-being (Stukas, Hoye, Nicholson, Brown, & Aisbett, 2016), perceptions of meaningfulness in their own paid jobs (Malinen & Harju, 2016), and chances to obtain a job or even an educational degree (Wilson, 2012). Specifically, Wilson (2012) provides an overview of two recent studies (Choi & Bohman, 2007; Sugihara, Sugisawa, Shibata, & Harada, 2008) that confirms a significant decrease of depression symptoms for people who engaged in volunteering in addition to their paid job roles.

For nonprofit organizations, the significance of volunteer talent is rapidly increasing along with growing competition for funding, limited resources, and high turnover rates of mid-level and entry-level professional staff due to burnout (Eisner, Grimm Jr., Maynard, & Washburn, 2009).
While struggling to attain necessary funds for sustainable growth, organizations instead can fill gaps in their needs by acquiring needed skills and expertise from the volunteer talent pool. Further, by delegating appropriate tasks to volunteers, organizations can significantly increase effectiveness, since paid staff will get more time and resources to devote to other responsibilities. The results of Laczo and Hanisch’s (1999) study suggest that:

Organizations may be able to use volunteer workers in place of paid employees in positions that do not require special skills or knowledge that a volunteer worker may not have. This would allow organizations to reduce payroll costs while maintaining the same level of functioning (p. 473).

Additionally, Eisner et al. (2009) emphasize the ability of volunteers to be effective advocates for the nonprofit’s cause, which derives from their personal commitment. Board members in nonprofit governance, who usually serve on a voluntary basis and without compensation, can be a great example in their fundraising efforts and advocacy for a charitable cause or a capital campaign.

However, a typical misunderstanding of the real value of “volunteer resources” results in staff who treat volunteers as a cheap or insignificant labor force (Nesbit, Rimes, Christensen, & Brudney, 2016). Hence, nonprofits may not invest enough in the capacity of instrumental means to grow and retain their volunteer workforce (Eisner et al., 2009; Millette & Gagné, 2008; Nesbit et al., 2016; Schie et al., 2014). In a situation of mismanagement, volunteer managers can find themselves confronted by problematic behavior of volunteers, their episodic involvement, and total withdrawal. While episodic volunteering can be justified in some cases by the short-term nature of service (e.g., event volunteering (Gilbert, Holdsworth, & Kyle, 2017)), in other situations it may increase nonprofit expenses, such as money or staff time spent for a volunteer program and recruitment (Alfes, Shantz, & Saksida, 2014). Karl, Peluchette, and Hall (2008) cite evidence-based calculations by Mitchell and Taylor (2004), that costs for engaging a new volunteer are five times higher than “to cultivate greater exchanges with existing ones” (p. 73).

Furthermore, Eisner et al. (2009) reported costs of volunteer withdrawal for the nonprofit sector as a whole. While comparing numbers of volunteers from two consecutive years, more than one-third of those
who volunteered in 2006 did not donate any time to a charitable cause the following year, which corresponds to $38 billion in lost labor (Eisner et al., 2009). Additionally, drawing on the latest Bureau of Labor Statistics report, volunteering in the United States is decreasing and hit its lowest point for the past decade in 2015 (Kiersz, 2016).

Considering the prevailing trends, dealing with problematic volunteer behavior may be very challenging for nonprofits, especially for those who heavily depend on volunteers (e.g., Peace Corps Volunteers). In a situation when people willingly donate their time and energy to support a cause of their choice, the dilemma between retaining volunteers engaged and holding them accountable to organization policies becomes a cornerstone of a complex issue. Jacobs (2017) illustrates this situation by citing a nonprofit staff, who emphasized the higher priority of a much-needed volunteer assistance over enforcing compliance “even if it means enabling disruptive behavior by limiting how often it is addressed with volunteers directly” (p. 40). How can managers avoid being trapped by reciprocal relationships with volunteers, where they may neglect to enforce rules and policies because of the lack of resources and unpaid nature of the voluntarily donated time and skills? How can managers hold volunteers accountable for their specific roles and organization’s standards and values overall, but at the same time increase retention and nurture their motivation and commitment? This research aims to explore the context and factors impacting relationships between organizations and volunteers.

The focus of this research is on types of volunteer behavior that can be considered undesirable (e.g., withdrawal) or to some degree disruptive, harmful (e.g., breaking the rules) for the organization. The research purpose is to analyze current literature on volunteer management, motivation, and retention to identify factors that influence volunteer behavior directly or through mediators, and may lead to undesirable behavior, or in the opposite, drive positive performance and increase volunteer retention.

**Methodology**

The focus of this research is on identifying different approaches to understanding major factors that determine and direct volunteer behavior. The study offers an overview of recent academic findings on voluntary behavior, organizational withdrawal, motivation, and commitment in relation to volunteer management practices. Literature was collected by
using the search terms volunteer, behavior, retention, and withdrawal both separately and by using combined terms. Additionally, some sources were sourced from references in articles analyzing relevant topics in more depth.

**Defining Undesirable Behavior**

**Organizational Withdrawal**

Organizational withdrawal can be considered as an example of the most common undesirable volunteer behavior. Taking into account investments in volunteer recruitment and retention being lost when the volunteer quits, this behavior can be expensive. In a comparative study of volunteer and staff behavior, Laczo and Hanisch (1999) define a term of organizational withdrawal as, “a general group of behaviors and intentions that are consequences of negative job attitudes and other antecedents” (p. 454). The authors, building on the empirical analysis of Hanisch and Hulin (1990), outlined two types of employee withdrawal: job withdrawal and work withdrawal (Laczo & Hanisch, 1999). Accordingly, the former behavior is based on disengaging oneself from the organization or job (such as quitting or retiring), while the latter assumes avoiding performing assigned tasks. The family of work withdrawal behaviors includes lateness, absence, and unfavorable job behaviors, such as missing company meetings, wasting time on the job, and taking long or frequent coffee or lunch breaks (Laczo & Hanisch, 1999). Additionally, the intention to transfer to a different department, argued by Blau (1998) as a missing example from the two general withdrawal constructs, later was included by Laczo and Hanisch (1999) in their future research and classified as a job withdrawal behavior since a person desires to be removed from a current job environment.

Laczo and Hanisch (1999) in their comparative study found that the psychological processes to engage in work or job withdrawal for both categories of paid and unpaid workers are similar. This implies that volunteers and employees should be treated similarly within the workplace regarding rule enforcement or reward system practices, for example. Also, the authors discovered overall stronger commitment and lesser withdrawal inclination of volunteers comparable to employees, which brings into consideration that paid staff should be targeted for reducing negative behavior first. Laczo and Hanisch (1999) also found that the negative nature of interrelationships between volunteers and employees, such as tensions in
work environment, would most likely cause job withdrawal (quitting), rather than work withdrawal (disengaging oneself from work tasks, not performing well, etc.): “when volunteer workers and paid employees do not perceive one another in a positive manner, these perceptions are manifest as intentions to leave the organization or to transfer to a different position within the organization” (p. 472). The importance of proper managerial practices towards staff behavior to improve volunteer retention is supported by the research of other authors (Nesbit et al., 2016).

At the same time, Wilson (2012) notes two categories of factors why volunteers may “quit a particular volunteer assignment,” which illustrates work withdrawal behavior (p. 196). The first category relates to volunteers’ individual characteristics, such as family events, moving to a new house, changing jobs, etc. The other group of factors is concerned with organizational matters, such as work environment, social connections, training, and others. Wilson (2012) cited a recent study of older volunteers, where the key findings conclude: “of the nine factors that predicted turnover, seven were related to either the individual’s experience of volunteering or characteristics of the program” (p. 196). According to Tang, Morrow-Howell, and Choi (2010), higher income and better mental health were the only two individual factors that were related to job withdrawal (Wilson, 2012). These findings may be viewed as optimistic in the sense that organizations have opportunities to increase volunteer retention by influencing factors which are under their control.

Additionally, Malinen and Harju (2017) conducted a study on volunteer engagement and its relationship to volunteer commitment and intentions to leave the organization. Authors distinguished between job engagement and organizational engagement of volunteers, which is similar to Hanisch and Hulin’s (1990) withdrawal classification. Job-related engagement focuses on performing tasks (e.g., driving clients to appointments), which correlates with work withdrawal. Organizational engagement is related to connectedness with the organization itself and may result in a job withdrawal if there is lack of it. Malinen and Harju (2017) reported that the relationship between volunteer commitment and satisfaction on one side and perceived organizational support on the other is mediated by organizational engagement rather than job engagement (Malinen & Harju, 2017). This research demonstrates that organizational support influences volunteer satisfaction and commitment more actively and in a more positive way than job engagement, which helps to diminish their intent to leave.
Disruptive Behavior

In a 2017 study, Jacobs discussed the issue of disruptive behavior as a possible consequence of individuals focusing on their own benefits and personal needs from volunteering more than on the goals of the organization. This mismatch between needs and goals of involved parties can result, according to Jacobs (2017) and discussed by Hustinx (2010), in two types of disruptive behavior: rule-breaking and volunteer uncertainty.

Rule-breaking. Rule-breaking can arise in a situation when an individual’s goals are different from the organization’s goals or when a volunteer feels uncomfortable following the rules set to achieve those goals. In the case of an animal shelter studied by Jacobs (2017), a volunteer’s need to feel emotionally happy from spending time with a dog prevailed over their commitment to organizational policies. Subsequently, when specific guidelines for walking dogs were taken the volunteer away from enjoying the process, such as stopping during a walk whenever the dog would like to do it instead of having a desired uninterrupted stroll, these regulations were neglected. Also, the feeling of discomfort perceived by volunteers personally or in relation towards others may also lead to breaking the rules: Volunteers acknowledge that they do not want to make people in the neighborhood feel uncomfortable by asking them to keep their dogs away. Volunteers know, that their primary role is to spend time with the dogs and get them out of the Kennel. Some of the rules, however, make that less enjoyable and the volunteers believe that they are not putting the animals at risk by breaking them. (Jacobs, 2017, p. 33)

Another example of disruptive behavior can be illustrated through a rule of prohibiting volunteers from entering the office space of the animal shelter. Ignoring the sign on the door, some volunteers approached staff with a friendly chat when employees have to finish some paperwork or send important information. Jacobs (2017) quotes an employee, who mentioned that she could not enforce the rule and explain a need to focus on her work. The employee described it as kind of an ethical dilemma because it would be rude to confront a person who also invests their time in the organization: “These are volunteers. They are not paid for their time” (p. 34). The key problem in this situation is a failure to enforce rules. The employee does not feel comfortable doing it and the volunteer manager may not want to do it either because of the possible departure of a volunteer.
Sometimes rule-breaking can be predetermined by the individual characteristics of the volunteer. McNamee and Peterson (2016) defined five different types of high-stake volunteers: those who serve on a long-term basis, required to have extensive training, sometimes also a background check, and on whom nonprofits heavily rely on in their service. The need to be accountable and follow policies by both individuals and organizations in these arrangements is amplified, which can be seen in a study of firefighters, child victim social workers, and volunteers working with youth. Among five different types of the high-stake volunteers, McNamee and Peterson (2016) defined crusaders as the ones more likely to perform haphazardly and by “violating expectations for conduct and performance” (p. 286). Crusaders can be characterized as volunteers passionate and zealous about their tasks, who would cross boundaries unknowingly, while just trying to get the work done. Authors recommended identifying and constant monitoring of such volunteers, along with updating organizational policies to avoid uncertainties and misinterpretation, which is the next significant factor of undesirable behavior and will be addressed further.

Volunteer uncertainty. The second type of disruptive behavior, defined by Jacobs (2017), focuses on volunteer uncertainty and may result in role ambiguity, rule ambiguity, and volunteer isolation. Rule ambiguity (Merrell, 2000; in Jacobs, 2017) can result from lack of volunteer orientation, lack or difficult access to online or printed volunteer resources (website, handbook), and lack of professional training. Another reason can be that rules and policies may not be developed or fully explained in the resources provided to volunteers. Sometimes, organizations may have many informal rules, which are not necessarily described in the volunteer handbook and can only be communicated verbally. The goal for volunteer managers should be to keep policies regularly updated, with most frequently broken rules, as well as new ones, consistently observed and reported.

Another reason for breaking the rules, which is also related to uncertainties, stems from a lack of rule enforcement, which may be interpreted as a right to be flexible in following the rules. As it was stated earlier, volunteer managers or staff performing such roles often may be cautious in using control and accountability instruments to enforce regulations as they are afraid to lose volunteers. However, the managerial practice of not reacting appropriately to rule-breaking behavior may lead to a snowball effect regarding other volunteers, who might repeat such behaviors and continue to behave unfavorably. Finally, the rule-breaking can
Factors of Undesirable Volunteer Behavior

affect the clients served, who may not receive quality service in a result or can be offended by the volunteer’s inappropriate conduct.

Role ambiguity is the most common problem regarding uncertainties in volunteer management (Alfes et al., 2015; Gilbert et al., 2017; Kappelides, Cuskelley, & Hoye, 2018; Nesbit et al., 2016; Oostlander, Güntert, & Wehner, 2014; Wilson, 2012). Lack of volunteer job descriptions and training most likely will lead to uncertainties in the volunteer’s perception of their role. Kappelides et al. (2018) discovered in their study that sometimes volunteers would learn about their role responsibilities in a summer camp exclusively from other volunteers. The program coordinator from another summer camp indicated that such situation happens naturally, as staff is not physically present in the camp and therefore they intentionally rely on experienced volunteers. However, Kappelides et al. (2018) argue that such communication practices may lead to psychological contract violations (this concept will be discussed later) and subsequently to attrition of highly qualified volunteers.

On the other hand, Musick and Wilson (2008) argue that “the volunteers’ role must be left somewhat diffuse” (p. 437) so that volunteers feel some level of personal agency leading to higher satisfaction and lower turnover rates. Studer and von Schnurbein (2013) found that it will reduce the level of volunteers’ satisfaction and contribution. Moreover, the organizations also may lose an opportunity to nurture volunteers’ motivation by not focusing on the job design and subsequently fail to increase or maintain volunteer retention (Alfes et al., 2015).

A common area where role ambiguity can cause serious tensions and ramifications for many organizations is with the board of directors. These volunteers are among the most significant unpaid workers in the organization, who have three primary role responsibilities: duty of care, duty of loyalty, and duty of obedience (Renz, 2010). Moreover, board volunteers are legally responsible for their governing decisions and may experience legal consequences for not fulfilling their responsibilities (Hopkins & Gross, 2010). It is in the interest of the organization and board members to ensure that their roles are defined clearly and to the full extent of assigned responsibilities.

Otherwise, ambiguity in the roles of board members may lead to board ineffectiveness at least or conflicts of interest and violated policies at worst (BoardSource, 2010). As an example, one may consider the commonly
uncertain stand on board member’s fundraising role and financial contribution responsibility. If the nonprofit organization does not have officially established regulations for these matters, its financial stability may be at risk. Board volunteers do not have traditional managers, but that role is usually performed by the board chair, sometimes in cooperation with the executive director, and conjunction with staff. The importance of board members’ accountability should lead staff and the board chair to ensure that any possible uncertainties in policies are eliminated and that the board is regularly educated and reminded of their responsibilities.

Finally, volunteer uncertainty is also related to the lack of social connections within the organization, most often with other volunteers, and is defined as volunteer isolation. Very often this factor would complement role and rule ambiguity. Jacobs (2017) finds, for example, that when guidelines are vague, important information or updates on work assignments can be transferred more effectively by word of mouth while socializing with other volunteers. Thus, socially engaged volunteers may have more information about the appropriate course of action than disengaged. For example, not all volunteers may read board postings whenever they come to the office. The important announcement posted on the board in the volunteer lounge more likely will be communicated to the socially engaged volunteer in a friendly chat with another volunteer or a staff member, rather than to the isolated one.

To summarize, two approaches to analyzing undesirable volunteer behavior were examined. Laczo and Hanisch (1999) discuss the broader perspective of organizational withdrawal that may result in job withdrawal and total disengagement of oneself from volunteering. Another dimension for organizational withdrawal is failing to perform tasks well, defined as work withdrawal and relates to lateness, absence, and unfavorable job behaviors (missing meetings, wasting time on the volunteer assignment, and taking long or frequent breaks, etc.). Jacobs focuses on a more specific dimension of volunteer behavior and factors that may drive it, which she describes as disruptive. Accordingly, disruptive behavior “may stem from explicit rule-breaking” and result from certain structural conditions, defined as uncertainties (Jacobs, 2017, p. 29).

Laczo and Hanisch (1999) did not examine rule-breaking as an example of work withdrawal. By looking at antecedents, the key factors of driving behavioral response for work withdrawal are related to satisfaction and commitment (Laczo & Hanisch, 1999). Jacobs (2017) describes possible
Factors of Undesirable Volunteer Behavior

factors of volunteer disruptive behavior in more instrumental ways: role ambiguity, rule ambiguity, and volunteer isolation. These factors are not mutually exclusive and may be applied simultaneously. Therefore, it is suggested that Jacobs’s concept may complement Laczo and Hanisch’s model, where disruptive behavior could be classified as a sub-type of work withdrawal along with lateness, absence, and unfavorable behavior. To identify whether or not a relationship between discussed factors exists, the following chapter will explore theoretical approaches to defining factors that may guide volunteer behavior in either negative or positive directions.

Factors that Influence Volunteer Behavior

Functional Motives

Researchers in different fields have studied the motivation of volunteers since volunteerism became a topic of academic interest. Clary et al. (1998) list at least twenty-four researchers from different interdisciplinary fields who were eager to explore the theme of benevolent assistance and personal sacrifice for another individual, very often a stranger. In particular, in their own research, Clary with associates (1998) focus on a strategy of functional analysis among other theories. This approach considers the reasons, purposes, goals, and plans, which are behind the personal and social functions (Snyder, 1993), and are being served by an individual’s thoughts, feelings, and actions (Clary, 1998).

Six main motivational functions were defined as a result: values, understanding, enhancement, protective, social, and career (Clary et al., 1998). The values motive explains a desire to express one’s altruistic intentions by helping others. An understanding function relates to an individual seeking new knowledge, experiences, and skills, while a career function is more directly focused on means to enhance professional opportunities. An enhancement function is correlated with an inner personal need to feel good about personal identity and increase self-esteem. A protective motive derives from a volunteer’s own negative feelings of guilt or sadness.

Willems et al. (2012) conducted research to identify whether these six motives correlate with a 10-factor solution for reasons to withdraw from the organization (p. 893). Authors identified two motives – values and
understanding – that directly relate to explained reasons to quit. Additionally, a social motive being described as “struggles with other volunteers in the group” had a half-connection and represented only an internal dimension of the social motivation (Willems et al., 2012, p. 896). Therefore, it was suggested that a social motive should be distinguished as internal and external because it relates to the social aspects directed toward people within and outside of the organization respectively (Willems et al., 2012). Consequently, only three out of seven functional motives to volunteer are related to reasons to quit. The other reasons to stop volunteering were related to contextual factors of organizational environment, which will be explored next.

**Contextual Factors**

Willems et al. (2012) categorized three different groups of factors that influence motivation to volunteer, which depends on past experiences and future expectations, and constantly being traded off. The *individual* set of factors includes personal emotions and attitudes to volunteerism, which are changing over time based on volunteer’s experiences. The *interpersonal* factors relate to the sense of affiliation or feelings of being trusted, helped, and appreciated. Bussell (2006) cites one of the interviewed volunteer coordinators who explained the essence of the relationship between volunteers and the organization as follows: “Fundamentally, in any relationship people need three things; they need to be valued, recognized and appreciated. If people get that in a voluntary sector setting then they will stay with the organization” (p. 164). Social interactions with other volunteers are in focus of the interpersonal type of contextual factors and, because of the social nature of staff communication, may be tightly interwoven within the next category.

The third is the *organizational* perspective focused on met and unmet expectations that volunteers hold towards an organization, which very often are based on the level of support they receive. Evidence-based studies confirm that organizational withdrawal may be significantly reduced if the organization creates a favorable context by paying attention to volunteers’ motives and specific preferences (Willems et al., 2012). Hence, all three categories are important for organizations to consider in planning the retention program along with taking into account personal motives on which organizations may not directly influence. To better understand the
context of organizational factors, it would be helpful to examine the psychological contract concept, defined by Farmer and Fedor (1999) as (1) a set of beliefs that volunteers hold toward an organization and (2) their own perceived obligations. This concept is based on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), which implies that human relationships are formed through a comparison of alternatives and the use of cost-benefit analysis.

**Psychological Contract Theory: Expectations and Organizational Support**

In a study of board members’ volunteer behavior, Farmer and Fedor (1999) applied Rousseau’s concept of *psychological contract*, which refers to “an individual’s beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between that person and another party” (Rousseau, 1989, p. 123). While drawing parallels between employee and volunteer social contracts, Farmer and Fedor (1999) discovered that the level of perceived organizational support (POS) received can significantly influence volunteer’s behavior positively or negatively. Moreover, the authors hypothesized possible relationships between participation involvement (how engaged and active volunteers are), POS, and volunteer expectations (formed prior to joining the organization). While overall, the results of the study supported the hypothesis that met or unmet expectations (or in other words — psychological contract fulfillment or violation) affects levels of volunteer participation, it was the impact of organizational support (POS), that had stronger effects on volunteer participation.

Additionally, POS was negatively related to turnover intentions (job withdrawal), which means that volunteers may be “somewhat willing to overlook particular unmet expectations in their work but particularly sensitive to an overall feeling that the organization did not care about their well-being” (Farmer & Fedor, 1999, p. 359). To conclude, the results of this study determined that fulfillment (or violation) of the psychological contract has lesser effects on volunteer participation then perceived organizational support, which also was strongly associated with volunteer’s intention to leave the organization (job withdrawal).

On the other side, Walker, Accadia, and Costa (2016) conducted a similar study also based on social exchange theory. Authors aimed to determine relationships between an intent to quit and perceived organizational support while testing an additional possible mediator —
“coworker support,” and specifying the condition of the psychological contract as violated. They defined the last as *psychological contract breach*, the “perceived failure of the organization to meet volunteers’ expectations of reciprocity” (p. 1062). The results contrast those of Farmer and Fedor (1999), who found no relation between met expectations and intention to remain volunteering. The study of Walker et al. (2016) illustrates that both perceived organizational support and psychological contract fulfilment are associated with volunteers’ intention to remain.

Overall, Walker et al. (2016) argue that these findings are in a line with social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). This means that in a situation when the contribution to a cause has been made, volunteers “perceive an obligation of reciprocity in their relationships and use this perception when forming intentions about their ongoing involvement” (Walker et al., p. 1066). As a result, such findings contradict the general perception that socially-related benefits from volunteering are the most important factors that influence volunteer withdrawal.

**Implications for Practice**

Eisner with colleagues (2009) argues that the decline in volunteering across the United States for the past several years has been caused by a lack of strategic approach to volunteer recruitment, management, and retention processes. In a summary of good volunteer management practices, published in 2004, only less than a half (45 percent) of organizations paid attention to matching volunteer’s skills with appropriate assignments (Eisner at al., 2009). Thirty-five percent recognized the contributions of volunteers only thirty percent measured volunteer impact regularly (at least once a year). The most shocking results were found for a practice of providing volunteers with training and professional development when only one-quarter of respondents confirmed having implemented it. Finally, only 19 percent of nonprofits considered it worthwhile to invest in training/hiring a paid employee to work with volunteers.

Failing to implement practices mentioned above can result in job and work withdrawal, and especially volunteer uncertainty. Among reviewed factors that may influence volunteer experience and behavior, a vast majority are organization-related. In Farmer and Fedor’s (1999) study, the two key categories of focus — met expectations, which are being formed at the beginning of volunteering, and perceived organizational support — are
Factors of Undesirable Volunteer Behavior

significantly related to each other and may have a bilateral impact. This means that for organizations that rely on volunteer support, it is critical to have an employee who can manage these relationships well. However, Eisner et al. (2009) report shows that investing in professionally trained staff is the least adopted practice by nonprofit organizations.

Additionally, Coursey, Brudney, Littlepage, and Perry (2011) argue that to influence volunteer behavior it is necessary to identify volunteers’ intentions, personal values and match them accordingly with available volunteer positions: “How an individual fits with respect to his or her goals, motives, and other criteria with an organization’s culture and opportunities will affect workplace behavior” (p. 50). Such practice also will help tailor recruitment messages appropriately to satisfy volunteer expectations within an offered organizational environment (Stukas et al., 2016). Moreover, as Bussell and Forbes (2006) argue, understanding the benefits which the organization can offer to volunteers is a key starting point for any marketing effort in recruitment process. By knowing what factors drive volunteers’ motivation to participate the volunteer manager can ensure a better fit between the organization’s and volunteer’s goals and needs, and diminish the possibility of disruptive behavior, and rule-breaking especially, which was explained by Jacobs (2017) as one of the consequences of goals mismatch.

Nonprofit organizations, while often depending on volunteers’ support and at the same time constantly competing for scarce resources, cannot ignore a need for a serious approach to volunteer management. Relatively small issues, such as ambiguity of role assignments or uncertainty about organizational rules and policies, derive from more fundamental problems in the perception of the impact volunteers have on the organization’s functionality. To prevent volunteers’ withdrawal from the organization, as well as a possibility of disruptive behavior, sound managerial practices in volunteer management should be adopted and endorsed, especially by the organization’s leadership.

Limitations and Future Research

This paper focused on a limited number of resources, and therefore cannot be considered as comprehensive research. Perhaps other approaches to assessment and classification of volunteer motivation in relation to
favorable behaviors may provide different perspectives. While acknowledging a limited scope of analyzed literature and approaches, this study offers a useful foundation of theoretical insight to outlining types of undesirable volunteer behavior and its antecedents.

For future research, it will be useful to examine how the increase of the organization’s investment in volunteer management would relate to discussed categories of perceived organizational support and psychological contract fulfillment, and to specific types of organizational withdrawal. Also, the examination of the relationship between perceived organizational support, volunteer rule-breaking, and unfavorable job behaviors may be very valuable in the field of volunteer management.

Recommendations

In a situation of reciprocal and relational-based exchanges when it is particularly challenging to enforce desirable behavior, adopting sound managerial practices can help to guide it in a positive direction. Considering a broad range of factors that may impact volunteer behavior, nonprofit organizations relying on volunteers’ support should remember that organization-related factors are always in place. Specifically, perceived organizational support and psychological contract fulfillment are among the most critical factors to which volunteer managers should pay close attention. A five-step process, synthesized from the literature, can be used by managers for their volunteer management planning process and help focus on ensuring positive and desirable volunteer behavior:

1. Design your program: list areas that need volunteer involvement and write job descriptions that include necessary skills sought, role descriptions, and mission/values statements of the organization; write volunteer policy; and create volunteer orientation materials.

2. Know your volunteers: learn their individual characteristics, prevailing motives to volunteer, goals and needs. Define a system to assign volunteers with tasks that match their individual needs and abilities in the best way.

3. Supervise, revise, and enforce: regularly revise, address, and enforce compliance to volunteer guidelines while updating policies and role responsibilities when necessary.
4. Invest in volunteer talent capacity: invest in training and professional development of both staff and volunteers; set communication guidelines for staff to follow; provide opportunities for staff-volunteer engagement and relationship-building.

5. Evaluate and recognize: regularly assess the quality and effectiveness of volunteer program by surveying volunteers, staff, and clients (if applicable), and by updating assignments accordingly to findings; create a structure to recognize volunteers’ service and personal achievements.

Following these basic steps and constant monitoring of trends and best practices in volunteer management will help managers to reduce the number of awkward situations when rules and policies need to be enforced, along with increasing volunteer tenure and commitment.
References


Factors of Undesirable Volunteer Behavior


23


About the Author

Ukrainian native, Iryna Bilan received her Bachelor’s degree in Economics and Entrepreneurship (2011) and Master’s degree in Marketing (2012) from Lviv Polytechnic National University, Ukraine. After serving at Tustan State Historical and Cultural Reserve in Ukraine as Communications Manager, she completed a year-long traineeship at ArtPrize (2015) in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The following year Iryna returned to the United States to pursue her Master of Public Administration degree with a concentration in nonprofit management and leadership at Grand Valley State University, graduating in 2018. While at GVSU, Iryna was a Graduate Assistant at School of Public, Nonprofit and Health Administration and helped organize two Art & Science of Aging conferences, and she served as an Events and Marketing Board Chair for the university’s Nonprofit Professionals Graduate Student Organization. Iryna currently works as a Prospect Research and Grant Writer at Grand Valley’s Development department, helping raise money for capital campaigns and outreach programs. She aspires to change cultural heritage preservation practices in Ukraine upon her return home. When not at work, Iryna enjoys backpacking trips with her friends in Northern Michigan and the Carpathian Mountains, attending traditional American music jam sessions, and leading docent tours at Grand Rapids Art Museum.