

Volunteerism: The Rewards and Costs Expected and Experienced

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*"How far that little candle throws his beams!
So shines a good deed in a naughty world."
Shakespeare*

For millions of Americans, volunteering is an essential element to wellness and feeling positive about one's self. By contributing a few hours a week to a good cause, volunteers often experience positive feedback that can correlate to higher self-competence and self-liking (Bosson & Swann, 1999). Ideally, through helping others, one's self-worth is elevated, and as a result, an individual can find meaningful interaction and higher status in society. This research explored the reasoning behind these "shining" examples of goodwill. The research objective of this study was to identify the rewards and costs associated with volunteering through the application of Social Exchange Theory (SET).

According to the Associated Press (2002), nearly 59 million Americans are currently volunteering. However, Independent Sector research discovered that although millions of Americans volunteer, they are "doling out their valuable hours in ever-smaller proportions" (Christian Science Monitor, December 1999). The average volunteer put in 3.5 hours per week in 1999, down nearly an hour from 1995 according to Independent Sector. Most recent statistics estimated that on average, Americans only put in about 52 hours of volunteer work during the year, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Associated Press, 2002). As a result of this decrease in volunteer hours, a ripple effect is being felt by many organizations across America due to shortages of staff to handle crisis hotlines and other organization needs (*Wall Street Journal*,

November 1999). Therefore, with the volunteer force playing such a crucial part in the American economy, it is important that we consider the equilibrium of costs and rewards essential to motivating today's volunteers.

SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY (SET)

SET asserts that individuals think about their relationships in economic terms, and then they tally up the costs to compare them to the perceived rewards that are offered (West & Turner, 2000). For instance, a younger neighbor might conceive an elderly neighbor giving them a hot baked apple pie as an equal exchange (i.e. costs = rewards) for reciprocating the favor of shoveling off the elderly neighbor's snow-covered sidewalk. In sum, SET is the voluntary transference of a random object or activity from one person to another in return for other objects or activities (Roloff, 1981).

Costs are the elements of relational life that have negative value to a person (Roloff, 1981). For example, a volunteer might consider time spent as a form of cost exchanged. Rewards are considered positively valued activities or objects that meet a person's needs or reduce a personal drive. In the case of volunteering this reward could take the form of learning, love, gratitude, perceived higher status associated with giving back to the community, and an overall sense of positive spirituality (Hinck, 2000).

So what then constitutes an equitable reward or exchange? Walster, Walster, and Berscheid (1978), in their book *Equity: Theory and Research*, predicted that in the year 2000 "humans will not only have some-

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what different ideas as who is entitled to a reward; they will also have a somewhat broader notion as to what constitutes reward” (pg.259). Therefore, with the arrival of the new millennium upon us, this study sought to identify the most common costs and rewards associated with volunteering. To initiate this research the following research questions (RQ) were examined:

- RQ 1: What are the most often sought rewards associated with volunteerism?
- RQ 2: What are the most common costs associated with volunteerism?
- RQ 3: Must rewards equal or exceed costs to keep volunteers active?

METHOD

Participants

Volunteer organizations with whom the authors previously had worked were approached about participating in this volunteer research project. As a result, six different organizations that assisted hospital patients, underprivileged or at-risk youth, church related concerns, schools, and other miscellaneous services decided to take part in the study. The participants for this study were drawn from a sample population of 177 individuals from three states (Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia) who actively participated as volunteers. All participants were required to have volunteered at least 3 hours a month for the past 2 months prior to the administering of the survey. Participants and the participating organization were assured anonymity.

The average number of hours volunteered per month by the participants was 26 hours with a range from 3 to 160 hours. The average length of volunteer months spent at the organizations was 38 months with a range from 2 to 180 months. The mean age of the sample was 46 with a range from 18 to 88. There were 131 women and 41 men (5 non-reports). Education levels consisted of: 6 junior high graduates, 82 high school graduates, 50 college graduates, and 33 with graduate degrees (6 non-reports). Demographic analysis also found that 60 participants were employed full-time, 24 were employed part-time, and 79 reported no employment (14 non-reports). Measure-

ments concerning past volunteer experience found that 124 participants reported previously volunteering at another organization and 50 participants reported never volunteering before (3 non-reports).

Procedure

The surveys were distributed to the participating agencies, and the staff was trained to administer the survey under procedures in accordance with guidelines for research with human participants (American Psychological Association and the institution involved). Participants were asked to respond to the survey as if the questions pertained to the agency where the volunteer activity took place. Participants completed survey questions to help clarify the rewards and costs associated with volunteering. All surveys, upon completion, were inserted into the attached envelopes by participants and sealed to insure confidentiality.

To identify costs associated with volunteering, participants were asked, “What costs have you encountered while volunteering at this organization?” To identify rewards associated with volunteering, participants were asked, “What rewards have you gained from volunteering at this organization?” Participants also were asked to answer yes or no (and why) to “If someday the costs outweigh the rewards gained from volunteering at this organization, will you continue volunteering for this organization?” The answers then were coded, categorized, and ran through a frequency analysis.

RESULTS

Research Question One (RQ1) inquired as to what the most often sought rewards are by a volunteer. Self reported rewards were coded into 25 different categories. Frequency distribution of the 25 rewards was analyzed to identify the top 10 most commonly reported rewards (see Table 1 for complete list of rewards reported). The three most commonly identified rewards were: (1) making friends, (2) personal satisfaction, and (3) helping others.

TABLE 1**Most Often Sought Rewards in Volunteering**

| Rank | Reward | Responses |
|------|---------------------------------------|-----------|
| 1 | Making Friends | 44 (25%) |
| 2 | Personal Satisfaction | 29 (16%) |
| 3 | Helping Others | 26 (15%) |
| 4 | Helped to Work With Others | 13 (07%) |
| 5 | Learned From Working With Others | 12 (07%) |
| 6 | Feel Better About Self-Accomplishment | 10 (06%) |
| 7 | Sense of Being | 08 (05%) |
| 8 | Spiritual Growth | 07 (04%) |
| 8 | Recognition | 07 (04%) |
| 9 | Spending Time With Others | 06 (03%) |
| 9 | Higher Self Esteem | 06 (03%) |
| 9 | Personal Benefit- Free Services | 06 (03%) |
| 9 | Getting Love From Others | 06 (03%) |
| 10 | Confirmation of Career Goals | 04 (02%) |

Note: The first number in the response column is the number of participants who cited the reward. The second number is the percentage of respondents who cited the reward. Participants were permitted to report more than one reward.

Research Question Two (RQ2) inquired as to what are the most common costs associated with volunteering. Self reported costs were coded into 10 different categories (see Table 2 for complete list of costs reported). Frequency distribution of the 10 costs categories identified the three most commonly identified costs as: (1) none (i.e. no costs), (2) transportation expenses, and (3) time.

TABLE 2**Most Common Costs Associated with Volunteering**

| Rank | Cost | Responses |
|------|------------------------------|-----------|
| 1 | None | 75 (42%) |
| 2 | Transportation Expenses | 35 (20%) |
| 3 | Time | 26 (15%) |
| 4 | Uniforms, Materials, etc. | 10 (06%) |
| 5 | Minimal Costs | 09 (05%) |
| 6 | Buying Things For The "Kids" | 07 (04%) |
| 7 | Being Away From Family | 06 (03%) |
| 7 | Emotional Stress | 06 (03%) |
| 9 | Limits Other Activities | 03 (02%) |
| 10 | Personal Safety | 02 (01%) |

Note: The first number in the response column is the number of participants who cited the cost. The second number is the percentage of respondents who cited the cost. Participants were permitted to report more than one cost.

Research Question Three (RQ3) sought to measure if volunteers would continue to volunteer even if costs outweighed rewards. A total of 105 participants (59%) reported that they would continue volunteering even if costs outweighed rewards. In contrast, 37 participants (21%) reported that they would not continue if costs outweighed rewards. Thirty five participants (20%) chose not to answer the question. Additionally, we asked an open-ended question as to why one might continue to volunteer in spite of costs outweighing rewards. Findings on these qualitative answers will be addressed in more depth in the discussion section.

DISCUSSION

In an attempt to define what "humans" (i.e. volunteers) constitute as a reward in the new millennium, RQ1 identified 25 self-reported rewards that the participants listed in the administered survey. In this study the self-report method was necessary and considered more reliable (and less bias) than asking the volunteer participant to pick from a list of rewards defined by the researchers. By considering the findings in Table 1, one can see that the volunteer answers held many different opinions as to what forms a reward.

Just as each individual has a unique schema for interacting with others, a volunteer has a vast variety of rewards that one might perceive as a positively valued outcome from one's volunteer interactions. As one can see from reviewing the top ten rewards listed in Table 1, these rewards are altruistic (i.e., unselfish) as well as egotistic (i.e., self-centered). However, the list of rewards does lean toward supporting a more egotistic perception of the participants. "Making friends," gaining "personal satisfaction" and "recognition," and a whole host of personal spiritual/religious growth rewards, are just a few of the individualistic gains experienced by the volunteers that dominated the list of self-reported rewards. Of the 25 rewards registered in the survey, "helping others" and "helping the group meet their needs" were the only two altruistic rewards reported and identified.

Research Question Two (RQ2) sought to define the most common costs associated with volunteering. From a diverse sample of 177 participants (from numerous organizations) only 10 different costs were reported. The number one cost listed most frequently by the participants was that they experienced no costs (i.e., "none") during their volunteer experience. Social Exchange Theory would argue that there are costs in every interaction or exchange. Yet for some reason, a majority of the participants either chose to ignore the obvious costs associated with volunteering or truly felt that the exchange was not cost laden.

Nonetheless, the costs that were identified served this study well in alerting one to the most commonly associated costs experienced by volunteers. Furthermore, when considering that this sample was taken from a diverse age group of volunteers (who assisted a broad spectrum of organizations and causes), the small number of rewards and costs commonly reported by the volunteers of the different organizations is of significance when generalizing findings to volunteerism. From the findings of RQ1 (most often sought rewards) and RQ2 (most common costs associated) one can see that rewards and costs associated with the volunteer experience are of an overwhelming personal nature to the individuals who donate their time and energies. However, as RQ3 (must rewards equal or exceed costs to keep volunteers active) findings suggested, the rewards do not always have to exceed the costs.

Research Question Three (RQ3) found that a majority of the volunteers in the focus sample would continue to volunteer even if costs outweighed rewards. Although 105 participants said yes to continuing in spite of higher costs exceeding rewards, and 37 said no to continuing, one must also question why 35 participants chose to ignore the question altogether. The fact that this question

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decisively had the highest level of non-reports makes one ponder if the subject of high costs associated with volunteering is a topic that many volunteers mentally choose not to consider. In fact, several participants avoided answering yes or no to the question and wrote "this is not an issue" or "this is something I can-

not think about at this time." The truth could be that many volunteers enter the activity knowing full well that there will be costs involved that may not ever reach equilibrium with received rewards.

"The cause is greater than the costs" is a statement that basically summarized most of the answers given to RQ3. Numerous respondents who answered yes to continuing when costs exceeded rewards provided a statement that explained one's justification for continuing in the cost laden relationship. The plethora of reasons cited by the participants is quite reflective of the large number who had no concern for high costs.

However, as one participant explained, "It is not about the costs." Another volunteer pointed out, "I love children and want to help." Statements of necessity, such as "The church has to have volunteers—it's my gift to God" or "Saving a child's life is worth more than any cost" pointed towards the apparent perception that no other alternative existed besides volunteering. "It's the right thing to do" is similar to the cognitive process of a person who knows CPR and finds it impossible to not come to the rescue in an emergency. Others reported that it was a family tradition, or an inherent condition that does not allow them to abandon their duties. Yet whether it is from a higher power or an internal guilt complex that one gets a calling to become a devoted volunteer, from the findings given in this survey it would seem that many (no matter what the costs) would be unable to quit.

Therefore, we offer four further points of advice in summary:

- (1) Ask your volunteers to anonymously

provide their thoughts as to what are the rewards and costs associated with their volunteer experience at your organization.

(2) Once data is collected, assess which rewards and costs your volunteers reported most often. Identifying the most often reported responses can help a volunteer manager to better understand their staff. For example, by being cognizant of a volunteer's transportation expenses (e.g., parking costs, bus fare, high gas prices), loss of free time and of quality time with family, uniform costs, and emotional stress are important factors to consider in effective volunteer management. By figuring out affordable effective alternatives to help reduce such costs for volunteers could be quite beneficial to volunteer managers and administrators. One example might be to ask neighboring businesses for free parking for volunteers in the evening hours.

(3) By considering the most common rewards and costs perceived by the participants, organizations reliant upon a volunteer work force might be wise to consider if their volunteer program is supplying such rewards valued by the volunteer as well as minimizing reported costs most prevalent and demanding to the volunteer. By occasionally giving awards (e.g., "Most Helpful Volunteer," "Happiest Volunteer," "Outstanding Altruistic Volunteer", or an occasional gift certificate for gasoline) to volunteers, one's efforts can go a long way to helping a volunteer feel more appreciated and motivated.

(4) By being aware of the rewards and costs most commonly reported by volunteers in your organization, one can strive to keep their volunteers in the "yes-I will never quit no matter what costs come to pass" category. Furthermore, knowing what your current volunteers feel are your organization's most appreciated rewards (and most dreaded costs) can help you to attract and prepare future volunteers for a successful rewarding experience.

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