WHAT AFFECTS
A VOLUNTEER'S COMMITMENT?

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Introduction

Human capital is the most valuable resource that voluntary organizations have at their disposal. It includes both paid staff and volunteers. In all voluntary sector organizations — even those with paid, professional staff — volunteers are responsible for providing direction and leadership. They are also often involved in carrying out day-to-day tasks. Indeed, many voluntary sector organizations — particularly those in the areas of sports, recreation, and culture — would not be able to function without the work carried out by volunteers.

Volunteers provide vital expertise, skills, knowledge, and labour. Keeping them (volunteer retention) is a key part of an organization's success. Many factors affect volunteer retention. One key factor is the desire to be part of the organization — a volunteer's commitment to the organization. A research project for the International Year of Volunteers investigated factors that affect a volunteer's commitment.

Getting a high level of volunteer commitment

To achieve high levels of commitment from volunteers, organizations must ensure that volunteers are satisfied with the organization's performance and that they identify with the organization. This means that the organization must:

- have clear policies and procedures;
- create a safe, trustworthy, and supportive environment;
- ensure that volunteers accept their responsibilities; and,
- give volunteers ways to satisfy their need to help the community and others.

Theoretical perspective

Social scientists often use an approach called Social Cognitive Theory to explain human behaviour and the persistence of the behaviour. Applied to the behaviour of volunteering, this theory suggests that both personal and social environmental factors affect a volunteer's commitment (or loyalty) to an organization. The theory also suggests that individuals (volunteers) shape their environment through their behaviour rather than just reacting to it.

In other words, environmental, personal, and behavioural factors operate simultaneously, influencing and being influenced by each other. In this report, we examine which personal and social environmental factors influence one specific behaviour: volunteer commitment.[1]

The factors examined

While numerous factors may influence a person's behaviour, this study examined five personal factors and one social environmental factor that are thought to affect volunteer commitment (see Figure 1).

Generally, volunteers are more committed when they:

1. Like the social environment (*psychological climate*) where they volunteer. This includes:

   - how much freedom and control they have;
   - how much people pull together;
   - trust;
   - psychological safety;
   - pressure;
   - support;
   - recognition; and,
   - fairness.

2. Want to achieve a desired outcome (*volunteer motivation*), such as:

   - helping others;
   - advancing their careers;
   - getting away from the troubles of their everyday lives;
   - interacting with other people;
   - being recognized for their efforts;
   - fitting cultural norms; and,
   - helping the community.

3. Feel that their volunteer role, or link to the organization, is important (*role identity* and *organizational identity*).

4. Understand their role and accept its responsibilities (*role clarity* and *role acceptance*).

5. Feel sure they can do the role (*role efficacy*).

6. Feel good about volunteering (*satisfaction*), based on:

   - their performance;
   - the service they provide;
   - their co-volunteers;
   - their social status;
   - their responsibility;
   - policies and procedures;
   - their advancement;
   - organizational performance; and,
   - their independence.

This report looks at the relative impact of these factors on the level of commitment volunteers show toward the organization.

Figure 1

Factors influencing commitment, according to Social Cognitive Theory

Social Environment Factors
- Psychological Climate

Personal Factors
- Volunteer Motivation
- Role / Organizational Identity
- Role Clarity
  Role Acceptance
- Role Efficacy
- Satisfaction

Behaviour
- Commitment
- Effort

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[1] For information on what influences volunteer effort, please see *What Determines a Volunteer's Effort?* available online at www.nonprofitscan.ca.
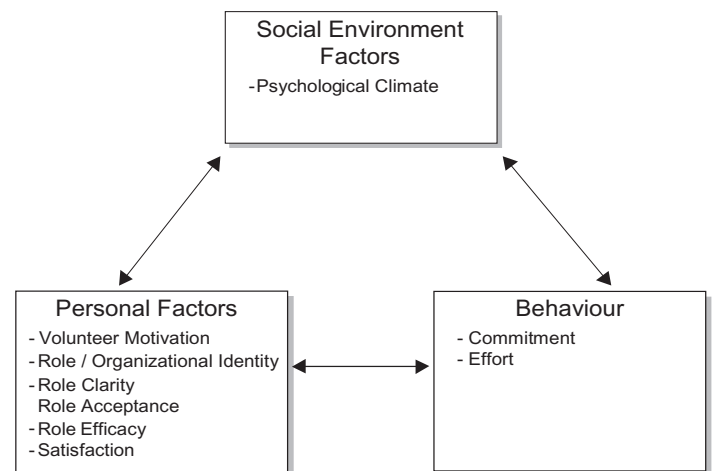
The research process

Sports, culture, and recreation organizations from across the province of Saskatchewan were invited to participate in this research project. Volunteers associated with these organizations were mailed a questionnaire designed to measure the six factors listed above.

A total of 1,074 volunteers completed the questionnaire. Of the 1,074 returned questionnaires, 601 (56%) were from females and 473 (44%) were from males (see Figure 2). The respondents ranged in age from 12 to 79 years, with the most common age category being 35–44 years (see Figure 3). Most respondents were married (see Figure 4), and lived in communities of over 100,000 people (see Figure 5).
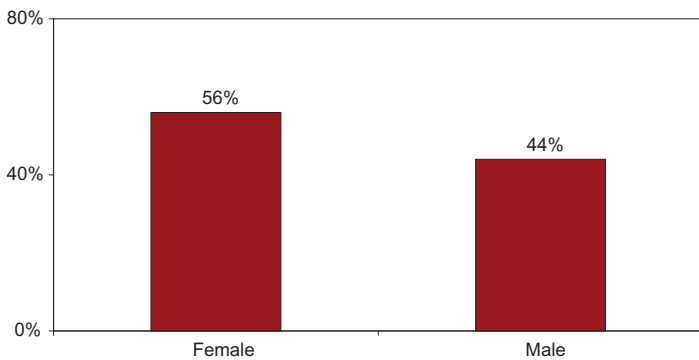
Figure 2

Gender of survey respondents

Figure 3

Age of survey respondents
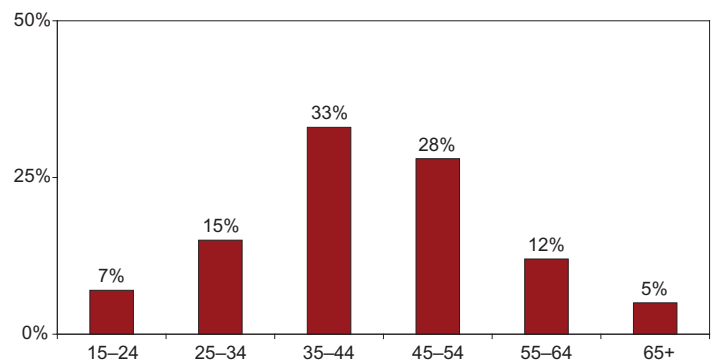

Figure 4

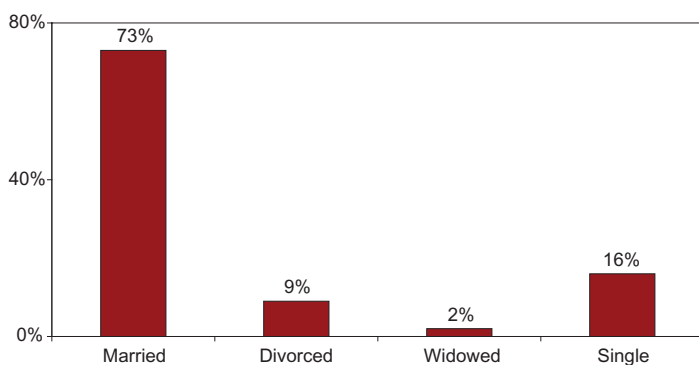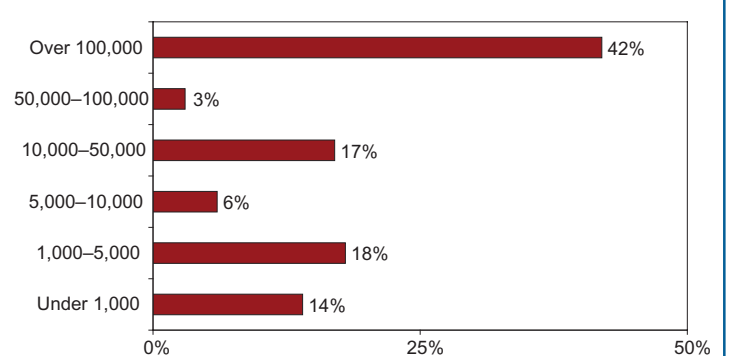**Marital status of survey respondents**

Figure 5

Percentage of respondents by community size

Findings

What influences a volunteer's commitment?

Five of the six factors we examined turned out to be the most useful for predicting volunteer commitment. These factors were:

- satisfaction with organizational performance;
- organizational identity;
- the safety of the psychological climate (safety);
- role identity; and,
- role acceptance.

The relative contribution of each of these factors can be seen in Figure 6. Satisfaction with organizational performance was the strongest predictor of volunteer commitment, accounting for over one-third (34%) of the variability in this behaviour. The second most important predictor of volunteer commitment was organizational identity (11%). While the other factors — safety, role identity, and role acceptance — did not account for as big a "piece of the commitment pie," they are still important factors to take into consideration when trying to retain volunteers.

Collectively, these factors explain 52% of the variance in volunteer commitment, leaving 48% of the variance unaccounted for.

Satisfaction with the organization's performance

The strongest factor influencing commitment was the volunteer's level of satisfaction with the performance of the organization. Volunteers who are satisfied with outcomes (such as meeting goals or hosting successful events) tend to be more committed than those who are dissatisfied.

Organizational identity

This is the second strongest predictor of volunteer commitment. Volunteers want to be associated with organizations that they and their communities value.

When they feel attached to an organization, and this feeling becomes part of their self-identity, they become committed to that organization. As such, they are more likely to stay a part of it.

Psychological climate — safety

Volunteers must feel that the organization is a psychologically safe place to be. In other words, they must feel able to express themselves without being shamed or ridiculed. When they can express themselves in an open and non-threatening environment, they are more likely to be committed to the organization.

Role identity

Role identity (the feeling that "I am a volunteer") was not a strong direct predictor of volunteer commitment. However, as we will show below, it has an indirect impact on volunteer commitment through its impact on organizational identity.

Role acceptance

Volunteers are either recruited to fill a particular role (e.g., a position on the board of directors) or are assigned to a certain role the organization needs to

Figure 6

Factors influencing volunteer commitment
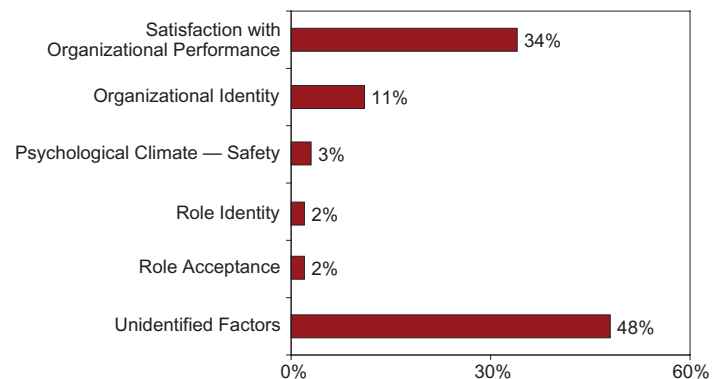
Factor	Percentage
Satisfaction with Organizational Performance	34%
Organizational Identity	11%
Psychological Climate — Safety	3%
Role Identity	2%
Role Acceptance	2%
Unidentified Factors	48%

The percentages refer to the amount of overall variance in commitment associated with each factor.

fill. When they accept the responsibilities of their role (regardless of whether it matches their skills, knowledge, or attributes), they tend to be more committed to the organization than volunteers who do not accept their role.

What influences satisfaction with the organization's performance?

Since satisfaction with organizational performance and organizational identity are so important in contributing to volunteer commitment, it would be useful to try to understand what influences these two factors. With regard to satisfaction with organizational performance, the three factors that were shown to be the most important were:

- satisfaction with policies and procedures;
- satisfaction with social service; and,
- the trust dimension of psychological climate.

The relative contribution of each of these factors can be seen in Figure 7. Satisfaction with policies and procedures is the strongest predictor of satisfaction with organizational performance, accounting for almost two-thirds (65%) of its variability. Satisfaction with social service and trust are also important factors

to consider when trying to satisfy volunteers about the organization's performance.

Satisfaction with policies and procedures
By far the strongest predictor of satisfaction with the organization's performance is satisfaction with its policies and procedures. This includes how policies and procedures are applied, practiced, and conveyed to volunteers.

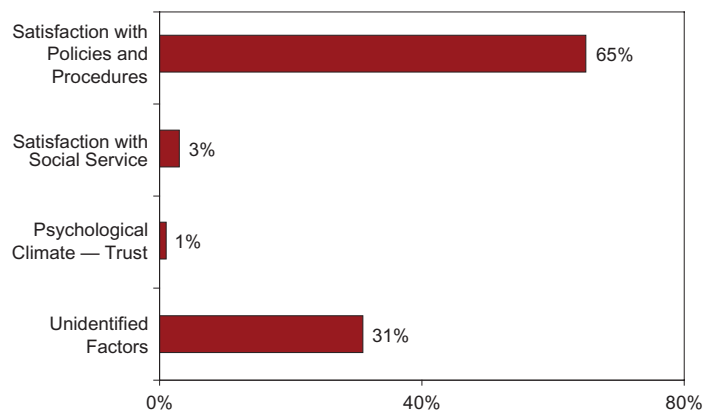### Satisfaction with social service
Our research suggests that the two most important motives for volunteering are to help the community and to help other people. Satisfaction with social service is concerned with how well the organization permits people to do that. If the main motive of volunteers is to help, and they believe that they are doing so through the organization, then they are more likely to be satisfied with its performance. In other words, because their personal motives have been satisfied, they are more likely to see the organization as being successful.[2]

Psychological climate — trust
When volunteers can trust their co-volunteers to do their tasks, they are more likely to feel satisfied with the organization's performance. When they feel that their colleagues are not pulling their weight, they are more likely to be dissatisfied with the organization's performance.

What influences organizational identity?
As shown in Figure 6, the second strongest predictor of volunteer commitment was organizational identity. Organizational identity is an important factor to consider when trying to improve volunteer retention because those volunteers who have a strong sense of being a part of the organization tend to be more committed to the organization. Consequently, they evaluate the organization more positively, and will stay

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Figure 7

Factors influencing satisfaction with organizational performance

Satisfaction with Policies and Procedures	65%
Satisfaction with Social Service	3%
Psychological Climate — Trust	1%
Unidentified Factors	31%

The percentages refer to the amount of overall variance in commitment associated with each factor.

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[2] For more information on volunteer motives, please see the fact sheet, *Volunteer Motivation: What drives sport volunteers?* available online at www.nonprofitscan.ca.

with the organization longer. This study found three factors that enhance organizational identity:

- role identity;
- satisfaction with social service; and,
- the support dimension of psychological climate.

The relative impact of each of these factors can be seen in Figure 8. Role identity (19%) and satisfaction with social service (8%) have the strongest influence on organizational identity. Together they account for more than one-quarter of the variability in organizational identity. The contribution of support to organizational identity is minimal, but should still be considered.

Role identity
Someone who either gives time to several organizations, or a lot of time to one organization, is likely to develop a volunteer role identity. As well, volunteers who give a lot of time to one organization may develop an organizational identity. This seems to be the case as role identity is the strongest predictor of organizational identity.

Satisfaction with social service
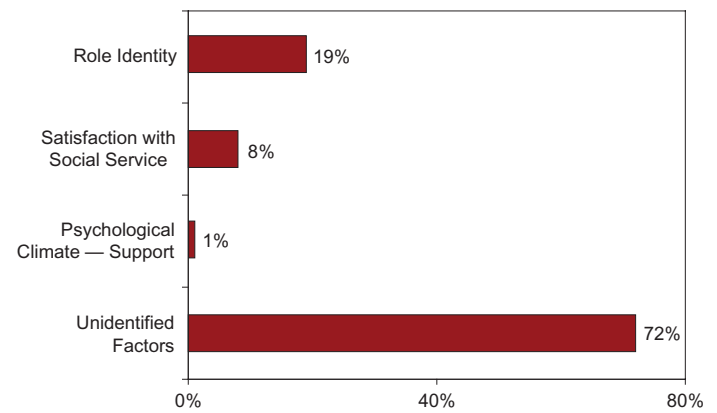As noted above, satisfaction with social service refers to how much volunteering allows people to fulfill their desires to help others and the community. If an organization can provide ways for volunteers to help others and volunteers like these options, they are more likely to identify with that organization.

Psychological climate — support
Not only must volunteers feel that their volunteer environment is psychologically safe and trustworthy, they must also feel supported and accepted by their peers. This refers to psychological support and acceptance of ideas, rather than financial or technical assistance.

Figure 8

Factors influencing organizational identity

Role Identity	19%
Satisfaction with Social Service	8%
Psychological Climate — Support	1%
Unidentified Factors	72%

The percentages refer to the amount of overall variance in commitment associated with each factor.

Conclusion

What do we know?

To have high levels of commitment from volunteers, organizations must strive to ensure that volunteers are satisfied with the organization's performance and that they identify with the organization. This means that the organization must:

- have clear policies and procedures;
- create a safe, trustworthy, and supportive environment;
- ensure that volunteers accept their responsibilities; and,
- give volunteers ways to satisfy their need to help the community and others.

Figure 9 shows the relationships among these factors. The thick arrows represent stronger relationships than the thin arrows.

What don't we know?

Together, the factors discussed above are quite important to understanding volunteer commitment. But, as with all research on human behaviour, we cannot always predict what people will do (as shown by the "Unidentified Factors" bar in Figures 6, 7, and 8). However, the factors in this study predicted more than 50% of the variability in volunteer commitment. This is a major start in understanding volunteer commitment.

What can you do?

To increase volunteer commitment, organizations should ensure that:

Volunteers are satisfied with the organization's overall performance. Volunteers are more satisfied with organizational performance when they are involved in setting goals and outcome measures. And, when their roles directly relate to measurable outcomes, they can see how they helped the organization succeed. For example, the organization may set a goal to increase revenue by 25%. Each board director may then have an outcome measure to help achieve this goal.

Volunteers identify with the organization. Effective volunteer stewardship (such as timely orientations and training, and appreciation programs) can also help

Figure 9

Relationships among factors that influence commitment
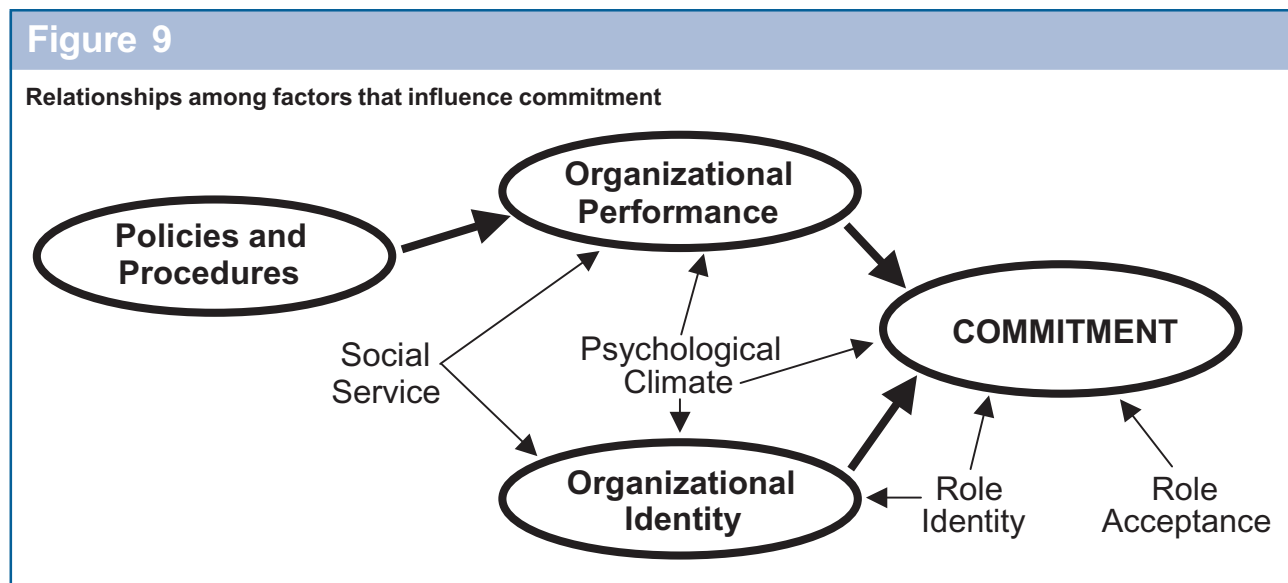
increase organizational identification. Ensuring that volunteers have ways to build friendships helps create a sense of connection and community within the organization. Organizational t-shirts, pins, and bags have stood the test of time because they help build a team identity.

The organization has clear policies and procedures. Policy and procedure development often takes a lower priority to more exciting tasks. However, this study shows that documenting policies and procedures clearly is an investment that pays off.

The organization has a safe, trustworthy, and supportive environment. To foster a healthy social environment, create a code of conduct that encourages desireable behaviour. Role modeling of desirable behaviours by organizational leaders can also go far to making a positive culture. Detailed volunteer orientations also help share organizational values and set guidelines for volunteer behaviour.

Volunteers accept their roles. Volunteer assignments do not always match volunteer skills, knowledge, and attributes. Nonetheless, volunteers need to accept their responsibilities. They are more likely to accept those roles when they choose them or sign contracts that outline their duties and timelines.

Volunteers feel satisfied with their ability to help others. Volunteers must perceive that they are helping others and their community in order to feel satisfied. Take steps to show volunteers the results of their efforts. Where possible, provide meaning to volunteer jobs by attaching them to the clientele. For example, provide statistics on the number of individuals impacted by your organization or interview a cross-section of clients to determine if the organization is delivering its services in a client-friendly way.