

Something for nothing

Why work for zero pay? That's what more than one million New Zealanders actively involved in volunteering do.¹ People do not normally supply their time and effort (outside their family) without being paid. So volunteers are clearly motivated by something other than pay. Understanding those motivations can help organisations to make the most of their volunteer resource.

Why do people volunteer?

There are three broad motivations for volunteering – consumption, investment and altruism (see Table 1).

Table 1 Volunteer motivations

Broad	Specific
Consumption - the "here and now" enjoyment and benefits of volunteering	Love of voluntary activity per se Social interaction Joy and "warm glow" from giving Prestige/power Sense of achievement Expression of deeply held convictions Overcome guilt from being more fortunate than others
Investment - the future rewards from investing today's volunteer hours	Gain skills, experience and contacts to gain paid work in the specific voluntary activity or elsewhere, or signal desirable traits and behaviours to prospective employers Influence voluntary activity to benefit self/family Gather information on the voluntary activity before making a donation
Altruism - a genuine selfless act benefiting others	Help others/community Provide something that otherwise may not be provided "Conscience good" – respond to requests to volunteer

Source: NZIER, drawn from Ziemek, S. (2006), *Economic analysis of volunteers' motivations: A cross-country study*. Journal of Socio-Economics. Vol. 35 no. 3: 532-55.

¹ Volunteering New Zealand (2009), *Fact and Figures on Volunteering in New Zealand* – see <http://www.volunteeringnz.org.nz/news/headlines/090121a.php>

Example: What motivates emergency services volunteers to train?

NZIER used the concepts in Table 1 in a 2008 study of training for emergency services volunteers in New Zealand.¹ The study identified two basic drivers for emergency services volunteers undertaking training. Firstly, volunteers have no choice but to participate in training that is a prerequisite to becoming operational in an emergency service. Secondly, volunteers undertake training if it fits in with their lifestyles and motivations for volunteering.

The study found evidence of all three of the broad motivations in Table 1 among emergency services volunteers. The “altruism” motivation was dominant, especially for volunteers in rural areas, who are driven by a strong sense of community. The “consumption” motivation – the adrenalin rush, camaraderie, satisfaction of helping others – was also strong. The “investment” motivation – using the voluntary activity as a stepping stone into paid work in the emergency service or elsewhere – was important for some volunteers. These included people in the younger age groups, migrants, or those volunteering for an emergency service which has a clear career pathway from unpaid to paid work.

Training has the most direct appeal to investment-driven volunteers. For example, gaining formal qualifications from training was valuable to emergency services volunteers seeking to enhance their CVs. The study also identified training implications for the other two motivation types. Consumption-driven volunteers are likely to prefer hands-on, team-based training. Altruistic volunteers may prefer that training is kept to a bare minimum. The value of this study is that it helps organisations to match their training to better attract and retain volunteers, and ultimately to deliver better services to the public.

Other applications

By definition, volunteers can be expected to be highly dedicated and motivated. However, for organisations that use volunteer labour this can be a double-edged sword. Volunteers may have strong views on what is a valuable way of spending their time. Ultimately they retain the right of veto. Managers do not have the same levers to drive volunteers’ performance as they do with paid staff. So making the most of the volunteer resource can be challenging for organisations which use volunteer labour.

Organisations that use volunteer labour can use their understanding of volunteers’ motivations to inform their management practices. For example, a recruitment campaign targeted at rural volunteers might focus on the community aspects of volunteering, while one targeted at young people might focus on the value of volunteering in enhancing CVs. For this to work, organisations need to be able to identify specific volunteer “motivation” segments, and tailor strategies to those segments.

The better an organisation understands the volunteer psyche, the better use it can make of its volunteer resource. This benefits not only the organisation but also the volunteers themselves.

Sharon Pells
December 2009

¹ NZIER (2008), *Volunteer-related training in emergency services: Findings from a literature review*; NZIER (2008), *Volunteer-related training in emergency services – improving training outcomes: Findings from qualitative research*. The study was conducted for a group of industry training organisations (ITOs) led by the Fire and Rescue Services ITO. It included 52 depth interviews with volunteers and other stakeholders in urban fire, rural fire, civil defence and emergency management, land search and rescue, coastguard and ambulance - see http://www.nzier.org.nz/Site/Publications/reports/2008_Reports.aspx.