

WHAT DETERMINES A VOLUNTEER'S EFFORT?

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For more information on the International Year of Volunteers, visit www.nonprofitscan.ca.

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VOLUNTEER
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WHAT DETERMINES A VOLUNTEER'S EFFORT?

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WHAT DETERMINES A VOLUNTEER'S EFFORT?

Introduction

The most valuable resource that voluntary organizations have at their disposal is human capital, which 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. In addition, volunteers are 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 contributed by volunteers.

Volunteers provide organizations with many vital resources in the form of expertise, skills, knowledge, and labour. One factor that determines the value of these volunteer resources is the amount of effort volunteers expend while engaged in their voluntary activity. A research project for the International Year of Volunteers investigated factors that affect a volunteer's effort.

Theoretical perspective

Social scientists often use an approach called Social Cognitive Theory to explain human behaviour in general and volunteer effort in particular. When this theory is

Role acceptance is key to volunteer effort

Organizations that want to achieve high levels of effort from their volunteers must ensure that volunteers accept their roles. This means ensuring that volunteers:

- have clearly defined roles;
- understand these roles;
- feel a sense of confidence in their ability to fulfill their roles;
- are satisfied with the extent to which they perceive themselves as helping their community and others; and,
- are satisfied with the organization's overall performance.

applied to the behaviour of volunteering, it suggests that both personal and social environmental factors affect a volunteer's effort. The theory also suggests that individuals (volunteers) actively shape their environment rather than simply react 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 effort.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 effort (see Figure 1). Generally, volunteers exert more effort when they:

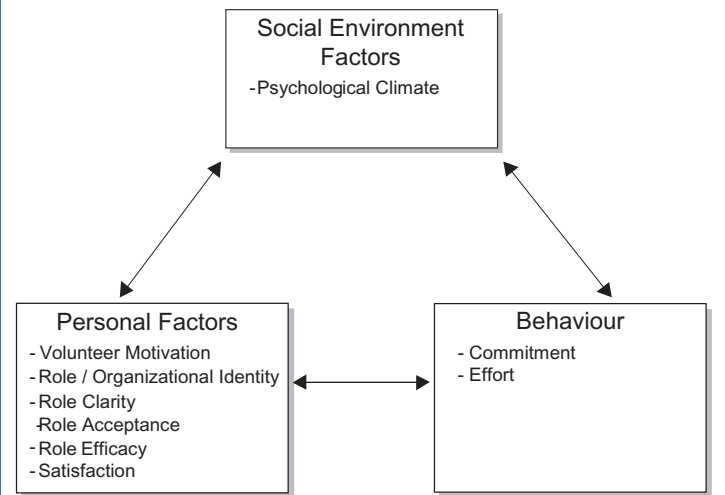
1. Like the social environment (*psychological climate*) where they volunteer. This includes:
 - how much freedom and control they have;
 - how much people pull together;
 - trust;
 - psychological safety;
 - pressure;
 - support;
 - recognition; and,
 - fairness.
2. Want to achieve a desired outcome (*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 carry out the role (*role efficacy*).
6. Feel good about volunteering (*satisfaction*), based on:
 - their performance;
 - the service they provide;
 - their co-workers;
 - 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 effort volunteers apply to their volunteer task(s).

Figure 1

Factors influencing effort, according to Social Cognitive Theory



¹ For information on what influences volunteer commitment, please see *What Determines a Volunteer's Commitment?* available online at www.nonprofitscan.ca.

What Determines a Volunteer's Effort?

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

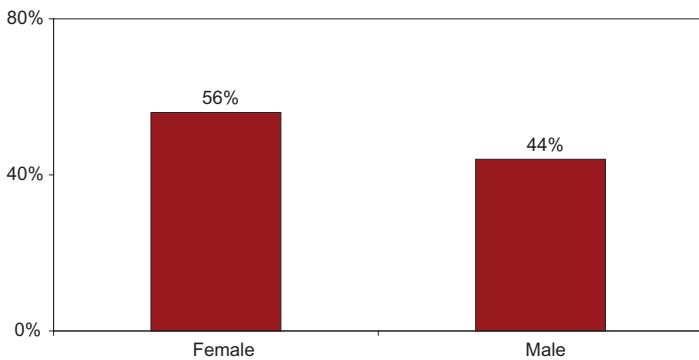


Figure 3

Age of survey respondents

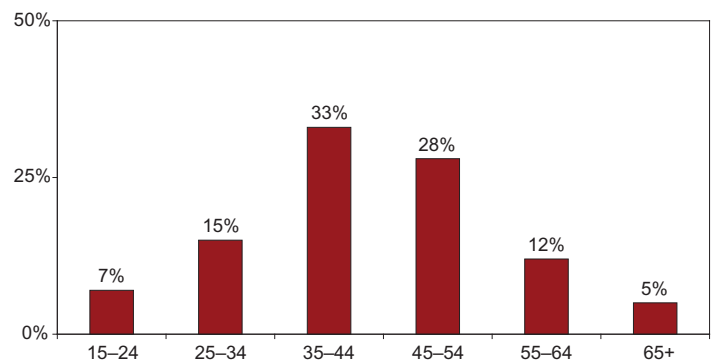


Figure 4

Marital status of survey respondents

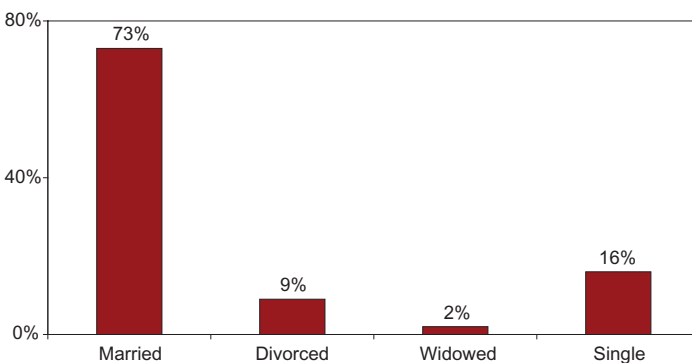
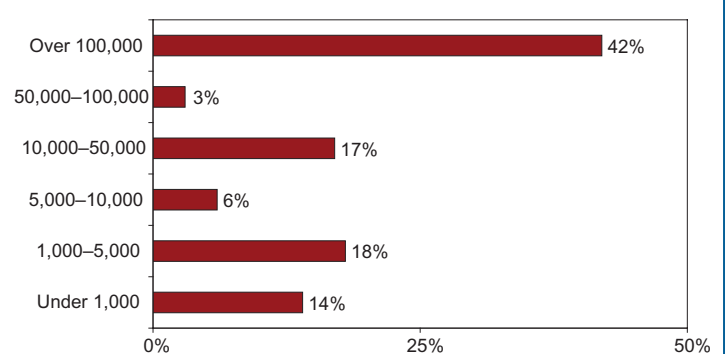


Figure 5

Percentage of respondents by community size



Findings

What influences a volunteer’s effort?

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

- role acceptance;
- role clarity;
- specific aspects of satisfaction; and,
- role efficacy.

By far the most important factor influencing volunteer effort was role acceptance. When people volunteer with an organization, they are either recruited to fill a particular role (e.g., a position on the board of directors) or are assigned to a role the organization needs to fill. In both instances, volunteers must accept the responsibilities of the role they occupy. As can be seen in Figure 6, this factor accounted for over half the variability seen in volunteer effort. In other words, volunteers who accept the responsibilities associated with their role are more likely to expend greater effort to carry out their tasks than those who do not accept their responsibilities.

Figure 6 shows that satisfaction (2%), role efficacy (2%), and role clarity (1%) also influenced volunteer effort. These factors, however, had more impact when we started looking at the factors that influenced role acceptance. They will be discussed later in this report.

Collectively, the four factors noted above explain 58% of the variance in volunteer effort. Age and gender explain another 1%, leaving 41% of the variance unaccounted for.

What influences role acceptance?

Since role acceptance is so important to understanding volunteer effort, it would be useful to know what contributes to volunteer role acceptance. To answer this question, the relationship between the factors and role acceptance was examined. The three factors that

contributed notably to developing role acceptance were:

- role clarity;
- satisfaction with social service; and,
- role efficacy.

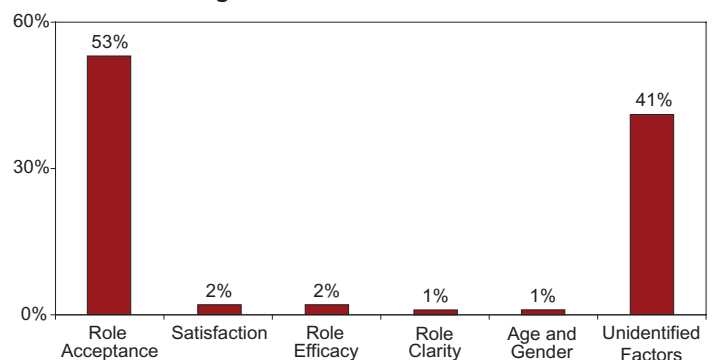
The relative contribution of each of these factors can be seen in Figure 7. Role clarity was the strongest predictor, accounting for over one-third (39%) of the variability in role acceptance. Although role efficacy and satisfaction with social service did not account for as large a percentage of the variance, they should not be overlooked.

Role clarity

As noted, this was the single strongest contributor to role acceptance and, as such, was important in determining volunteer effort. Volunteers need to have a clear picture of what they will be doing, where they are doing it, and how it fits into the “bigger picture.” If volunteers are not certain about the specific nature of their roles, it is very difficult for them to accept those roles and work hard on the tasks associated with them.

Figure 6

Factors influencing volunteer effort



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

What Determines a Volunteer's Effort?

Satisfaction with social service

This was a moderate predictor of role acceptance and, therefore, contributes indirectly to volunteer effort. Volunteers who are satisfied that they are being of service to others tend to put more effort into their activity. This factor must be seen in light of volunteer motives. Findings from our research suggest that the two most important motives for volunteering are to help the community and other people.² If the most important motive of volunteers is to help and their perception is that they are doing so, then they will be much more accepting of the roles they have been assigned. This type of satisfaction also contributes to

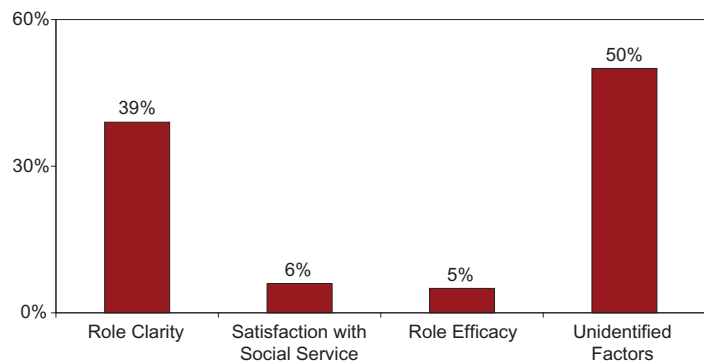
role clarity — when volunteers are satisfied that they are helping their community and other people they believe that their role has some meaning in the larger societal context.

Role efficacy

Not only must volunteers' roles be clearly stated and individuals perceive that they are contributing to the welfare of others, but volunteers must feel confident that they have the ability to carry out their assigned tasks. Role efficacy was not as strong a predictor of role acceptance as role clarity (see Figure 7), but it was a factor. As we will show below, role efficacy also contributes to role clarity (see Figure 8), so it cannot be overlooked when considering how much effort volunteers will expend.

Figure 7

Factors influencing role acceptance



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

What influences role clarity?

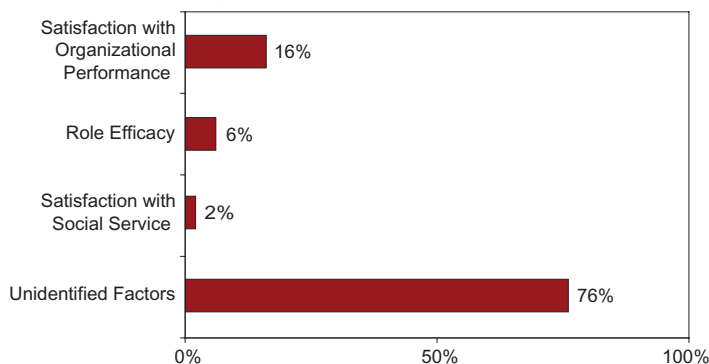
Since role clarity plays an important role in how accepting volunteers are of their roles, it is important to explain the factors that influence role clarity. The two most important factors in predicting role clarity were:

- satisfaction with the organization's performance; and,
- role efficacy.

The relative contribution of each these factors is shown in Figure 8. Satisfaction with the organization's performance was the strongest predictor (16%) of role clarity. The two factors mentioned previously — role efficacy and satisfaction with social service — also contributed somewhat to the understanding of role clarity.

Figure 8

Factors influencing role clarity



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

Satisfaction with the organization's performance

This was a major contributor to role clarity and, therefore, an indirect contributor to role acceptance and effort. It appears that a volunteer's level of satisfaction with how the organization is performing

² For more on volunteer motives, please see the Fact Sheet, *Volunteer motivation: What drives sport volunteers?* Available online at www.nonprofitscan.ca.

(e.g., meeting goals, etc.) has a direct impact on his or her perception of how clearly defined the volunteer role is in the organization. Organizations with clearly defined goals tend to have clearly defined roles for

their volunteers. Moreover, it tends to be easier to determine whether the organization is performing well if the organization has clearly defined goals, which results in greater satisfaction among volunteers.

Conclusion

What do we know?

Organizations that want to achieve high levels of effort from their volunteers must make every effort to ensure that volunteers are accepting of their roles. This means ensuring that volunteers:

- have clearly defined roles;
- understand these roles;
- feel a sense of confidence in their ability to fulfill their roles;
- are satisfied with the extent to which they perceive themselves as helping their community and others; and,
- are satisfied with the organization’s overall performance.

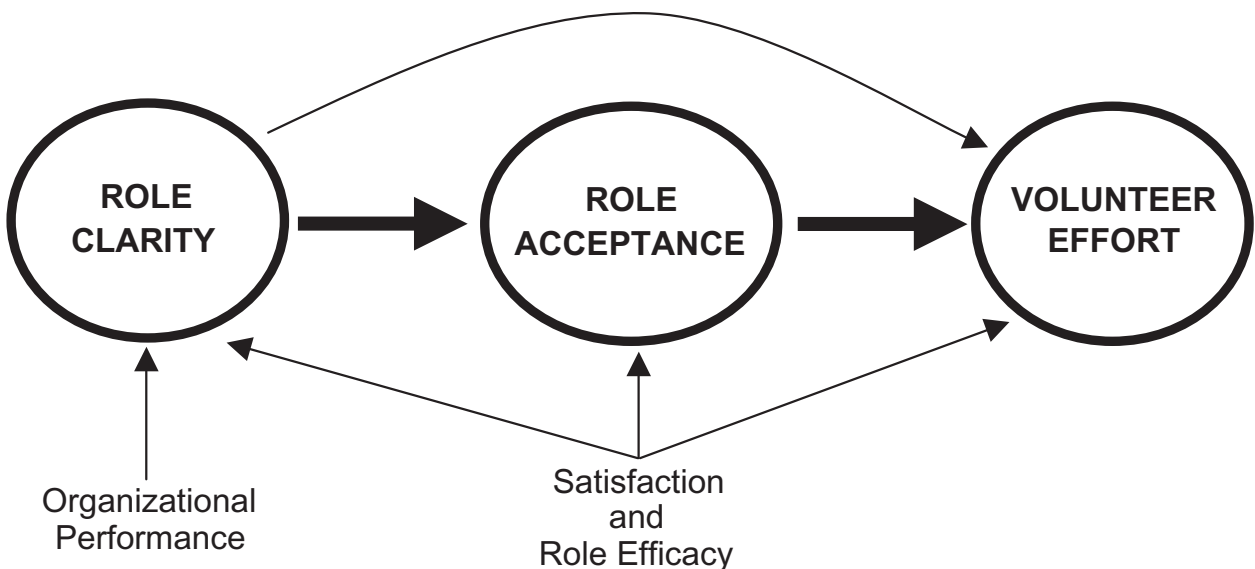
Figure 9 shows the relationships among these factors. The thick arrows represent stronger relationships than the thin arrows.

What don’t we know?

Together, the factors discussed in this report are quite important to understanding volunteer effort. 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 discussed here predicted 58% of the variability in volunteer effort. This is a major start in understanding volunteer effort.

Figure 9

Relationships among factors that influence volunteer effort



What Determines a Volunteer's Effort?

What can you do?

To increase volunteer effort, organizations should ensure that:

Volunteers accept their role. This does not necessarily mean matching a volunteer's assignment with their skill, knowledge, and attributes. It does mean that the volunteer must accept the responsibilities associated with his or her role. It may be helpful to let individuals choose their roles. Volunteer contracts are helpful ways to get volunteers to commit to carrying out a set of duties in a predetermined length of time.

Volunteer roles are clearly defined. During the recruiting and orientation process, spell out precisely what the volunteer's responsibilities will be and what is expected of him or her. Written job descriptions are helpful for this.

Volunteers feel confident in their roles. Provide appropriate training, positive feedback, encouragement, and modeling — all of which contribute to building a volunteer's confidence. Assign

volunteer mentors (e.g., a volunteer who successfully managed the role in the past).

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.

Volunteers are satisfied with the organization's overall performance. Volunteers must feel that the organization is accomplishing its stated goals and objectives to feel satisfied with their contribution. Take steps to demonstrate how your organization — with the help of its volunteers — is making a difference in the community and in the lives of individuals. Involve volunteers in goal setting and implementation plans. Encourage volunteers to be accountable for results.