

V21 – ENHANCING VOLUNTEERING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

SUMMARY REPORT

Key principles for enhancing volunteer capacity:

- ★ Ascertain the volunteer perspective and take it seriously.
- ★ Adopt a multidimensional view of volunteer capacity and effectiveness.
- ★ Employ task accessibility, support and training to enhance capacity.
- ★ Establish pathways which maximise access to volunteering opportunities.

Introduction

Partner organisations

Three community organisations – the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVDP), the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) and the Benevolent Society (TBS) - and the Australian Catholic University have completed a three-year collaborative research project titled *V21 – Enhancing volunteering for the 21st century*.

The V21 Research Team acknowledges with appreciation the cooperation and support of the partner organisations and their volunteers and employees who participated in this study.

Aims

The aim of the project was to help the community organisations maximise their volunteer resource by enhancing both individual and collective volunteer capacity. These organisations were seeking more flexible organisational structures and processes that maximise their volunteer pool through increased volunteer retention and the development of alternative pathways to attract volunteers from diverse backgrounds.

The partner organisations' goal was to develop structures and processes that:

- enhance people's capacity to volunteer;
- make more effective use of the interests and abilities of their current volunteers;
- provide volunteering opportunities that are attractive to under-represented groups; and
- establish a range of volunteer pathways which promote volunteer retention.

Context

Volunteering is 'an activity which takes place through not-for-profit organisations or projects and is undertaken:

- to be of benefit to the community and the volunteer;
- of the volunteer's own free will and without coercion;
- for no financial payment; and
- in designated volunteer positions only.' (Volunteering Australia, 2005)

Volunteers contribute substantially to the social capital and the economic viability of Australian communities. While volunteer participation added \$9 billion of the contribution of non-profit organisations to Australia's GDP in 1999-2000 (ABS, 2002), this participation comes at a price to the organisations. For community organisations serious about deploying voluntary workers, this price includes costs such as: the salary of a volunteer manager; recruiting and equipping the volunteer;

orientation and training; support and recognition; management infrastructure, including policies and procedures, evaluation and review, and record keeping; and insurance.

Given these costs, it is important, from a management perspective, that community organisations maximise the capacities of volunteers within their organisations. Maximising the use of the volunteer resource will be cost effective in terms of the payback on direct expenditure (Gaskin, 1999) and will also reduce indirect expenditure. Failure to manage this volunteer resource effectively not only constitutes a missed opportunity but may lead to lack of service availability, inefficiencies in service delivery, increased costs, and dysfunctional relationships between volunteers and members of the organisation's paid workforce (Johnson, 1981; Moynes, 1966; Twelvetrees, 1991). More effective use of the full range of volunteer interests and abilities will increase volunteer satisfaction and retention, lower attrition rates and volunteer burnout, and thereby reduce the costs of recruiting replacement volunteers.

Volunteer capacity

To address the maximisation of the volunteer resources for community organisations, this study employed the concept of 'volunteer capacity'. A person's volunteer capacity includes their sense of efficacy to contribute to particular activities of the community organisation and the intended extent and preferred form(s) of their contribution. Volunteer capacity includes self-efficacy as a key component. Self-efficacy is the belief that one is capable of doing the actions needed to achieve some desired goals, or at least of learning how to do so. Self-efficacy within both organisational and educational research is recognised as a key factor in motivating and sustaining commitment to a task (Bandura, 1997; Labone, 2000).

Furthermore, organisational structures that support efficacy are recognised as critical in supporting employee engagement and commitment (Bandura, 1997; Saks, 1994, 1995). Self-efficacy operates as a motivator both at points of task engagement and task persistence (Bandura, 1997). In other words, if volunteers perceive a task as accessible and achievable then they are likely to engage, and once they have engaged, organisational structures that provide appropriate training and support will enhance their job satisfaction and commitment (Saks, 1994, 1995).

Methodology

The key characteristics of the methodology adopted for the project were:

- grounding of the research in the reality of the organisations;

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- finding a common language and ensuring that the learning and research were inherently inclusive;
- the use of both quantitative and qualitative data;
- a multi-faceted view of each of the variables; and
- a focus on how the research team operated.

The components or phases of the research methodology adopted for V21 during 2003-2006 were:

- Developing a detailed profile of each partner organisation as a volunteer-involving organisation;
- Listening to each organisation's volunteers and employees through focus groups to inform survey development;
- Developing and administering the V21 survey of volunteer and employee opinions and experiences;
- Validating the survey findings through follow-up interviews with focus groups;
- Analysing data with respect to the research questions developed for the project;
- Developing organisational structures and processes to enhance volunteer capacity; and
- Facilitating the implementation of project findings within each partner organisation.

The volunteer questionnaire was responded to by 454 respondents across all organisations; a response rate of 71%. Response rates varied from 64% to 82% across the three organisations.

Findings

Capacity and efficacy

Capacity refers to the extent and form of a volunteer's current and projected contribution to the organisation and their sense of efficacy to contribute. This study examines both personal or self-efficacy and collective efficacy.

Enhancing volunteer capacity includes understanding how volunteers view their participation currently and their projections regarding their future involvement. The multidimensional view of capacity used in this study enables the organisations to be strategic when considering the current and projected capacities of volunteers.

This multidimensional view of capacity encompasses:

- current levels of volunteers' self-efficacy;
- current perceptions of collective efficacy; and
- the current and projected extent and form of volunteers' involvement.

Self-efficacy: capacity for effective participation

A volunteer's self-efficacy is defined as 'belief in one's capacity to organise and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments.' (Bandura, 1997, p. 3).

A more differentiated understanding of volunteer self-efficacy was obtained through the use of a survey instrument which measures five dimensions of efficacy for volunteering. Focus group data was also analysed for evidence of volunteer effectiveness related to these dimensions.

These five dimensions of self-efficacy for volunteering are:

- relationships with the people the service supports;
- relationships with other volunteers;
- work competence;
- empathetic action; and
- social awareness.

Survey respondents reported high levels of self-efficacy overall and on each of the five dimensions. For all three organisations, volunteers were most confident in their ability to form relationships with other volunteers and in their work competence. The following table summarises volunteer responses on each self-efficacy dimension.

Table 1 Survey data related to volunteer self-efficacy

Dimension	ALL (Mean score per item*)	SVDP (Mean score per item*)	RFS (Mean score per item*)	TBS (Mean score per item*)
Relationships with clients or people the service supports	5.5	5.4	5.5	6.0
Relationships with other volunteers	6.3	6.3	6.3	6.1
Work competence	6.1	6.0	6.1	6.0
Empathetic action	5.7	5.9	5.7	6.0
Social awareness	5.9	6.0	5.9	5.6
Total self-efficacy score	5.9	5.9	5.9	6.0

* on a 7-point scale (1 = 'not confident'; 7 = 'very confident')

Collective efficacy: influence of the collective environment

Collective efficacy refers to volunteers' 'shared beliefs that they can work together to produce effects' (Bandura, 1997, p. 7). Simply stated, collective efficacy is the extent to which we believe that we can work together effectively to accomplish our shared goals.

Volunteers were asked about two aspects of collective efficacy: the effectiveness of their organisation and the impact of teamwork on their effectiveness as a volunteer.

Respondents reported high levels of confidence on each of the two aspects. However, for all three organisations, volunteers were more confident in the effectiveness of their organisation than in the impact of teamwork on their volunteering. The following table summarises volunteer responses on each item.

Table 2 Survey data related to collective efficacy

Item	ALL (Mean score*)	SVDP (Mean score*)	RFS (Mean score*)	TBS (Mean score*)
The organisation I volunteer for is effective	6.1	6.1	6.0	6.3
Volunteering within my team increases my effectiveness as a volunteer.	5.9	5.9	5.9	5.7

* on a 7-point scale (1 = 'not confident'; 7 = 'very confident')

Extent and form of involvement

A substantial majority of volunteers (79%) indicated their satisfaction with the extent of their current involvement; that is, how often they volunteer and for how long. Others indicated that they are willing to volunteer to a greater extent; 16% would like to volunteer more often and 15% would like to give more hours. Twenty-five per cent of volunteers would like to be involved in a different form to their current involvement; that is, in other volunteer roles or activities.

It is clear that a majority of respondents across each organisation are committed to, and confident in, their current volunteer work, and satisfied with their current level of involvement.

The individual and collective efficacy of volunteers contribute to both their current capacity and their motivation to participate in the future. To enhance volunteer capacity organisations need to be proactive in constructively drawing upon both the current and projected capacities of their volunteers.

Support and training

Volunteers' self-efficacy is enhanced by positive perceptions of the availability of support and training. Hence the provision of support and training has implications for volunteer self-efficacy and, in turn, volunteer and organisational capacity. The project has provided a clear picture of how volunteers see the current provision of support and training in relation to their volunteering roles.

Findings have confirmed that volunteers overall feel well supported by the organisation. The most important types of support for volunteers are professional support/supervision followed by training. In respect of professional support and supervision volunteers want a particular person, such as a volunteer coordinator or supervisor, whom they can approach to discuss any issues relating to their volunteering role, particularly critical incidents and difficulties with clients.

Financial support and physical infrastructure – such as reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses, and the provision of uniforms and equipment - are also important to the majority of volunteers, though less important than professional support/supervision and training.

For employees, the most important types of volunteer support are also professional support/supervision and training; but 40% of volunteers rate professional support as the most important compared to 13% of employees, and only 26% of volunteers consider training to be the most important support compared to 47% of employees.

Volunteers indicated that the training they have received is useful and sufficient for their respective roles. Employees thought volunteers would see the training as less useful than they actually did.

Volunteers reassess their self-efficacy, and hence their volunteer capacity, in light of the level of match between their own and the organisation's perceptions of available support and training. Volunteers' perceptions may not always align with those of employees, even those who manage or supervise volunteers. Volunteers should be involved directly in assessing the availability and adequacy of the support and training provided to them.

The levels of support and training reported by survey respondents are associated with high levels of self-efficacy and collective efficacy. This suggests that the level of support and training which is currently available would be conducive to favourable (re)assessments of efficacy and capacity by volunteers.

Volunteer pathways

Pathway is defined in this study as the journey a volunteer takes with a particular organisation from initial interest through engagement to staying with the organisation over an extended period of time or leaving the organisation at some point in time.

Pathways into the organisation

Volunteers' pathways into the organisation result from their successful search for an effective organisation which provides them with opportunities to use their own capacities in the role of volunteers.

Survey respondents were asked if there was a particular event in their lives that provided the opportunity to volunteer or to resume volunteering. 59% of all volunteers identified such an event with responses ranging from 53% to 66% across the three organisations. Volunteers who identified such an event were asked to provide brief details of the nature of the event. These fell broadly into two categories: personal life-events and outside events.

Through outside events, or through advertising or personal invitation, volunteers become aware of particular organisations or groups and the community needs which they seek to address.

Three key factors are at play in the volunteer's searching:

- **personal life-events** - such as retirement, bereavement or children leaving home. These may result in more 'personal space' being available to the volunteer-to-be and provide the opportunity to volunteer to resume volunteering;
- **outside events** – such as a natural disaster or a TV documentary - which heighten their awareness of a particular community need and act as a motivator; and
- **awareness of some organisation, group or program** which has the potential to meet both the needs of the community as seen by the volunteer-to-be and their own personal needs.

These three factors comprise the context for the volunteer-to-be's exploration of volunteering opportunities. The relative influence of these three factors will vary according to the individual and his/her circumstances.

Their decision to engage as a volunteer with a particular community organisation is based on:

- their knowledge of the organisation and what it does – and how this aligns with their values, needs and circumstances;
- their perception that the organisation is effective in what it does (collective efficacy); and
- their belief that they could be effective doing that sort of volunteer work (self-efficacy).

The potential volunteers need to have sufficient knowledge of the organisation to see it as matching their goals and capacities and being effective in meeting community needs. This knowledge is at times gained from people, such as family, friends or other networks, or through the organisation's own advertising. In RFS and TBS, volunteer coordinators have been found to be pivotal in negotiating this match of goal, task and capacity for the new volunteers.

If people believe they are capable of volunteering it is likely they will follow this through. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave (Bandura, 2005). Factors which influence the development of self-efficacy beliefs include: personally mastering the task, vicariously seeing people similar to oneself manage the task, and being socially persuaded that one has the capabilities to do the task (Bandura 2005). Any combination of these influences may lead a person to initiate volunteering and maintain that involvement. In this study, the most important influence was volunteers' belief that they had the skills and experience to address the tasks involved together with their belief that the organisation was effective.

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To facilitate this initiation of volunteering, organisations need to review their structures and processes to ensure that pathways into the organisation are accessible to potential volunteers.

Pathways within the organisation

Volunteers' journeys are characterised by an increasingly strong commitment to serve the community within the context of the vision, goals and activities of the organisation. Serving the community is the valued goal and engaging in particular activities is the effective means. The volunteers acknowledge their increased capacity to be confident in responding effectively to people or events even in the most challenging of contexts.

A number of volunteers have changed or are seeking to change their roles and responsibilities during their journeys. Two of the three organisations had a broader range of roles for the volunteers. Some changes can be to positions of higher responsibility while other changes can be from one frontline service to another frontline service, from one location to another, or from a management position to frontline service.

Volunteers may be categorised into two broad 'types' based on their current view of the volunteering experience:

- **Type 1** - They feel it is time for a change in their role and responsibilities. Synchronicity may be involved - someone may have suggested this to them before they had articulated this view themselves – and this provides the catalyst or trigger for change. Such triggers are person and context specific.
- **Type 2** - They may be formal pathways seekers. They have identified the next step or steps in their journey and have a clear time dimension in mind.

Implications

The study revealed the importance of the following principles and focus areas for enhancing volunteer capacity.

Ascertain the volunteer perspective and take it seriously.

This requires focussing upon:

- An evidence-based approach to volunteer perspectives;
- Volunteer advocacy; and
- Volunteer involvement in decision-making.

Adopt a multidimensional view of volunteer capacity and effectiveness.

This requires focussing upon:

- Self-efficacy;
- Collective efficacy; and
- Preferred form and extent of involvement

Employ task accessibility, support and training to enhance capacity.

This requires focussing upon:

- A learning culture within the organisation, teams and programs;
- Development of volunteers' skills and interests; and
- Volunteer support at all levels.

Establish pathways which maximise access to volunteering opportunities.

This requires focussing upon:

- Why and how the organisation is involving volunteers;
- Volunteer experience as a pathway; and
- A person's suitability for particular tasks or roles.

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Australian Catholic University Limited ABN 15 050 192 660
Strathfield Campus (Mount Saint Mary)
25a Barker Road Strathfield New South Wales 2135 Australia
Locked Bag 2002 Strathfield New South Wales 2135 Australia
CRICOS registered provider: 00004G, 00112C, 00873F, 00885B
www.acu.edu.au