

Job Skills Developed in Volunteer Work: Transferability to Salaried Employment

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Volunteer administrators, vocational advisers, and others have long maintained that volunteers develop valuable job skills which are transferable to paid employment. The Association for Volunteer Administration and VOLUNTEER: The National Center have been particularly active in seeking recognition of volunteer work experience by employers. Many corporations, state and local governments, and the Federal government now provide a place on job applications for relevant volunteer work experience.

Volunteers individually are encouraged to develop their skills and demonstrate these to potential employers. The I Can series, for example, consists of a checklist of competencies to help volunteers recognize and establish areas of expertise (Council of National Organizations for Adult Education, 1981).

Some people participate in volunteer work as a way of getting job experience. Surveys over the past few years indicate that students at Michigan State University have increased their interest in using volunteer work to explore career alternatives and to get work experience (Service-Learning Center, 1983).

Research on job skills and volunteer work has been minimal. Mueller (1975) found that volunteer work participation was higher for women who expected to work in the immediate future. She concluded that women

volunteer, in part, to gain on-the-job skills and work experience. In an effort to help "displaced homemakers" to obtain jobs, Hybels (1978) studied the transition from volunteer work to paid work for women. She found that skills gained in volunteer jobs were seen as transferable by the volunteers. Also, volunteer job contacts frequently were useful in getting a paid job.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

Recently, Ellis (1984) cited the documentation of job-related skill development as an important area for research in volunteer work. Such research could help to convince employers that volunteer work does produce transferable skills. It could also help to identify the range of skills acquired and the type of volunteer jobs in which they are developed. Thus, the purpose of this research¹ was to investigate job skill development in volunteer work. Specific objectives were: (1) to determine whether job skills acquired in volunteer work are used in paid employment; and (2) to identify types of volunteer jobs which produce specific, transferable skills.

METHODOLOGY

Data used in this project are from a larger study of spring 1980 baccalaureate graduates of Michigan State University. The larger study included both volunteers and non-

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volunteers. To ensure that both groups were in the final sample, one-half of those surveyed were identified as volunteers. Records available from the Service-Learning Center² were used to facilitate this. All the volunteers were surveyed since their number was relatively small compared to the total student population in the graduating class. A random sample of the non-volunteers were surveyed. The resulting sample size was 906; 472 completed questionnaires were returned. There were 59 questionnaires returned as undeliverable.

The researcher developed a mail questionnaire. One part of the questionnaire was an inventory of 45 skills which could be obtained in volunteer work. This list was designed after reviewing the relevant literature and lists of skills developed by others (e.g., Ekstrom, 1980; Association of Junior Leagues, 1981). Other parts of the questionnaire dealt with volunteer experiences while respondents were students, volunteer work following graduation, subsequent employment, and demographics.

Data were collected on both volunteer work and internship experiences that graduates had while students at the University. Since unpaid internships are similar in nature to volunteer work, they were defined as volunteer work in this study. Paid internships were excluded from analysis. Although this is a limitation, measuring the two separately on various aspects was judged too involved to provide reliable data from respondents. There were 351 respondents characterized as volunteers; this group comprises the sample for this study.

FINDINGS

The average volunteer in the study was a white female, aged 25 years, with a personal income in the \$10,000-\$14,999 range. She was more likely to have majored in social sciences, business, language/

communication/fine arts, or education than in any other major. Of all the volunteers, 335 reported they had obtained skills in their volunteer work; 281 indicated they used these skills on the job.

Table 1 lists the skill inventory and the percent of volunteers indicating they had obtained a skill in their volunteer work. All 45 skills were obtained by some portion of the respondents. This documents the variety of skills that one can get as a volunteer, at least when one is a college student or graduate. This table also shows the percent of those who obtained a skill and subsequently used it on a salaried job. Of particular interest is that so many skills were used on the job by more than half of those who obtained the skill. For example, more than three-fourths of the volunteers who got some type of managerial skill used this on the job. Thus, volunteers seemed to be very likely to use the skills they developed in volunteer work when they enter the labor force. Although these data measure the respondents' perceptions of skills and their transferability, not quality of skill, they are important in establishing the role of volunteer work in job skill development (again, at least for college graduates).

Respondents also were asked to indicate the type of volunteer assignment in which they developed the skills used on the salaried job. The volunteer jobs, "group leader" and "giver of direct services," provided the greatest variety of skills; respondents indicated they had obtained 40 of the skills used on the job from these types of volunteer assignments. Other volunteer jobs which resulted in 35 to 40 different skills used in employment were: (1) teacher, tutor, or teacher's aide; (2) internship (not specified); and (3) organizer, planner. Given these results, it seems reasonable to assume that any volunteer job has the potential to allow a volunteer to develop several salaried job skills. What seems to be important is for

Table 1
Percent Distribution of Volunteers Obtaining
Skills and Using Them on the Job

	Obtained Skill*	Skill Used on the Job	
	#	#	%
<u>Arts and Crafts Skills</u>			
Crafts, ceramics	28	13	46.4
Needlework, knitting, sewing	8	2	25.0
Painting, sculpture, pottery	14	8	57.1
Photography	24	14	58.3
Woodworking	7	3	42.9
<u>Child Care Skills</u>			
Custodial care: feeding, etc.	43	26	60.5
Supervise activities	127	87	68.5
Plan learning activities	114	77	67.5
<u>Clerical/Secretarial Skills</u>			
Computer/calculator operation	29	21	72.4
Filing, general office work	71	54	76.1
Typing, dictation	40	32	80.0
<u>Education Skills</u>			
Demonstrating	135	106	78.5
Teaching, tutoring, training	173	130	75.1
<u>Financial Skills</u>			
Accounting, bookkeeping	27	19	70.4
Budgeting	27	17	63.0
Comparison shopping	22	10	45.5
Fundraising/solicitation	50	24	48.0
Grantsmanship	13	8	61.5
<u>Health Care Skills</u>			
CPR, first aid	43	22	51.2
Testing: blood pressure, etc.	32	18	56.3
Lab work	41	29	70.7
<u>Household Skills</u>			
Cooking, cleaning, laundry	25	11	44.0
Gardening, lawn care	14	5	35.7
Home maintenance: painting, wallpapering	11	2	18.2
<u>Managerial Skills</u>			
Delegating tasks	125	97	77.6
Leadership	163	127	77.9
Organizational	183	148	80.9
Program development	157	118	75.2
Supervising	147	119	80.9

Table 1 (continued)

	Obtained Skill*	Skill Used on the Job	
	#	#	%
<u>Mechanical Skills</u>			
Auto repair; small engine repair	8	4	50.0
Household repairs: plumbing, electrical, etc.	12	5	41.7
<u>Public Policy Skills</u>			
Lobbying	26	9	34.6
Public policy formation	44	20	45.5
<u>Public Relations Skills</u>			
Advertising	40	28	70.0
Oral communication	171	145	84.8
Sales	23	20	87.0
Writing, editing	104	81	77.9
<u>Research Skills</u>			
Analysis	115	87	75.7
Evaluation	118	88	74.6
Writing reports	116	86	74.0
<u>Technical/Professional Skills</u>			
Computer programming	12	9	75.0
Counseling, advising, listening	113	88	77.9
Drafting, engineering	14	13	92.9
Mathematics	14	12	85.7
Translating languages	20	13	65.0

*N = 335

the volunteer to be aware of skills desirable to develop and for the volunteer administrator to help in that job skill development. These results also can be used to help educate employers about the diversity of employment skills that can be developed in any one volunteer job rather than assuming that only a select few skills are developed in a particular volunteer job.

To understand further the role of volunteer work in salaried job skill development, respondents were asked about the importance of volunteer work in obtaining their first job, related to their education, following graduation. Slightly more than one-half of the volunteers indicated that volunteer work was somewhat important or very important. By far the reason given most frequently for the importance of volunteer work was that it gave the respondent practical experience between the classroom and the work world. Thus, these data indicate the important role volunteer work has in undergraduate education and can have in any program which prepares people for paid employment.

IMPLICATIONS

Volunteer work does produce transferable job skills as measured in this study. Results of this study are useful in educating employers, volunteers, and others. The data also suggest that people needing job training, and not eligible for government-funded job training programs, could find training in volunteer work.

The results of this study are important, but the sample limits generalizability of the results beyond a university population. Future research could diminish this limitation by sampling a broader spectrum of the population. Or, a different type of selected sample could be used, and results compared with those of this study. Another research possibility would be an in-depth study of job skill development in one type of volunteer job or within one type of volunteer agency. It would also be of

interest to investigate the opinions of employers. Any of these approaches would build on the results reported from this study and enhance knowledge of job skill development in volunteer work.

FOOTNOTES

¹This study was funded by a Human Ecology Research Initiation Grant and an All-University Research Initiation Grant, Michigan State University. Data were collected by the author while a faculty member at Michigan State University.

²The Service-Learning Center at Michigan State University coordinates student volunteer placements in the Lansing-East Lansing, Michigan area. It is one of the country's largest student volunteer programs.

³A table with all the cross-tabulations is available from the author.

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