

# A Study of Attitudes and Perceptions of Volunteers in Nonprofit Organizations

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Volunteers provide a diverse and valuable source of non-salaried labor in the United States. Although in the past a large proportion of volunteers were homemakers, recent surveys indicate that many full-time paid workers in American business are anxious to volunteer in their spare time (Geber, 1991). If the Federal government's ability and willingness to fund American social programs continues to decline, this pool of willing volunteers and the nonprofit organizations which utilize them will become even more critical to the success of American social action in the coming years.

To meet the challenges of obtaining and effectively involving volunteers and to optimize the use of their scarce resources, nonprofits have become increasingly business-like in the management of their operations and labor (Drucker, 1989). Despite reported gains in business orientation, however, there has been limited research in the field of Business Administration, into the effectiveness of managing volunteers or the attitudes and perceptions of these volunteers in nonprofits. There has been even less investigation of how volunteers' attitudes and perceptions compare with those of paid staff. Do volunteers see themselves as adequately supervised and their efforts fully utilized? Are they more or less committed to the organization than are paid staff? Do volunteers and paid staff differ in their perceptions about the relative importance of the problems faced by nonprofits in utilizing volunteers?

The purpose of this study is to address these questions by examining three types of volunteers' attitudes: organizational commitment, satisfaction with supervi-

sion they receive, and concern about the problems nonprofits face in effectively managing volunteers. This examination is particularly useful because it compares two of these attitudes of volunteers (commitment and problems in managing volunteers) with paid staff who work in nonprofits. The third attitude, satisfaction with supervision, serves as an indication of how well nonprofits may be doing in effectively involving volunteers once they have been recruited, trained, and placed.

Organizational commitment represents an identification with organizational goals and a desire to remain a member of the organization (Mowday, Porter, and Steers, 1982). In for-profit firms, it has been found to be linked with both decreased turnover (Cotton and Tuttle, 1987) and job performance (Lee and Mowday, 1987).

In nonprofit, organizations commitment may not predict volunteer turnover as well as it predicts turnover of paid employees in for-profits. There is high potential mobility for volunteers across nonprofits, since pay is not a factor and volunteer positions are abundant (Jenner, 1984). Thus, it is not surprising that some research has found that for volunteers convenience of the work schedule is related to volunteer turnover, but organizational commitment is related only to *intention* to leave, not actual turnover (Miller, Powell, and Seltzer, 1990). Similarly, Jenner (1984) found that although organizational commitment was related to volunteer hours worked at the time of measurement, it did not predict turnover two years later.

Although organizational commitment may not be directly related to volunteer turnover, it has great potential value for

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nonprofits. Jenner's research indicates that it is an important intervening variable in volunteer turnover and may also be related to effort, performance, and time worked. Given the cost and difficulty of initial recruiting and training volunteers, retaining them and maximizing their performance is a high priority for nonprofits.

Organizational commitment may have several bases. O'Reilly and Chatman (1986) suggested that commitment may be based on one of three factors: (a) compliance to secure rewards or avoid punishment, (b) identification with other persons or the group, and (c) internalization of the organization's values or ideology. It is likely that both volunteers and paid staff are committed to the organizations they serve based on their shared ideology with the organization. The initial motivation to volunteer often has been found to be altruistic (Gora and Nemerowicz, 1991; Howarth, 1976). Others at first may begin volunteering for compliance (e.g., gaining experience through volunteering to help them obtain a paying job later) or identification reasons (e.g., forming friendships). However, these often give way to ideological concerns over time (Gora and Nemerowicz, 1991). Thus, the commitment of volunteers would be expected to be based upon ideological attachment to the nonprofit's purposes.

The organizational commitment of paid staff in these agencies is less clear. Paid staff may be expected to have greater organizational commitment than volunteers, since they receive monetary rewards. Some authors argue, however, that pay levels in nonprofits may often be lower than those for comparable jobs in for-profit agencies, and that paid workers in these agencies rely upon satisfaction from their work to compensate for lower wages and benefits (Mirvis and Hackett, 1983). Thus, many paid workers in nonprofits may have initially been attracted to their positions as a way of combining work and altruism (compliance and internalization).

Others, however, see little difference between pay levels in for-profit and non-

profit agencies and argue that paid staff in nonprofits are not a breed apart from their counterparts in for-profits (Johnston and Rudney, 1987). In fact, there are some indications that volunteers and paid staff in nonprofits may have greater differences in commitment than paid staff in for-profit agencies. Research results indicate that volunteers may have higher intrinsic motivation than the paid staff in nonprofit agencies (Adams, Schlueter, and Barge, 1988). This further suggests that paid workers in both types of organizations may not differ, but that they may differ greatly from volunteers on ideological attachments in nonprofits. In sum, the question as to whether and by how much the organizational commitment of paid staff differs from that of volunteers remains largely unanswered.

A second question to be addressed in this study is the level of satisfaction with supervision that volunteers receive. Staff who coordinate or supervise volunteer activities have a challenging job. Rewards and punishments available to volunteers are limited. The working hours for the supervisor may be long and irregular, and the span of control may be excessively wide. The pool of volunteers is often diverse in terms of talents, schedules, and backgrounds (Ellis, 1986). In some nonprofits, volunteers may be supervised by a fellow volunteer. This added responsibility on the unpaid supervisor may further complicate supervisory effectiveness, since there is little additional reward for taking on these added duties. In addition, the supervisor may not be trained adequately in supervisory and management techniques.

Adams et al (1988) found that volunteers were generally satisfied with their supervisors' decision-making styles, although they desired a participative approach from their supervisors. No research was found, however, which looked at correlates of supervisory satisfaction. It is not known whether supervisory satisfaction is related to whether the supervisor is paid staff or a fellow volunteer, to

tenure as a volunteer, or to the recruitment practices used to obtain volunteers. This study examines these possible relationships.

The final issue to be addressed is a comparison of perceptions of volunteers and paid staff about the problems of managing volunteers. This comparison allows insight into managing nonprofits by obtaining two different perspectives. Staff may have to deal on a long-term basis with a pool of volunteers which turn over often. They must also answer to a triple constituency: volunteers, the organization, and clients (Ellis, 1986). Thus, their views reflect a long term "big picture" of the volunteer process and the organization. In contrast, volunteers may have a more limited scope. They may be expected to evaluate the relative importance of problems of managing volunteers against their own experience and exposure to the organization or its clients. Their perceptions, based on first-hand experiences, should provide a valuable point of comparison to those of paid staff.

#### METHOD

A list of all known organizations interested in involving volunteers in a county in the Southeastern United States was obtained from the local Community Information Line. This voluntary agency serves as a resource center for people seeking help as well as for those wishing to volunteer. The county has a population of about 80,000 people, about half of whom reside in urban areas. Of the 81 organizations on

this list, 22 had never involved volunteers (although they would be willing if any came forward), and 28 did not have volunteers working at present, were not currently operating, declined to participate in the study, could not be contacted, or had merged with other agencies. The remaining 31 organizations participated in the study.

The organizations consisted of church and religious groups, hospitals and nursing homes, government agencies, schools and day care centers, and youth and civic clubs. The researcher visited each organization and asked each paid staff member to complete a survey and to ask each volunteer currently working to complete a separate survey form whenever that volunteer reported for work over the next month. Both surveys were to be completed anonymously and respondents (both paid and volunteer) were assured that responses would be kept confidential.

A total of 69 paid staff and 189 volunteers completed surveys. A description of participants in the study by organization is shown in Table I. A summary of recruiting sources is shown in Table II.

For both survey forms, organizational commitment was measured by use of five items adapted from Buchanan's (1974) organizational commitment scale. The internal consistency reliability (alpha) of this measure was .92. Satisfaction with supervision was assessed with four items adapted from Smith (1976) (alpha = .78). Responses for both organizational commitment and supervisory satisfaction

**Table I**  
**Description of Participants in the Study by Organization**

Type of Organization	Number Paid Staff	Number Volunteers
Mental health	1	3
Civic	14	6
Religious	3	39
Health care/hospital	20	45
School/day care	9	16
Government agencies	<u>22</u>	<u>80</u>
Total	69	189

**Table II**  
**Sources of Recruitment of Volunteers Participating in Study**

Source of recruitment	Number of volunteers	Percent
Word of mouth; friend's referral	64	38.6%
Media; publicity by organization	13	7.8%
Referred by relative	6	3.6%
Through other volunteer activities	23	13.9%
Recruited at church	44	26.5%
Asked by staff member	15	9.0%
Order by court as part of sentencing	1	.6%

ranged from "1" (strongly disagree) to "5" (strongly agree).

Finally, both volunteers and paid staff were asked to rank from one to seven the importance of the following possible problems in using volunteers: recruiting, motivating and rewarding, retaining, giving performance feedback, training, placement, and coordinating the work of paid staff and volunteers. These seven problems were compiled from interviews with both volunteers and paid staff before construction of the instruments.

Volunteers were also asked to provide other information. This included their tenure in the organization, the source of their recruitment into the organization, and whether they were supervised by paid staff, another volunteer, or some combination.

## RESULTS

The means and standard deviations of variables for each group of participants is shown in Table III. The organizational

commitment of both paid staff (4.61/5) and volunteers (4.54/5) was very high. A two-tailed t-test was performed to investigate whether volunteers and paid staff differed significantly in their organizational commitment. The t-value of .08 was not significant. Thus, there is no statistically significant difference between the two groups in terms of organizational commitment.

To further investigate the possible predictors of organizational commitment of volunteers, this variable was regressed on satisfaction with supervision, type of organization (civic, religious, etc.), tenure in the organization, type of supervision (volunteer or paid staff), and recruitment source. These results are shown in Table IV. Both satisfaction with supervision and tenure were significant predictors, both in a positive direction.

The mean for volunteers' satisfaction with supervision was also quite high (4.17/5). To further investigate possible predictors of satisfaction with supervision,

**Table III**  
**Means and Standard Deviations for Volunteers and Paid Staff**

	Mean	S.D.
<b>Paid Staff</b>		
Organizational commitment	4.61	.56
<b>Volunteers</b>		
Organizational commitment	4.54	.68
Satisfaction with supervision	4.17	.82
Tenure (months)	42.42	47.2

**Table IV**  
**Results of Regression of Organizational Commitment of**  
**Volunteers on Possible Predictors**

Independent variable:	beta	t
Satisfaction with supervision	.50	7.13**
Tenure	.14	2.02*
Type of supervision	.07	.94
Type of organization	-.02	-.20
Recruitment source	-.09	-1.17
R-square	.287	
F-ratio	11.79**	
* p < .05      ** p < .01		

this variable was regressed on a set of possible correlates: tenure in the organization, type of supervisor (volunteer or paid staff), organizational commitment, type of organization, and source of recruitment. These results are shown in Table V. Only organizational commitment was a significant predictor of satisfaction with supervision.

Finally, the rankings of both volunteers and paid staff in regard to the seven problems in utilizing volunteers were examined. For each group, Kendall's coefficient of concordance ("W") was computed to determine whether there was significant agreement within each group on the seven rankings. The "W" for paid staff was .295 (chi-square=90.13; df=6; p < .01) and for volunteers was .266 (chi-square=187.9; df=6; p < .01), indicating that members of each group agreed on the rankings to a statistically significant extent. The two sets of rankings generated by the two groups

were then compared to investigate the extent to which volunteers and paid staff gave similar rankings. These results are shown in Table VI. Computation of Spearman's rank order correlation coefficient (rho=.86; p < .05) indicated that the two ranks were significantly correlated. Both groups ranked recruitment of volunteers as the most important problem faced by organizations in using volunteers and ranked coordinating volunteers with paid staff as the least important. Paid staff saw motivating and rewarding volunteers (rank of 4) as more important than did volunteers (rank of 6). Retaining volunteers and training volunteers were both ranked high by both groups.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine several attitudes and perceptions of volunteers of nonprofit organizations and

**Table V**  
**Results of Regression of Volunteers' Satisfaction with**  
**Supervision on Possible Predictors**

Independent variable:	beta	t
Organizational commitment	.515	7.13**
Source of recruitment	.070	.93
Type of supervisor	-.068	-.95
Tenure in organization	-.034	-.47
Type of organization	.078	1.04
R-square	.268	
F-ratio	10.70**	
** p < .01		

**Table VI**  
**Comparison of Rankings by Paid Staff and Volunteers of**  
**Problems Utilizing Volunteers**

Problem	Paid Staff Ranking	Volunteer Ranking
Recruiting volunteers	1	1
Retaining volunteers	2	3
Training volunteers	3	2
Motivation/rewards	4	6
Giving performance feedback	5	4
Placement of volunteers	6	5
Coordination with paid staff	7	7

to compare two of these with paid staff in the same sample of organizations. The first attitude of interest was organizational commitment. Both paid staff and volunteers expressed very high levels of commitment. In addition, there was no significant statistical difference between the two groups on this score.

This finding suggests several important conclusions. Within the scale, both groups reported very high scores on the items dealing with identification with the organization's goals and purposes and with loyalty to the organization. This suggests that both groups find their association with the nonprofit a way to address their altruistic needs. The role of pay as it affects paid staff, however, is less clear. The present data do not allow for conclusions about whether (and by how much) pay may increase levels of organizational commitment for paid staff. Although the commitment levels of staff were quite high, part of their commitment may have resulted from pay they receive. Thus, Mirvis and Hackett's (1983) contention that satisfaction of altruistic needs may compensate for lower wages of employees in nonprofits may have some validity. The end result, in any case, is that the overall commitment levels of both paid and nonpaid workers is remarkably similar, regardless of the causes of commitment for paid staff.

For volunteers, there was no significant association between organizational commitment and recruitment source, type of supervision (volunteer or paid staff), or

type of organization. Rather, supervisory satisfaction and tenure were the only significant predictors of commitment. It seems that the longer the volunteer is a part of the organization, the greater the commitment. This may be the result of greater understanding and appreciation of the goals and purposes of the organization, or it may be an effect of contact with the clients served by the organization. It could also reflect the identification form of commitment of volunteers (need to form social contacts) which is built over time. An alternative explanation is that tenure is a function of commitment and that volunteers who are more committed remain with the organization longer. This is consistent with research findings in the for-profit sector where commitment and decreased turnover have been found to be related. However, the present results contradict the findings of Miller et al (1990) and suggest that commitment may be more strongly related to lack of turnover of volunteers than had been previously thought.

A related goal of this study was to investigate the satisfaction of supervision of volunteers. Again, the overall score on this variable was quite high. This was consistent with the findings of Adams et al (1988). Volunteers generally seem to think that they are well supervised, regardless of whether the supervisor is a fellow volunteer or paid staff. These results may be a confirmation that nonprofits are indeed managing their volunteer resources pro-

professionally, as Drucker (1989) asserted. Besides the type of supervision received (volunteer or paid staff), neither the initial source of recruitment, type of organization, nor tenure seemed to affect supervisory satisfaction. Only organizational commitment was significantly related to this variable. It is somewhat surprising that tenure was not related to supervisory satisfaction, since it might be expected that those who were pleased with their supervision might be more inclined to remain in the organization. However, this was not the case in the present study. An alternative explanation is that those who were not satisfied with their supervision have already left the organization and thus were not adequately represented in the study.

The strong association between supervisory satisfaction and organizational commitment seen in the results of both regression analyses deserves comment. This association may be the result of greater insight into the operations and practices of the agencies, and perhaps a greater appreciation of the purposes of the organization. Without a longitudinal study it is not possible to suggest which causes the other, or if both are simply part of an overall consistent attitude toward the organization. This association may also be the result of common method variance or the "yea-saying" tendency of respondents to give generally positive views on more than one issue on a survey instrument.

The final issue to be investigated was a comparison of rankings of problems faced by nonprofits in managing volunteers. There was significant agreement both within the two groups of interest and between the two groups. This agreement between groups may indicate that volunteers have perspectives very similar to paid staff as far as the role of volunteers in the organizations. Both groups cited recruitment of volunteers as the most important problem and coordination with paid staff as the least important. The relative lack of importance of coordination with staff may be further evidence that the

organizations in the present study are effectively managing their volunteers. However, both groups also placed a high ranking on training volunteers, which may suggest an area for improvement in the future. Future research should more fully investigate the methods involved in training and attempt to identify problem areas in this category. Special attention should be paid to whether or not there are formal training courses, who does the training (staff or fellow volunteers), and whether training effectiveness is measured.

It is interesting to note that retaining volunteers was given a high ranking by both groups, and yet the organizational commitment of the volunteers was quite high. One explanation for this finding may be that volunteers leave not because of actions or attitudes of the organization but because of personal limitations on their time and energies. This hypothesis should be further investigated in future research.

The present data also suggest some other interesting conclusions and topics for future study. Recruiting volunteers was cited as the most important problem by both groups and the volunteers in the present study were recruited through a variety of sources. However, it appears that word of mouth or being asked personally by an acquaintance is the predominant means of recruitment. Publicity or media attention accounted for few recruits compared to other sources. This suggests that the most effective means of addressing one of the most important problems in using volunteers could be by more actively involving present volunteers and paid staff in recruitment. Since recruitment source was found to be unrelated to either organizational commitment or satisfaction with supervision of volunteers, it would seem that simply obtaining volunteers by any effective means is the key issue, and that the source of recruitment is of little importance to subsequent volunteer attitudes.

This study has taken an exploratory approach to assessing attitudes in nonprofit

organizations. The overall results suggest that both volunteers and paid staff are highly committed to the organizations they serve. Volunteers also seem to be generally satisfied with the supervision they receive, regardless of whether they are supervised by volunteers or paid staff. Future research should focus on other possible influences on positive volunteer attitudes and tenure, including such variables as full-time employment status, family obligations, and motivation for volunteering. This research would enable nonprofits to enhance the recruitment and retention of the pool of volunteers which are so vital to their purposes.

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