

Expanded abstract

Volunteer motivation as a key factor in retaining volunteers in NGOs

Purpose

This article aims to analyse and systematise the main theoretical perspectives on volunteer motivation. Particular attention is paid to the impact of motivation on the retention of volunteers in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and third-sector social action entities. It begins by considering volunteering to be both an essential resource for the sustainability of non-profit organisations and a complex social phenomenon whose motivations cannot be explained by altruism or instrumental logic alone.

Specifically, the article seeks to define the role of volunteering in third sector social action, review the main theoretical approaches to volunteer motivation, identify their contributions to and limitations in explaining retention, and integrate these perspectives with a relational analysis from the standpoint of internal marketing. The context of liquid modernity and generational dynamics is also considered to shed light on the emergence of more flexible, episodic, and unstable commitments.

Methods

This work adopts a theoretical and conceptual approach, drawing on a literature review of volunteering, motivation, the third sector, internal marketing, and organisational behaviour. Rather than being an empirical study, the aim is to make an integrative contribution by organising disparate conceptual frameworks and proposing useful connections for research and management in non-profit organisations.

As volunteering has been studied from psychological, sociological, economic, anthropological and marketing perspectives, the approach is interdisciplinary. The analysis is organised around five perspectives. The symbolic perspective views volunteering as a practice associated with subjective meanings, identity and socially constructed narratives. The functional perspective explains how the same behaviour can satisfy different psychological needs. Rational Choice Theory introduces the balance between perceived costs and benefits, which is useful for interpreting intermittent participation or dropout rates. Perceived value broadens this interpretation by incorporating functional, social, emotional and ethical benefits. Finally, Self-Determination Theory shifts the focus from identifying motives to evaluating motivation quality by examining satisfaction with autonomy, competence, and social relationships.

Findings

The review identifies several relevant theoretical findings. Firstly, although the motivation of volunteers has been widely studied, further research is needed to understand what encourages long-term commitment. While volunteer recruitment has received attention, retention poses a more critical challenge for NGOs due to staff turnover, the temporary nature of commitments, and the absence of contractual incentives. Understanding motivations is essential to explaining both the initial decision to volunteer and the continuation of that commitment.

Secondly, the functional perspective remains the predominant approach. Its main contribution is recognising that the same behaviour can stem from diverse motives, such as altruistic values, learning, social relationships, professional development, self-esteem, and ego protection. However, this approach has a key limitation in that, while it identifies motives, it does not explain their quality or their differential impact on volunteer retention, performance or well-being.

Thirdly, Rational Choice Theory allows us to view volunteering as a decision made through a cost-benefit analysis. While this framework helps us to understand situations involving drop-out, overload or episodic participation, it is insufficient in isolation as it does not fully capture the emotional, identity-related, ethical and relational components of volunteering.

Fourthly, the concept of perceived value is relevant because it recognises that volunteering can be a meaningful experience, offering emotional, social, functional and ethical benefits that can outweigh the costs in terms of time, effort and burden. This perspective links volunteer motivation to experiential and internal marketing, viewing volunteers as internal customers whose satisfaction and loyalty depend on their organisational experience.

Finally, Self-Determination Theory offers a robust framework for understanding sustained motivation. By distinguishing between autonomous and controlled motivations, it helps us to understand persistence in the absence of tangible rewards. Satisfying the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness acts as a direct precursor to intrinsic motivation, well-being, and continued volunteering.

Practical implications

The practical implications focus on managing relationships with volunteers. Rather than adopting uniform strategies, NGOs must segment and thoroughly understand the motivational profiles of their volunteers. Motivations can include altruism, social factors, professional development, emotional fulfilment and identity, and their relative importance can change over time. Therefore, effective management requires listening and monitoring mechanisms that allow tasks, responsibilities, and forms of recognition to be adapted.

Secondly, organisations must design experiences that satisfy basic psychological needs. Fostering autonomy involves allowing some degree of choice in tasks, while reinforcing competence requires training, feedback and recognition of impact. Promoting social relationships, meanwhile, requires creating spaces for belonging, collaboration and mutual support. These conditions strengthen intrinsic motivation and encourage long-term volunteering.

Thirdly, volunteer management should incorporate perceived value as a strategic criterion. Simply assigning tasks is not enough; meaningful and rewarding experiences that align with the organisation's mission must be created. This involves matching volunteers' interests with the organisation's needs, communicating the impact of their work and acknowledging their contributions. From an internal marketing perspective, volunteers should be considered key players in generating relational value rather than peripheral resources.

Finally, NGOs must address the context of liquid modernity and generational dynamics. Among young people in particular, flexible, episodic and learning-oriented forms of engagement may become more prevalent. This should not necessarily be interpreted as a lack of commitment, but rather as a different type of engagement requiring more adaptive and participatory approaches.

Study limitations

The first limitation stems from the interdisciplinary nature of volunteering, which makes developing unified frameworks challenging. Secondly, the dynamic and idiosyncratic nature of motivations, which vary according to individuals, contexts, life stages and organisations, makes it difficult to develop unified frameworks. A third limitation is the risk of adopting Self-Determination Theory as an exclusive paradigm, given that it does not include all personal and contextual factors. Future research should take a multidisciplinary and multilevel approach, explore beneficiaries' perceptions of volunteering and analyse whether these motivational factors are replicated in corporate volunteering.

Originality/Value

The article's original value lies in its proposed theoretical integration. Unlike approaches that focus exclusively on identifying motives, this work presents an interdisciplinary framework that combines symbolic, functional, rational, experiential, and self-determined perspectives. This allows us to view voluntary motivation as an evolving process where identity, psychological functions, cost-benefit analysis, perceived value, and the fulfilment of fundamental psychological needs converge.

Furthermore, the article offers an internal marketing perspective, placing the volunteer experience at the heart of NGOs' relationship management. This perspective links literature on volunteering with literature on consumer behaviour, experiential marketing, and human resource management in non-profit organisations. Moreover, by incorporating liquid modernity and generational dynamics, the article provides an updated interpretation of the challenges of retention and loyalty in the TSAS. The article's main contribution is its provision of a useful conceptual framework for both theoretical development and designing strategies aimed at strengthening volunteer satisfaction, commitment, and continuity.