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Altruism, Egoism, or Something Else: Rewarding Volunteers Effectively and Affordably

Laura Phillips and Mark Phillips

Despite limited amounts of available free time, Americans continue to volunteer at a wide variety of Nonprofit Organizations (NPOs). Religious organizations remain the top beneficiaries, receiving 35.1 percent of these hours, with educational and service groups (26%) and social/community service organizations (13.5%) rounding out the top three. Donors provide an average of one hour per week to their chosen causes, yielding approximately 4 billion volunteer hours per year or the equivalent of roughly 2 million full-time employees (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

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Given the constrained resources available to most NPOs, it is no exaggeration to state that many of these groups depend on this unpaid workforce for their survival, and several factors have aligned to make volunteers even more critical. As the economy has slowed in recent years, demands for services have skyrocketed. Related to this downturn, state and local budgets have been slashed, reducing funds available for many NPOs. Finally, as an expanding base of organizations seeks to recruit a limited pool of individuals, pressure to retain volunteers has intensified (Wilson, 2000; Butrica, Johnson, & Zedlewski, 2009). Growing demand for volunteers, coupled with extremely low exit barriers, suggests that individual organizations may soon find themselves competing with one another for a constrained labor supply. As NPOs have become increasingly aware of their dependence on their volunteer labor forces, many have sought a deeper

understanding of the reasons that individuals initially volunteer and choose to continue volunteering. This study examines one aspect of that process, focusing on volunteer motivation and the role of rewards in volunteer retention.

Rewards and their motivational value have been extensively examined within the field of economics (Benabou & Tirole, 2003; Lazear, 2000a, 2000b). These studies focused almost entirely on motivation within workplace environments, and dealt almost exclusively with companies and paid employees, with motivation typically taking a monetary or similar form. Although some writers in this field acknowledge the potential importance of nonmonetary rewards (Bartol & Srivastava, 2002; Merchant, Stede, & Zheng, 2003), the unquantifiable nature of nonmonetary rewards makes them inherently more difficult to empirically examine. Given the limited resources of most NPOs and

their typical inability to offer monetary rewards, these studies' findings offer relatively limited utility in understanding why volunteers choose to participate.

A second factor that makes the existing economic literature less applicable to the study of volunteer motivation involves the numerous differences between volunteer and paid workers. Even though the number of individuals volunteering each year is substantial, individual volunteers are not representative of the general U.S. population; volunteers are more likely to be female, middle-aged, college-educated, and above average in annual earnings (Auslander & Litwin, 1988; Smith, 1994; Garland, Myers, & Wolfer, 2008). In addition, since most volunteers hold paying jobs, their volunteer work may fulfill only those motivational needs that are not being met at work. Because of these and other differences between paid workers and volunteers, researchers have found it necessary to specifically examine volunteer motivation, rather than attempting to apply workplace motivational findings to this distinct group.

As previously noted, NPO managers are often squeezed between their need to retain and care for volunteers, and their extremely limited resources.

As a result of this convergence, these managers have developed a wide array of symbolic rewards that acknowledge volunteer contributions at little or no financial cost to the organization. Some of the more common rewards include thank-you letters, small prizes, publicity, appreciation dinners, and invitations to conferences. The diversity of the rewards being offered suggests that these organizations have become quite resourceful in caring for their volunteers. Cnaan and Cascio (1999) evaluated seventeen different symbolic rewards, assessing the impact of specific demographic, personality, and situational variables on volunteer satisfaction, organizational commitment, and tenure. Their results demonstrated that symbolic rewards do play a role in the three tested outcomes; however their analysis was also unable to consistently tie individual motivation to any specific rewards, suggesting that while individuals are motivated by these rewards, no single reward (at least in their sample group) appeared to consistently motivate a wide array of individuals.

Additional research has also suggested that individuals exhibit a wide variety of motivational needs; given that Cnaan and Cascio sampled more than 500 individuals from more than 100 different organizations, the

individuals' differing motivational needs probably mitigated the overall impact of any particular extrinsic reward on the outcome variables. As a result, the study's failure to identify consistently desirable rewards may in fact be a result of the sample population's diversity, rather than a result of a particular population characteristic. Without systematically matching and mismatching rewards with individual volunteer preferences, it will remain difficult to determine whether rewarding volunteers in a personalized manner can favorably impact the outcome variables of interest.

This article attempts to clarify the relationship between individual characteristics such as reward preferences and one's perception of specific rewards. Specifically, it examines whether individually tailored rewards are more effective than generic offerings and attempts to determine whether organizations are better-served by matching specific rewards to specific individual preferences or whether generic awards can be just as effective.

Theories of Volunteer Motivation

Since the labor contributed by volunteers is essential to the effective functioning of nonprofit organizations in the United

States, nonprofit managers have a vested interest in keeping their volunteers motivated. Research in the area of volunteer motivation has produced a number of theories, including altruism (Simmons, Klein, & Simmons, 1977), egoism (Schervish & Havens, 1997), and functional theory (Clary & Snyder, 1999), as well as the more recent systematic quality of life perspective (Shye, 2010).

Altruism and Egoism

The earliest research on volunteer motivation primarily adopted a rational utilitarianism view (Schervish & Havens, 1997). This approach examines individual motivation as it lies along the dichotomy between egoism, which motivates behavior for the purpose of self-enhancement or self-enrichment (consistent with most of the economic models described previously), and altruism, which is conceptualized as a generally selfless motivator. Altruistic helping behavior includes any action that is both self-initiated and undertaken without expectation of external reward (Bierhoff, 1987). Volunteer research on altruism rests on a foundation of previous research which examined diverse situations including instances of individual heroism, in which an individual risks personal safety in order to help

another (Piliavin, Dovidio, Gaertner, & Clark, 1981) and blood and organ donation, in which individuals are willing to suffer discomfort and potential physical harm in order to preserve or extend the life of another (Simmons et al., 1977; Simmons, Marine, & Simmons, 1987; Titmuss, 1971). Empathizing, the experience of feeling emotions similar to those being experienced by another, is often suggested to be the motivator of altruistic behavior; however, empathy is most often felt toward a specific individual, rather than a class or group of people, making it an unlikely motivator for helping behavior aimed at less tangible groups such as “the poor” or “the homeless” (Batson et al., 2002).

Diametrically opposed to altruism is egoism, defined as behavior intended to benefit oneself. Economists frequently assume that egoism lies at the heart of all rational economic decision-making, and has been colorfully described as “the most obvious motive for acting for the common good” (Batson et al., 2002: 434) as well as the only motive powerful enough to matter (Hardin, 1977). Individuals behave egoistically for a variety of reasons; rewards including money, work promotions, and public recognition are common motivators for individual behavior, while in some cases people are motivated

by a desire to avoid outcomes such as feelings of guilt, fines, and other forms of punishment. Egoism has been demonstrated to be both a powerful and an unpredictable motivator. Individuals who are motivated to undertake a project for egoistic reasons may find that the current effort is no longer the best way to achieve their goals; in the context of volunteers in community projects, the availability of superior alternatives typically results in a termination of the volunteer’s involvement in the current project (Batson et al., 2002). Though this tendency is both logical and well-documented, little research has examined factors which could potentially mitigate this predisposition (Millette & Gagne, 2008).

Functional Theory

Functional theory (Katz, 1960; Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956) posits that individuals are unique in the ways they experience situations and their motivations to undertake activities are equally unique, driven by their personal attitudes or beliefs. Functional theory suggests two individuals may exhibit identical behaviors for very different reasons, and, unlike most other theories of motivation, the functional approach focuses strictly on psychological variables as factors of attitude change. Because its focus is on

psychological, rather than experiential, factors of functional studies are more likely to produce findings which can be extrapolated to the general public. The topic of volunteer motivation is a natural application of functional theory.

Functional Theory and Volunteers

Extensive existing work has applied functional theory to human resource management (Dulebohn, Murray, & Sun, 2000; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Piderit, 2000; Pratkanis & Turner, 1994), evaluating attitudes and their consequences within the context of an organization. Because this work dealt with questions of practice, rather than questions of theory, it provides a logical starting point for functional theory research dealing with volunteers. In particular, examinations of recruiting, retention, job satisfaction, and above normal participation rates (Greenslade & White, 2005) are directly relevant to the present study of volunteers.

Prior to Clary and Snyder's (1991) development of the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI), few tools existed for standardized assessment of volunteer motivation. Clary and Snyder attempted to produce a measurement tool which was applicable for a wide variety of volunteers in a wide range of settings. The inventory is based on the

premise that volunteer work fulfills one or more of six psychological functional needs, and that individuals volunteer in order to meet those needs:

- social (spending time with friends and gaining approval of admired individuals);
- career (job-related benefits or advancement);
- understanding (learning or practicing skills or abilities);
- values (expressing altruistic or humanitarian concern);
- protective (reducing guilt over feeling more fortunate, or escaping personal problems); and
- enhancement (gaining satisfaction from personal growth or esteem).

Items for the VFI were initially derived from the authors' interpretation of these functions in conjunction with both quantitative and qualitative findings from earlier work on the motivations of volunteers (Clary, Snyder, Ridge et al., 1998). Following significant testing, Clary et al. (1998) determined that the VFI is not only robust across varied volunteer opportunities and diverse samples, but also easy to

administer and useful for addressing organizational questions regarding commitment and satisfaction.

The Volunteer Function Inventory has been applied in a wide variety of situations, and has been used to study a broad range of topics, including gender differences among volunteers (Fletcher & Major, 2004; Switzer et al., 1999), satisfaction among volunteers in service learning (Chapman & Morley, 1999), volunteer motivations in older adults (Okun, Barr, & Herzog, 1998; Okun & Schultz, 2003), and factors affecting retention among younger adult volunteers (Marta, Guglielmetti, & Pozzi, 2006). This measurement framework has demonstrated its practical utility in assessing the complex, multifaceted nature of volunteer motivations.

Rewards and Volunteers

In one key sense, volunteers are noticeably different from employees: most volunteers choose to donate their time despite the fact that they hold paid employment (Smith, 1994). This dual participation means that virtually all of the personality profiles and demographic variable groupings found in the volunteer workforce are also present among paid employees. Even so, individuals with certain demographic characteristics (e.g. older females, college

graduates) are more highly represented in the volunteer workforce (Greenslade & White, 2005). This subset of individuals may exhibit different fulfillment needs than the general population of paid workers. Volunteers are also distinctly unlike paid employees because they choose to labor with no expectation of monetary compensation. In cases in which goal congruence between the individual and the organization is high, the volunteer might even resent an offer of monetary compensation since that payment would reduce the funds available to meet the organization's primary objectives.

While early analyses of volunteer motivation concluded that volunteers did "something for nothing," current perspectives suggest that, like their paid counterparts, volunteers anticipate receiving some benefit for their efforts. While this benefit is frequently intangible or of little financial value, the benefit itself often remains important to the volunteer. A variety of academic disciplines have examined the impact of extrinsic rewards and reached a variety of sometimes contradictory conclusions (Cameron & Pierce, 1994; Deci et al., 1999; Lazear, 2000a), however two consistent findings have emerged from this large volume of work.

First, rewards which are

salient and valuable to the worker will provide motivation as long as the reward system remains in place (Kohn, 1993b). In practical terms, rewards which matter to the recipient will motivate participation and continuation, just as they do in a paid employment context. Second, an individual's basic hygiene needs must be met to avoid dissatisfaction with, and hostility toward, the organization (Crewson, 1997; Herzberg, 1966; Wilkinson et al., 1986). In organizations with a paid workforce, some basic level of salary and benefits constitute two of the primary hygiene needs. These rewards are normally not available to organizations that utilize a volunteer workforce. The question of specifically which basic rewards are adequate to meet volunteer hygiene needs remains unexamined.

A virtually unlimited variety of rewards have been used to recognize volunteer performance; among the most common are appreciation dinners, recognition in the organization's newsletter, a certificate or plaque, small gifts, such as movie passes, and preferred parking (Bartol & Srivastava, 2002; Hahn et al., 2004; Spitzer, 1996). The motivational effectiveness of a particular reward obviously depends on the value that particular reward holds for the

volunteer, as well as other factors.

Research linking the effectiveness of advertising appeals to the individual's functional profile has been conducted in the fields of marketing and volunteer motivation (Clary, Snyder, Ridge et al., 1998; Snyder & DeBono, 1985). These studies concluded that advertising messages which are targeted to match an individual's primary needs increase the attractiveness of the product or volunteer opportunity. In a similar vein, it appears likely that a specific reward would not be equally valued by individuals with different functional profiles, and that its attractiveness to a volunteer would vary according to the reward's ability to meet the individual's unique needs; however, the proposition that functional needs are fulfilled to different degrees by different nonmonetary rewards has not been empirically tested.

Research Questions

A more complete understanding of volunteer motivation and behavior offers enormous potential benefits to NPOs attempting to capitalize on their volunteer workforces. The present study examines two questions in an attempt to extend our understanding of the relationship between functional preferences and volunteer rewards. The first question addresses whether

individuals who differ in their functional preferences also differ in their preference for specific rewards. Researchers and practitioners have speculated that personalized rewards might be more effective in motivating volunteers than generic rewards designed for broad distribution. Specifically, it has been assumed that a reward tailored to an individual's personal functional preference will prove more motivating than one which does not match the individual's VFI profile. Confirmation of this belief would support the practice of reward customization, while its rejection would encourage NPOs to embrace the more cost-effective strategy of offering generic rewards.

RQ1: Do VFI preferences predict individual recipient ratings of specific rewards?

Extensive discussion has also centered on the potential implications of identifying rewards which are universally valued; this approach assumes that specific high quality rewards will be valued by, and motivating for, all volunteers, regardless of functional preference. The opposing perspective holds that individuals are too diverse for such a reward to exist, and that individuals with differing functional

preferences will rate different rewards as more or less desirable, making the identification of a universally valued reward difficult or impossible.

RQ2: Are highly rated rewards meaningful to volunteers regardless of primary functional preference?

Results and Analysis

Study participants were recruited from volunteers at a local Meals on Wheels organization that delivers daily meals to elderly and disabled individuals. Volunteers received an email from the organization inviting them to participate; information about the survey, including the link, was also posted at the facility. Six-hundred and thirteen invitations were distributed and 328 surveys were completed (53.5%). In addition, a small number (approximately 1%) of volunteers chose to complete paper-and-pencil versions of the survey.

RQ1 asked whether an individual's VFI preference would predict that individual's rating of specific rewards. An initial assessment of the data was performed, including tests for normality of the data (histogram), equality of variance (scatterplot of residuals), and independence of observations (Durbin-

Watson test). Multiple regression was used to assess the relationship between VFI factors and individual rewards; the results are presented in Table 1, and a summary of the most frequently retained factors is provided in Table 2.

A series of regression models was run in order to examine the impact of each factor on individual ratings of each reward. The most commonly retained VFI factor was *Career*, which was a significant predictor for 22 of the 28 rewards, including 22 of the 24 tangible items; however, the Career factor was the lowest rated factor overall for the volunteers; the mean score for the Career factor was 1.9, well below the scale midpoint of 4. The Career VFI factor was retained in the model for three different categories of rewards: (1) rewards that result in a lasting, physical expression of recognition that can be displayed or shown to others (e.g. wall plaque or service pin), (2) rewards that are expressed through an event (e.g. appreciation dinner or meeting celebrities), and (3) rewards that help develop skills that would be useful in one's career (e.g. serving on a committee for the NPO or training new volunteers). Rewards in this third category also included the Understanding factor in the

Table 1
Individual Rewards and VFI Factors

Rank	Reward	Predicting Factors	R²	P-value of Model
1	Helping make community a better place	V,U	0.396	0
2	A feeling of satisfaction	V, E	0.277	0
3	Being able to use your skills to help others	V,E	0.335	0
4	Developing a relationship with the people served	V,E,U	0.299	0
5	Thank you from NPO	E,C,V	0.167	0
6	Opportunity to meet people helped/served	U,C,V	0.212	0
7	Free cookie	E	0.046	0
8	Prize (gas card, car wash, movie tickets)	C,E,U*	0.159	0
9	Snack tables at volunteer location	E,U*	0.085	0
10	Appreciation luncheon	E,C	0.201	0
11	Volunteer of the year award	C,E	0.274	0
12	Thank you letter from people helped/served	C,U,P	0.213	0
13	Selected to train new volunteers	U,C,E	0.229	0
14	Volunteer of the month award	E,C	0.241	0
15	Appreciation dinner	C,E	0.215	0
16	Selected to serve on committee for NPO	U,C	0.268	0
17	Certificate of appreciation	C,E	0.194	0
18	Selected to serve on Board of Directors for NPO	C,U	0.232	0
19	Party with other volunteers and NPO staff	E,C,U	0.226	0
20	Free t-shirt from organization/event	C,P	0.182	0
21	Free basic medical services	C	0.103	0
22	Service pin	E,C	0.140	0
23	Newsletter publicity	C,E	0.213	0
24	“Promotion” to leadership position among volunteers	C,U	0.317	0
25	Wall plaque commemorating service	E,C	0.189	0
26	Invited to speak at annual recognition dinner	C,U	0.247	0
27	Meet celebrities	P,C	0.227	0
28	Media publicity	C,E	0.236	0

*coefficient is negative

Table 2
Top Motivating Factors and Their Frequencies

Top Ratings (primary)	Times Retained
Values	6
Understanding*	12
Career	22
Enhancement	18
Social	0
Protective	3

*Coefficient for understanding is negative for two rewards

model because the premise of the Understanding factor is that some people volunteer to learn or practice skills.

The Enhancement factor is a significant predictor in 18 of the models. This factor is largely absent from the models for rewards that involve additional work (e.g. serving on the board of directors or speaking at the recognition dinner), although it did appear in relation to being selected to train new volunteers. The Enhancement motivational factor addresses actions that are taken to gain a feeling of satisfaction or to feel good about one's involvement; therefore, it makes sense that this factor is not expressed in the models that require work. Instead, the Enhancement factor is included in almost all of the models where the nonprofit gives something to the volunteer—any

acknowledgement of the volunteer's service.

The Understanding factor is retained in 12 of the models. The most notable group of rewards includes those that allow the volunteer to make a substantial investment in the organization in a way that will help the volunteer learn or practice skills (e.g. train new volunteers or serve on a committee). In general, the Understanding factor is not positively significant in regression models for rewards that represent token gifts from the NPO (except a thank you note) or celebratory occasions (except a party with other volunteers and staff). The Understanding factor was included in the regression model for both the prize and the snack tables, but the coefficient of this factor was negative, meaning that as a volunteer's score on the

Understanding factor went up, their interest in receiving either of these rewards went down. A prize and the snack tables were actually "unrewarding" for individuals with a high score on the Understanding factor.

In summary, the analysis of VFI scores and their relationship to ratings of specific rewards demonstrated that an individual's VFI score explains more than 20 percent of the variance in reward ratings for 19 of the 28 rewards. These findings suggest that individual VFI preferences play a role in determining reward ratings; as a result, an individual's motivational preferences did exert a measurable effect on their value rating of the various rewards, a finding which supports Research Question 1.

Research Question 2 examined whether the highest-rated rewards are equally desirable for volunteers regardless of their functional preference; this item explores the possible existence of "universal" rewards which have high appeal across all functional preferences. In a previous exploratory study on a student sample, this analysis was performed using the fifteen most highly rated rewards; for each reward a one-way ANOVA was conducted using each participant's primary motivator as the factor. In only one case (free meals) did the respondent's

primary motivator account for a difference in reward ratings, suggesting that specific rewards may be universally appealing or universally unappealing. In the current sample group 94.8 percent of respondents rated Values as their top motivation; this disproportionate result prevented the use of ANOVA on this data set. In this case, however, out of the 28 possible rewards, only six retained the Values motivation in the regression model; these six were the highest rated rewards, suggesting that the motivational profile does impact reward rating. While this finding does offer preliminary support for Research Question 2, these results conflict with data gathered in a pilot study using a student sample, suggesting that further study is necessary in a population with a more balanced distribution of motivations before a definitive answer to this question can be reached.

Discussion

Volunteers are complex and, at times, unpredictable, making their recruitment and retention an ongoing challenge; however, several observations may be made from the present study. First, the decision to volunteer is highly personal, and two individuals may choose to engage with the same NPO for very different

reasons. One important implication of this finding is that NPOs should avoid the tendency to lump their volunteers together into a homogenous mass; they should also invest in keeping communication lines open with volunteers, since the most vocal few may not represent the objectives and values of the entire group. Given the extreme variation evident in the decision to volunteer, it seems prudent for NPO managers to deal with volunteers as individuals whenever possible.

While this recommendation may appear idealistic to organizations which are already facing resource shortfalls, one possible solution would be to offer a menu of rewards, allowing volunteers to craft the package which they prefer, potentially at little or no extra cost to the NPO. A second recommendation would involve varying the organizations' appeals, targeting various populations with different volunteer opportunities or different possible rewards. Such appeals might allow the organization to reach individuals who might not be attracted by a single appeal.

The analysis demonstrated that an individual's VFI score explains a meaningful portion of the variance in reward ratings for most of the rewards. For the NPO manager who is

determined to match rewards to functional preferences this statistic suggests that giving new volunteers the Values Function Inventory as part of their orientation process might help the organization select rewards which are meaningful. The findings of this measure might also aid in the assignment of volunteers to specific opportunities which are matched to their values.

In the present study, virtually all of the respondents (94.8%) rated Values as their top motivation. This distribution made it impossible to perform the analysis necessary to fully assess the second research question, however the fact that the scores of the top rewards were somewhat driven offers some evidence that personalized rewards might provide the greatest motivational impact. Further, the fact that the vast majority of respondents rated the same value as their highest motivator suggests that, at least in the case of this particular organization, the volunteers who are drawn to this opportunity may be more homogenous than expected. Further, if an NPO finds that its volunteer base mostly shares functional preferences then it may become possible to tailor rewards to the motivations of the volunteer base with a very small number of reward options. In such a

case the NPO might be able to achieve the best of both worlds, providing tailored rewards to volunteers without the need to offer an excessive number of options. Additional study using volunteers from other organizations will be necessary in order to determine whether this homogeneity is unique to this organization or common among many.

Limitations of the Study

This study utilized a sample of individuals volunteering at a single organization; while this group was somewhat diverse, caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings to other groups. Further, specific factors related to that organization or its current operations might have influenced the responses in some unexpected way. The list of rewards presented to volunteers might have omitted items which they would find more valuable. Also some of the organization-specific rewards appear unique enough to require further study before extensive generalization of the findings is made. Finally, like any research dealing with altruism and motivation, this survey depends both on the respondents' ability to clearly identify their motivations (which is often difficult) and their willingness to respond honestly to questions which

might be impacted by social desirability bias.

Further Work

This study examined the relationship between individual volunteers' functional preferences and their ratings of a variety of non-monetary rewards. This study's preliminary findings should now be validated with additional studies conducted within multiple NPOs. These samples would provide a wider cross-section of ages, backgrounds, and locales, as well as allowing participants to consider the rewards in the context of their current volunteer activities. Further questions remain to be answered, including the ways in which specific rewards impact job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and tenure with the organization.

Finally, this study assessed the impact of NPO rewards on volunteers. While the list of rewards was quite lengthy, it was merely a compilation of rewards currently being offered. Further research is needed to determine what types of rewards volunteers actually want. A clearer understanding of volunteer needs may go the farthest in helping NPO managers better utilize and retain their extensive volunteer resources.

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