

Topic 4 | The value of volunteers

One important question concerning volunteering has to do with the creation of value. Volunteering creates value from five perspectives:

1. **Individual value**, as volunteering allows people to acquire expertise, knowledge, and contacts, in addition to generating good feelings
2. **Economic value**, as the outputs of volunteering reduce expenses relative to having the activities performed by paid professionals, thereby enabling the provision of more services, additional services, and different services at a lower cost
3. **Social value**, as volunteering contributes to social capital, or at least to its maintenance. Opinions are divided concerning the extent to which volunteering contributes to broad trust within society, as volunteering can also be based on solidarity within a specific group or confirm differences relative to others.
4. **Added value**, as working with volunteers in some interventions (or parts/tasks thereof) can add value due to the fact that the activities are being performed by a volunteer. In other words, the services would be less beneficial if the intervention or tasks were to be performed by paid staff.
5. **Legitimacy value**, as an activity in which several thousands of volunteers participate is legitimate almost by definition, given that it is based on direct interpersonal solidarity.

Individual value

Thinking about the individual value of volunteering from the reward perspective dates back to the early 1990s. Partly due to the process of individualization, the realization has emerged that people do not volunteer solely to help others, but also to help themselves. The position that “volunteering is altruism” is being replaced by a position that “volunteering is also rewarded, but not with money.” At least for volunteer management, this is a better starting point, as volunteering based on pure altruism allows no room for recognition and appreciation, let alone any form of reward (e.g., access to a unique event, an entry on the résumé, or study credits). A pure altruist would actually already be “offended” if the client were to say, “thank you.” Another

way in which pure altruism is problematic is that it actually sees the client as a dependent: the existing distance must be maintained.

Volunteering is thus not a job description, but a reward structure: the individual value. The rewards are not paid out in currency, but in a sense of satisfaction, purpose, health, personal development, expanded network, expression of one's own values, acquisition of knowledge and contacts, and much more. A well-known list of functional motivations that volunteers hope to realize through their volunteering was compiled by the group surrounding Gil Clary and Mark Snyder (Clary et al., 1998). The first are *normative* motives, in which people volunteer in order to express their norms and values. The second category consists of *social* motives, aimed at expanding or strengthening social contacts. People also volunteer because it allows them to develop themselves (*understanding* motives) or to improve their lives (*enhancement* motives). Other categories include *protective* motives, in which volunteering provides an escape from unpleasant life circumstances, and *career* motives, in which people are able to develop and build up their networks.

Functional motivation describes why people volunteer. It can be used to motivate volunteers to stay by giving them what they want. Paid staff members also have a range of other reasons for working that could be comparable to the functional motives of volunteers. Collectively, however, they have a need to work for money, as well as the possibility of comparing each other's rewards. This operates as a great equalizer in terms of organizational behavior—a sort of standard method of enforcing “organizational control.” It is combination of the stick (we will fire you) and the carrot (we will give you a bonus) to bulldoze undesirable behavior and restrict the autonomy of paid staff and professionals. In terms of rewards, volunteering thus lacks this equalizer (i.e., the stick and the carrot) for deviant organizational behavior. The stick does not work well, as it is difficult or impossible to determine what the reward is that is to be taken away. Actually taking it away is difficult as well, as compared to stopping salary payments. The carrot does not work well either, as there is little or no way to reward one volunteer better than another, and promotion is not really enticing.

Economic value

It always attracts attention when volunteering is translated into “hard” currency, thereby revealing the magnitude of the share that volunteering contributes to the economy. At the same time, however, volunteering is not free. The organization of volunteers comes at a cost as well. Direct costs include reimbursing the expenses of volunteers and providing training. Perhaps even more important are the indirect costs of ensuring proper, paid coordination and organizational conditions.

There are three approaches to the economic valuation of volunteering: replacement value, investment value, and market value. All calculations are obviously only estimates, which are aimed at the various aspects of economic value. Volunteering by people is priceless. It has other positive effects, including individual and social value, and this is exactly why its economic value is so high. In addition, volunteering by people is of value precisely because it is not aimed at monetary gain. Assigning a monetary value to the efforts of volunteers is thus nearly an insult, at least according to the volunteer.

Three methods of calculating cost savings

1. Replacement value

Replacement value concerns what the organization would have to pay if the volunteers had been paid staff (Handy & Srinivasan, 2004). In the simplest terms, the number of volunteer hours worked is multiplied by the gross hourly wage of a professional employee doing similar work. The basic formula is thus as follows:

Number of volunteer hours * hourly rate for comparable paid work

Three important questions are important in this regard:

A Which types of activities do the volunteers perform? (visiting, organizing, governance tasks)

B How many hours of volunteering are performed for each type of volunteering?

C What fee would be paid for these activities if they were to be performed by paid staff?

This method is simple and easily performed, on the important condition that the three questions can be easily and reliably answered.

2. Investment value

Investment value concerns the cost to the volunteer by considering what the volunteer could have earned otherwise (opportunity costs). This type of question requires a large amount of information about the private situations of the volunteers.

The basic formula for investment value is as follows:

Number of volunteer hours * hourly rate for the paid work that could otherwise have been performed

The following questions are important in this regard:

A What hourly fees do the volunteers earn for their own work?

B How many hours of volunteering are performed by a specific volunteer?

3. Market value

The third approach has to do with the market value of the services. This involves considering how much the recipient would be willing to pay for the same service in the marketplace (Mook et al., 2007). The formula to be applied is as follows:

Number of services provided * price to be paid for the service

One relatively simple way to clarify the economic importance of volunteering is to convert it into FTE (full-time jobs). In the Netherlands, the average volunteer performs slightly more than four hours of volunteering per week. A full-time job is between 36 and 40 hours per week. This means that, if volunteers in the organization perform all kinds of large and small functions and are therefore “average” volunteers, 10 volunteers together are equivalent to one FTE. An organization with 300 volunteers can thus establish that these volunteers together fulfill between 25 and 30 full-time jobs. The calculation can easily be adjusted if there is a sense that volunteers perform somewhat fewer or more hours on average.

Social value

Volunteering is a manner in which a society’s social capital can be deployed. Volunteering is organized, thereby addressing hesitance to act and hesitance to ask. Potential volunteers often experience considerable hesitance to act. Many wonder whether they are able and allowed to

do the work. It is precisely the organized context of volunteering that can make the difference when a potential volunteer is hesitant to act. Citizens are able to overcome their hesitance to act when an organization provides them with a formal volunteer position. This is because such a position delineates the boundaries that let a volunteer know how far the job can go in substantive terms. In addition, it provides a volunteer with a “title” that grants permission to intervene. An organization is thus needed in order to resolve hesitance to act. Hesitance to ask occurs on the part of the person seeking help. It simply means that, for any number of reasons, it is difficult to ask for help. Although it remains troublesome, it is easier to request help from an organization than directly from an unfamiliar individual. The signaling function of volunteers and their organizations also exists within the tension between hesitance to act and hesitance. Through volunteering, social capital is simultaneously monetized and strengthened. According to civil society theory, social capital is accumulated wherever people meet and associate with each other, regardless of the objective of their coming together.

Added value

To treat the efforts of volunteers solely in terms of cost savings is to do disservice to the concept of volunteering. Another perspective proceeds from the unique contribution that volunteers make by sacrificing their time voluntarily and without compensation (Metz et al., 2016;). They can do this either directly (within the relationship with clients) or indirectly (primarily for the organization itself).

The added value of direct client contact largely involves establishing “meaningful relationships” and creating a “richer context” (Metz et al., 2016). It is easier for volunteers to establish personal and meaningful relationships because: 1) beneficiaries value volunteering as equal; and 2) volunteers offer proximity through a wide range of similarities, especially in peer-to-peer projects. Such proximity is a prerequisite for being able to empathize with the other person, for listening with acceptance, and for realizing an emotional connection (Pols, 1990) (Fiske, 1991; Newton, 2004). 3) Beneficiaries perceive the efforts of a volunteer as more authentic and sincere. 4) Beneficiaries see volunteers as more accessible and thus less threatening than paid staff (Kelleher & Johnson, 2004). Volunteers enrich the context simply by making it possible to expand

the number of pedagogic (or other) environments. Volunteering—or civil society—is an environment that differs from home, school, or work.

Within the context of indirect volunteering for UNICEF, Van Overbeeke (2017) identifies the following seven values.

1. **Credibility.** Volunteers are often perceived as more credible than paid staff, in part because they do not blindly repeat the organization’s “script.” They are able to state the importance of the goals for which they stand. In addition, with paid staff, there could be a perception that their salary is paid with donations (e.g., in the case of fund-raising). Moreover, a large constituency of volunteers can provide the organization with greater credibility: “if so many people are willing to dedicate their free time to this cause, it must be good...”
2. **Network effect.** An organization with many volunteers can often reach deep within society, given the enormous network constituted by all volunteers together. This can open many doors, as personal contact often remains more effective than “cold calls” from an organization’s headquarters. Word-of-mouth advertising and publicity can enable social organizations to reach more supporters, volunteers, and donors through their volunteers. The network effect is also important because people are more likely to give (whether in terms of money, time, or resources) when asked by an acquaintance, as well as when there is greater awareness around the topic. A large pool of volunteers is helpful in both respects at the same time: more volunteers translate into more exposure, as well as into more acquaintances to ask for a contribution.
3. **Diversity.** The variation between volunteers is often greater than between professionals (e.g., in terms of age, interests, education, professional skills, and personal background). This makes it easier to reach different target groups, enhances recognition of the organization, and makes the base of support more pluralistic. Moreover, diversity ensures a broad array of skills and knowledge within the organization. By way of illustration: 1) while almost all teachers at a primary school have the same educational background (university of applied sciences), the educational diversity among parents is much, much

greater; 2) while almost all of the paid staff at a national headquarters come from the surrounding area, the regional distribution (and therefore dialect and other characteristics) of volunteers throughout the country is much, much greater.

4. **Proximity.** This is a combined result of the network effect and diversity. It has to do with identification. People are more likely to feel attached to others who resemble them, such that they can identify with them. They are more likely to like them, thereby increasing their likelihood to respond to requests from these individuals. Proximity can emerge from many different factors. Examples include cultural background, sex, religion, as well as speaking with a certain accent, wearing glasses, or being an Elvis fan.
5. **Source of feedback.** Unlike paid staff, volunteers need not fear losing their income if they express criticism, and this independence makes them more likely to do so (e.g., about the organization's management). In addition, volunteers regularly receive criticism from the field (e.g., during recruitment drives or even at birthday parties) about the organizations to which they donate their efforts. This is because people are more likely to do this to a volunteer than to a paid employee. Volunteers thus serve as a channel for feedback from society to the organization.
6. **Source of innovation.** Independence from the social organization for which they work is one of the reasons that volunteers are a good source of innovation. In addition, volunteers possess a "luxury of focus." This means they can devote more time, effort, and creativity to devising new activities or programs, as there is generally no manager telling them that it is time to start working on another task. For this reason, volunteers are often more likely to be creative, innovative, experimental.
7. **Granting factor.** Finally, volunteers often have a certain granting factor, which paid staff may sometimes lack. This is because people tend to be more inclined to help those who perform altruistic work and choose to devote their leisure time to a specific cause. This makes potential donors more inclined to donate their time, money, or goods. This granting factor can be reinforced if the volunteer is an acquaintance.

Legitimacy value

Organizations derive their right to exist—their legitimacy—from support within society. Volunteering contributes to the legitimacy of the social sector in two ways. First, volunteering generates personal involvement in social issues, which is not present when paying taxes or donating money: volunteering creates lived solidarity. As demonstrated by both research and practice, civic internships (volunteering facilitated by schools) and employee volunteering (volunteering facilitated by employers), and similar programs bring people into contact with experiences/target groups and social issues that they have not previously considered. For example, they could allow a manager at an investment bank to experience and feel first-hand what it is like to have a child with an incurable disease or to be forced to grow up and live in poverty.

In addition to enhancing understanding of the target group, direct experiences gained through volunteering can enhance understanding of social organizations and their specific challenges. By allowing volunteers into the workplace, an organization can open itself to more eyes, critical actors, and additional supervisors. Precisely because they have no economic ties to the organization, volunteers are quite well suited as whistle-blowers. Not admitting volunteers could suggest that there is something to hide. The fact that citizens are willing to work for an organization as a volunteer means more than a willingness to help the target group by providing “cheap labor.” It also means that they are willing to place their own reputation as a guarantee to a specific organization. This guarantee of legitimacy can be deployed within the private sphere (e.g., at birthday parties), as well as in the form of public political pressure.

A second way in which volunteers contribute to legitimacy has to do with the fact that, by working with volunteers, a social organization can demonstrate that it is keeping an eye on expenses. Many organizations are accused, rightly or wrongly, of wasting public money. Volunteers are obviously unlikely to receive such accusations.

Reading list for these topics:

- 1 Movisie examines the various ways in which volunteering is of value. [Read here](#)

- 2 Beroepskrachten vervangen door vrijwilligers? De waarde van vrijwilligers en vooral de voordelen ten opzichte van betaalde krachten [Replacing paid professionals with volunteers? The value of volunteers relative to paid staff.] By Meijs, Roza, & Metz. [Read here](#)
- 3 Verplichten is slecht voor individuele waarde vrijwilligerswerk. Over perspectieven rondom het verplichten van vrijwilligerswerk [Obligation is bad for the individual value of volunteering: On perspectives concerning obligatory volunteering]. By Meijs, Roza, & Metz. [Read here](#)
- 4 Vrijwilligerswerk geeft sociale sector legitimiteit. Een pleidooi voor het zelf borg staan voor legitimiteit [Volunteering provides legitimacy to the social sector: A plea for self-guaranteeing legitimacy.] By Meijs, Roza, & Metz. [Read here](#)
- 5 Wie profiteert van de kostenbesparing? Over het economisch waarderen van vrijwilligerswerk [Who profits from cost savings? On the economic valuation of volunteering.] By Meijs, Roza, & Metz. [Read here](#)
- 6 De oudere vrijwilligers beschouwd. Inzichten over de economische, functionele en additionele waarde van de oudere vrijwilliger. [Considering the older volunteer: Insights on the economic, functional, and additional value of the older volunteer.] By Meijs, Parren, & Simons. [Read here](#)
- 7 Economische waarde van het vrijwilligerswerk door de Zonnebloem [The economic value of volunteering by De Zonnebloem]. By Meijs & Roza. [Read here](#)
- 8 Vrijwilligerswerk maken waarde! Over de toegevoegde waarde van vrijwilligers binnen sportverenigingen. [Volunteers create value! On the added value of volunteers within sports clubs.] By Meijs & van Overbeeke. [Read here](#)
- 9 Beroepskrachten en vrijwilligers: communicerende vaten? Over wederzijdse verdringing. [Professionals and volunteers as communicating vessels? On mutual displacement.] By Meijs & van Overbeeke. [Read here](#)
- 10 De grenzen tussen vrijwilligerswerk en betaald werk. Over keuze, dwang en verdringing. [The boundaries between volunteering and paid work: On choice, coercion, and displacement.] By Van Overbeeke. [Read here](#)

Additional literature

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- Fiske, A. P. (1991). *Structures for social life: The four elementary forms of human relations: Communal sharing, authority ranking, equality matching, market pricing*. New York Free Press: New York.
- Handy, F. & Srinivasan, N. (2004). Valuing volunteers: An economic evaluation of the net benefits of hospital volunteers. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 33(1), 28–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764003260961>
- Kelleher, L. & Johnson, M. (2004). An evaluation of a volunteer-support program for families at risk. *Public Health Nursing*, 21(4), 297-305. doi:10.1111/j.0737-1209.2004.21402.x
- Metz, J., Roza, L., Meijs, L., Baren, E. van, & Hoogervorst, N. (2017). Differences between paid and unpaid social services for beneficiaries. *European Journal of Social Work*, 20(2), 153–166.
- Mook, L., Handy, F., Ginieniewicz, J., & Quarter, J. (2007). The value of volunteering for a nonprofit membership association: The case of ARNOVA. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 36(3), 504–520. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764007300388>
- Newton, K. (2004). Social trust: Individual and cross-national approaches. *Portuguese Journal of Social Science*, (3)
- Pols, J. (1990). Afstand en nabijheid: opleiding, attitude en geaardheid van psychiaters [Distance and proximity: Training, attitude, and orientation of psychiatrists]. *Tijdschrift Voor Psychiatrie*, 32, 576–581.