



Why Volunteers Leave

If you're plagued by volunteer retention issues, or want to encourage deeper participation, it helps to know what the research says about why volunteers leave.

WHY VOLUNTEERS LEAVE

You may think you know, but often volunteers don't always tell us directly why they are leaving. Giving critical feedback is harder than simply blaming the inability to continue on a lack of time.

First to know — three things set volunteerism apart from paid work. These are important because they affect how volunteers perceive their expected experience, their level of satisfaction, and whether or not they continue to volunteer:

- Volunteers have a choice to engage or disengage with an opportunity or task.
- People volunteer for altruistic reasons because they want to help others (employees may be drawn to social conscious workplaces, but the primary motivation of work is to be paid).
- Volunteers attach a stronger value to incidental (e.g., making friends) and intrinsic rewards (e.g., working together for the common good) than employees.

Moreover, while there are many reasons we may attribute to volunteer turnover, there are four key areas that are backed by research that has been validated. What's fascinating is that they often have little to do with the plethora of human resources management activities and structures organizations put in place and focus their attention on.

FOUR THINGS YOU MAY BE MISSING

When you think about designing an intervention to increase retention, consider these four areas for better results:

1. Competency — Volunteers must feel they have the required knowledge and skills and are adequately prepared for their assignments.

Questions for You — Do your volunteers receive adequate training to feel comfortable and confident in their new roles? Do they have the right tools for the right job? What other tools and supports can you offer?

2. Participation Efficacy — Similar to feeling they are prepared to do the job, they also need to feel that they are able to be effective, that their time is well used, and that their work makes a concrete difference.

Questions for You — Is their work designed to be efficient with minimal bureaucracy and roadblocks to progress? Do you report and celebrate with volunteers goals attained, as well as key learning, on a regular basis?

3. Group Integration — This refers to the social aspects of volunteering and feeling that they are part of the "in-group." Volunteers need to feel that they have positive relationships with both their peers and paid staff.

Questions for You — Do you ensure that new volunteers are fully integrated into the larger group? Do you actively work against the formation of cliques and "insider" groups? Do you keep everyone in the loop with emerging information? Do you address volunteer-paid staff relations issues proactively?

4. Organizational Support (varies with age) — This refers to the ability to get help when needed, acknowledgment of work, and feedback on performance. Perhaps surprising, this need varies with age, and research shows that this support does not affect the intent to remain of those over 40 years old.

Questions for You — For your younger volunteers, do you have a plan to provide more in-depth supervision and support? Do you have a feedback system in place to help volunteer make corrections and work more effectively?

By focusing on these four areas, you are more likely to increase the participation of volunteers. You might also poll volunteers with a satisfaction survey to find out which might be the most important to tackle first.

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