

# WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO MANAGE VOLUNTEERS ?

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## ABSTRACT

Due to the demand for services provided by voluntary welfare organisations and the economic pressure on governments, the demand for volunteers will continue to increase. Organisations that have the ability to attract and retain volunteers are the envy of others. Why do some have little difficulty in attracting and retaining volunteers, while others find it very difficult? What characterises successful organisations in this regard? Are there some types of supervisors who are more likely to attract volunteers and encourage them to stay? A recent study sought to establish the qualities volunteers prefer in a supervisor.

## INTRODUCTION

**V**olunteering is a long standing and noble pursuit. However, with the increased demand for their services, efforts to secure volunteers are intensifying. Due to the demand for services provided by welfare organisations and the economic pressure on governments, the demand for volunteers will continue to increase. The ability to attract and retain an adequate number of volunteers is, however, likely to be a problem. Voluntary organisations which have this ability are the envy of others. This situation exists wherever there is a demand for volunteers. Why do some voluntary organisations have little difficulty in attracting and retaining volunteers, while others find it very difficult? What characterises successful organisations in this regard? Does it have some relationship with the volunteer supervisor? Are there some types of supervisors who are more likely to attract volunteers and encourage them to stay?

While a problem does not exist for organisations with a pool of committed volunteers, it is a very real problem for those that do not. The lack of a reliable source of voluntary labour reduces an organisation's ability to provide services to clients. This, in turn, has funding implications. An organisation which is unable to provide services for which it was funded, will eventually have funding removed, particularly public funding.

agement: valuing, respecting and nurturing of the individual. Even though the management of volunteers may be fraught with difficulty, it is worthwhile struggling to overcome any problems as volunteers bring special benefits to organisations. They often build bridges between the community and the organisation. In many cases, community service agencies would cease to provide cost effective services (and may cease operating altogether) without volunteers.

If agencies are serious about attracting volunteers, they need to plan and execute effective recruitment and retention programs. It is important to remember that there is no single best practice. As in many other areas, variety and creativity are the keys to successful volunteer recruitment.

Once the volunteers have been recruited, agencies need to concentrate on looking after them, retaining and maintaining them. Volunteers need to be given meaningful work and responsibility, and in turn be rewarded in a variety of ways. In short, agencies need to invest in their volunteers as they do in their paid staff.

Some conflict between volunteers and paid staff may be inevitable. However, the way in which the agency's management deals with conflict is crucial for productive working relationships. The reality is that with continual funding cuts to community services, volunteers are essential. Therefore, working towards an harmonious relationship is also essential.

This study seeks to use these concepts as a background in the endeavour to establish a list of desirable qualities which volunteers look for in a supervisor.

## STATISTICAL TECHNIQUE

### Conjoint Analysis

Conjoint analysis is used to estimate the impact of characteristics of products and services upon consumer preferences. It can be used to provide answers to questions typically asked by those responsible for marketing and planning for a range of products and services (Wyner 1992). Most other techniques rate evaluative criteria one at a time, ignoring the possibility of interactional effects. However, conjoint analysis enables the assessment of bundles of attributes or characteristics, as well as the part-worth contributions of each attribute to an overall rating. Market researchers may assess consumer preferences by asking them to rate each attribute, but this can lead to erroneous results.

Conjoint analysis is specifically designed to assess actual preference structures of respondents, rather than surveying their desires (Shukla & Bruno 1992).

Conjoint analysis also provides a vehicle for measuring preferences for specific features and assessing their impact on consumer choice (Wyner 1992). Conjoint analysis is an important way to estimate consumers' re-

sponses to new products and services (Hagerty 1993). It is this predictive feature which gives conjoint analysis its strength and popularity. Conjoint analysis seems to work best in situations in which the product or service attributes are easily described as discrete levels, as in the case of functional characteristics. Successful applications of conjoint analysis have been implemented in numerous service industries (Wyner 1992).

### **Steps Involved in Conjoint Analysis**

The process commences with preliminary questioning to determine salient attributes. These are often obtained by focus groups which discuss the product or service.

Once the most significant attributes are identified, a data collection method needs to be selected. Researchers can choose from either a trade-off approach, involving two attributes at a time, or a full profile approach, sometimes referred to as concept evaluation.

The third step requires the researcher to present the stimuli to the respondents. One of three methods can be used:

- verbal description, using multiple cue or stimulus cards;
- paragraph description; or
- three dimensional model presentation (pictorial).

The most commonly used technique to collect conjoint data is the personal interview (Wittink et al 1994).

Fourthly, the data must be analysed to enable researchers to reconstruct the original judgements or predict the participants' evaluation of various combinations of the selected attributes (Wyner 1992, Ots 1990).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The use of conjoint analysis to examine preferences or trade-offs has largely been restricted to the marketing of products or services (Wyner 1992). In this context, conjoint research is undertaken to determine a preferred set of product or service characteristics. In this study of the management qualities of volunteer supervisors, the supervisor is 'the product'. The purpose of the study was to determine a preferred set of management qualities desired in a supervisor of volunteers. This information can be used in the selection and training of supervisors because it is believed that supervisors with preferred management qualities will attract and retain volunteers. Conjoint analysis was specifically designed to assess actual preferences, rather than surveying people's desires (Shukla & Bruno 1992).

Focus groups were used to select attributes relevant to respondent groups. There would be little value in seeking volunteer preferences for attributes which were neither relevant nor important to the groups. A list of the most common qualities was developed from the groups' discus-

sions, ensuring the qualities or attributes used were relevant to the sampled volunteers.

### Sample

This study used the population of welfare volunteers from the Town of Bassendean. All welfare agencies were asked for the number of active volunteers in their agency and they were provided with the required number of questionnaires. The data collected from this study could be used to design a larger study of volunteers in general. In this case, a sample could be taken from the wider volunteering population, rather than being restricted to the welfare area and the Town of Bassendean.

A total of 95 questionnaires were sent out. Using local organisations provided an easy avenue for distribution and placed responsibility on the contact person to encourage members to complete and return the questionnaire. A response rate of 58% was achieved.

### Attributes and Levels

As a result of the discussion in the focus groups, many significant desired characteristics of a supervisor were identified and a list of characteristics began to emerge. The characteristics which recurred most often were arranged into groups according to their similarity.

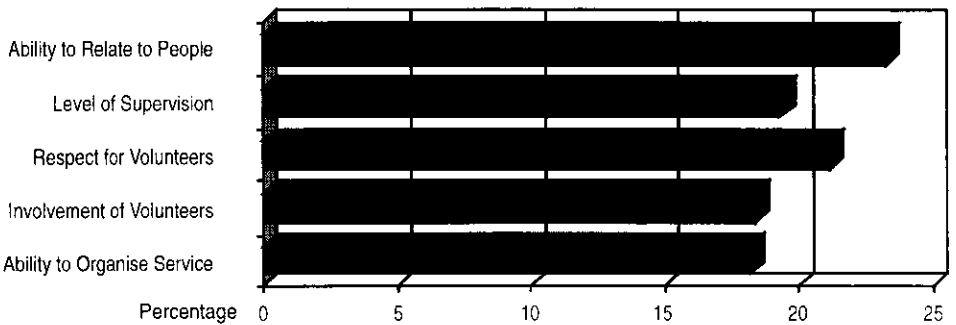
From these recurrent characteristics, five of the most frequently mentioned ones were selected as the five attributes to form part of the questionnaire and to be tested in the conjoint analysis. The statistical method chosen dictates that the number of attributes not exceed five. These attributes were: ability to organise service, involvement of volunteers, respect for volunteers, level of supervision and ability to relate to people (Table 1). Each of the attributes was described in terms of a number of levels listed in Table 1.

## RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The results indicate that, according to volunteers, the two most valued attributes refer to people and how they should be treated (Graph 1). Volunteers want a supervisor who has good

Attribute	Level
A. Ability to organise service	1. Minimal 2. Moderate 3. Considerable
B. Involvement of volunteers	1. Rarely 2. Sometimes 3. Often
C. Respect of volunteers	1. Little 2. Moderate 3. Great deal
D. Level of supervision	1. None 2. Limited 3. Close
E. Ability to relate to people	1. Does not relate well 2. Relates quite well 3. Relates very well

Table 1. Attributes and Levels



Graph 1. Relative Importance of the Five Attributes of Volunteer Supervisors

rapport with people, clients, associates and volunteers. They also wish to be treated with respect and have their donated time, effort and skills valued and appreciated. In the view of the respondent volunteers, other attributes fall into second place. The implications for supervisors of volunteers are to ensure that they put people first.

What qualities do volunteers prefer in a supervisor? The present study suggests volunteers prefer supervisors who have considerable ability to organise a service, often involve volunteers, have a great deal of respect for volunteers, have the ability to relate very well to people and provide close or limited supervision (Figure 1).

This study did not set out to establish a relationship between the presence of preferred supervisory attributes and recruitment/retention of volunteers. However, some indications were evident suggesting that, if these attributes were not present, particularly the ability to relate to people and respect volunteers, then volunteers may not remain with an organisation. Whether or not this would prevent volunteers trying out an organisation managed by a supervisor known not to possess these attributes is not established by this current study. However, it would be valuable for further research to be conducted to investigate this problem, because there are many welfare organisations which continue to experience a shortage of volunteers.

**PREFERRED SUPERVISOR**

Ability to organise service  
*Considerable*

Involvement of volunteers  
*Often*

Respect for volunteers  
*Great deal*

Level of supervision  
*Close - Limited*

Ability to relate to people  
*Relates very well*

Figure 1. The Preferred Volunteer Supervisor

Several studies (Curtis & Noble 1988, Dalley 1988) have established that, for volunteers to commit themselves to an organisation, there needs

Previous studies have examined the implications of the recruitment (Smith & Gutheil 1988, Stern & Gibelman, 1990), retention (McCroskey et al 1983) and maintenance (Loxton & Harris 1989) of volunteers. These and many other studies have sought to establish links between supervisory practices and the willingness of volunteers to be involved. However, this study seeks to establish the qualities volunteers prefer in a supervisor and which may enhance the volunteering experience and encourage commitment from volunteers.

In order to make the study manageable and relevant to a specific problem, it was restricted to residents in the Town of Bassendean (a local government area within Perth, Western Australia) who provided their time and labour voluntarily to welfare organisations. There are some voluntary welfare organisations within the Town which have little difficulty in attracting and retaining volunteers, while others find it a constant struggle. The study surveyed residents in the Town who are involved in volunteer work for welfare organisations within the confines of the Town. The residents who comprised the study population were asked about the qualities they prefer in a supervisor of volunteers. Once a common group of qualities had been collected, the study population was asked to assign ratings to descriptions of hypothetical supervisors, each with various dimensions of these qualities.

The study sought to establish a set of qualities that were expected in a supervisor of volunteers. Further research is needed to determine whether the presence or absence of the qualities has an effect on the willingness of people to be involved in and to remain committed to the organisation.

## MAJOR CONCEPTS AND THEORIES

For the purpose of this study, the term volunteer was defined as '... a person who, on a regular basis, contributes his or her time and energy to a voluntary agency, statutory body, social action or self-help group concerned with issues of welfare, without being paid for this, other than in some instances through the payment of out-of-pocket expenses.' Vellekoop-Baldock (1990: 4-5). The concentration on the welfare area is not intended to lessen the importance of non-welfare volunteering. There are many volunteers within the Town who work in the variety of non-welfare organisations. The decision to restrict the study to the welfare area was twofold. First, it was of particular interest and relevance to a problem existing in the Town and, second, it was necessary in order to make the study manageable. In a recent survey conducted in the Town of Bassendean (du Boulay 1994), 51% volunteered in the welfare area.

The common thread of many studies of volunteers (Smith & Gutheil 1988, Stern & Gibelman 1990, Miller et al 1990) is the human side of man-

to be something in the relationship for them. This current study provides a set of preferred attributes which can be used as the basis for building a sound reciprocal relationship between volunteers and their supervisors.

Other studies (Miller et al 1990, Stern & Gibelman 1990) have established the importance of the supervisory role in encouraging commitment from and motivation of volunteers. The preference of volunteers in this current study was for the supervisors to possess and practise sound interpersonal skills, relating to the respecting and involvement of people (volunteers particularly).

Supervisors need to create a work environment conducive to the development of volunteers' potential. That is to respect, value and nurture the individual. This current study has established that volunteers prefer their supervisors to be responsible and caring managers of people, rather than competent managers of physical resources, time or money.

Volunteers are informed people and are well aware that their skills and time are valued and are in great demand. Recent studies (Vellekoop-Baldock 1990, Loxton & Harris 1989) have measured the value of volunteer labour in monetary terms, indicating an enormous value, far beyond the reach of most welfare organisations. If the preferred attributes of supervisors identified in this study represent the views of all volunteers, then they might make their decision to donate their time and skills to one organisation, rather than another, on the basis of the presence of these attributes in the supervisor. While this current study does not establish this relationship directly, it does indicate the possibility of it. It would be prudent for boards of management of welfare organisations to assess the qualities of their supervisors, and for supervisors to examine themselves. It does not seem unreasonable for volunteers, through the board of their organisation, to demand that supervisors possess and practise preferred attributes, such as the five identified in this current study. This would send a very clear message to supervisors, that their performance is being critically appraised by their volunteers.

### **Implications for Recruitment of Supervisors**

The results of this study provide employers of volunteer supervisors with a sound indicator of the skills or attributes which are valued by volunteers, and therefore what attributes are suitable for the applicant to possess. These attributes are not the only ones relevant for an applicant to possess, however they do form a starting point. Employers should be encouraged to weave these into position descriptions, job advertisements and interview questions. It would be particularly useful to invent short hypothetical situations which incorporate the five attributes identified in this study. It is also recommended that employers use these attributes carefully in the selection process of volunteer supervisors.

As volunteers are people with considerable diversity of skills and experience and because they are such a valuable asset to an organisation, their opinions should be sought during the recruitment of a supervisor. Therefore, it would be very desirable to include volunteers on the interview panel.

### **Implications for Training of Supervisors**

The other major implication of the results of the conjoint analysis is the types of training requirements for supervisors of volunteers. Training programs primarily need to concentrate on interpersonal skills to ensure that supervisors and potential supervisors develop the ability to relate to people, to respect their needs and value their contributions. Training programs also need to focus on practical skills, such as how to involve volunteers in the meaningful work of an organisation, how to provide an appropriate level of supervision, how to involve them in some of the decision-making and how to organise a service effectively.

### **Implications for Assessment of Supervisors**

This study also provides a valuable tool for the assessment of supervisors and recommendations for corrective training. Regular performance appraisal or assessment is an integral part of any employees' working life. However, it is perhaps more important for supervisors, because they are not only responsible for their own tasks, but also for the quality of work of their staff (unpaid or paid).

Employers of volunteer supervisors need to regularly assess their performance, in order to ensure that they are still practising the preferred attributes. Studies by Akin and Weil (1981) and Considine (1988) stressed the importance of accountability of performance. The supervisor is not only responsible to the organisation, but to the organisation's clients.

Having established that the opinions and skills of volunteers are valuable and that it would be sensible to include them in interview panels, it would be advisable to involve them also in the assessment of the supervisor's performance.

### **Comparison of Volunteer Supervisors and Other Supervisors**

It is clear from management literature that different styles of supervision and supervisors with different attributes are required by different volunteers. This study, however, established a high degree of homogeneity among its respondents. Further investigation is needed to determine if these respondents are representative of all welfare volunteers. If this is established, it may indicate that volunteers form one group of supervisees who need a particular style of supervision or management, as indicated by the five attributes identified in this study.



Many management theories and models have been developed to determine the most suitable supervision for the different groups. These groups have been represented by the following dichotomies:

- mature or immature;
- nurture or autonomy;
- job-centred or employee-centred;
- flexible or inflexible;
- maintenance or motivation;
- expressive or instrumental; and
- intrinsic or extrinsic.

This study does not claim to have identified the most important supervisory attributes for all groups. However, it identified five that were important to its respondents. Although these five attributes may not be the most important for all groups, they do appear in management literature as worthy of analysis and discussion. It should be noted that these attributes will need to be operationalised for each specific organisation, as they may mean different things to different people. In order for this to be completed thoroughly, further research will be necessary to provide more specific guidance to volunteers, supervisors of volunteers and the management of organisations which employ the skills of volunteers.

McGregor (1960) and Hersey and Blanchard (1982) examined the level of supervision and involvement of individuals in decision-making as important factors in determining an appropriate management style. Blake and Mouton (1978) and Reddin (1970) recognised the importance of a supervisor's ability to relate to people. The motivational theories of Maslow (1954), Herzberg (1975) and McClelland (1965) stressed the importance of the needs of the individual, including respect for and value of the individual employees. Hersey and Blanchard (1982) and Fiedler (1967) also examined the significance of task orientation or ability to organise as an attribute employees value in a supervisor.

In most instances volunteer workers are similar to paid workers. Both are internally motivated by the work itself, providing they are respected and valued as individuals. Both can be externally motivated by factors such as, position, power, friendship and recognition. The major difference between the unpaid and paid workers is the motivator, money. Both expect their supervisor to be organised and able to produce high quality products or services. Both expect to be given an opportunity to be involved in the work and related decision-making in a meaningful way. Unpaid and paid workers demand to be treated with respect. They value varying levels of supervision, depending on their levels of skill and maturity. Perhaps the most important of all supervisory attributes is the ability to relate to people. Supervision or management is primarily concerned with people, for it is only through their staff that they can achieve

the end product or service. The quality of that product or service is largely in the hands of the supervisor.

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