

The value of volunteers in tourism and events: A leadership perspective

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ABSTRACT: This article is part of a three-year research project on volunteerism and the value for organisations employing volunteers, volunteers themselves and finally the tourists who meet the volunteers in various settings. Employing a mixed methods approach, we conducted a mutual research collaboration between the Danish Destination Management Office (DMO) VisitAarhus and Dania Academy within the Frascati research frame. The focus of this article is on the leaders of the volunteers and how they facilitate the conditions that enable volunteers to create the aforementioned value. This was done through in-depth semi-structured interviews with volunteer leaders from across Europe. We focus specifically on how leaders perceive the volunteers, how they assess the value that the volunteers create and, finally on what motivates the volunteers. The result of this article is a conceptual model that creates insights into the elements that help foster an identity among the volunteers and thereby increases the value that they produce.

KEYWORDS: European capital of culture, experience economy, hospitality, volunteerism

Introduction

Volunteerism has been an integral part of Danish society for several decades. Whether it be the volunteer that spends several evenings a week coaching the local football team, or the volunteer that helps out at the local community centre, volunteerism has been an integral part of Danish society for the past 30 to 40 years. In this article, we will investigate volunteerism in a tourism setting, and specifically how volunteer leaders from the European Capital of Culture (ECOC; see <https://ec.europa.eu/culture/da/node/635>) perceive the value that their volunteers contribute. We conducted the interviews presented in the article with the volunteer leaders throughout 2020/2021, and this is the final result of that process.

Methodology

The research design in the overall project with VisitAarhus is a mixed methods approach rooted in the pragmatic research paradigm. During the three-year period, quantitative and qualitative data collected from the various stakeholder groups — the organisations employing the volunteers (in the case of this article, the leaders of volunteers), the volunteers themselves and finally the tourists that meet the volunteers in various settings — will form part of this study. The research method employed in this article is semi-structured interviews.

The respondents in this article were chosen based on the following criteria: 1) they must have worked with volunteers on a managerial level for more than five years; 2) they currently work

with volunteers; and 3) they must have worked with volunteers in a similar setting (tourism/events) as the volunteers that we focus on in our research. To fulfil the criteria above, we chose to do interviews with the leaders of volunteers in the ECOC. We conducted ten online expert interviews with the respondents from across Europe. The interviews were conducted during 2020 and 2021 through the online video service Zoom, as physical meetings were not possible due to COVID-19.

Exploration of current literature

Before embarking on the expert interviews, a literature review was conducted. It showed that the amount of prevailing literature on the specific research topic (intrinsic value of volunteerism) is very scarce. Overall, we found that the bulk of research in the field of "value and volunteerism" concerned the economic value that volunteers contribute. Among the most cited was the research done by Sajardo and Serra (2011), Salamon et al. (2011) and Orłowski and Wicker (2014), who all focused primarily on measuring the monetary value that volunteers bring and how this could be measured. Apart from the connection between economic value and volunteerism, other researchers have focused on the social value of volunteers in different settings, for example, Gallarza et al. (2013), who investigated the value contributed by volunteers in a consumer value-based approach. Finally, Handy et al. (2010) focused on the intrinsic value added by volunteerism by looking at the connection between working as a volunteer and the subsequent benefits that this would have on a CV.

Results and analysis

In this section, we will present the results of the interviews with the volunteer leaders from the ECoC. After transcribing and analysing the interviews, which were conducted in English, we identified several patterns in the way the volunteer leaders perceive their volunteers, the value they bring to the organisation and the city, and the motivational strategy which they adopt. It is important to stress that even though the overall aim of our research focused on the value contributed by the volunteers, the perception and motivation of volunteers plays a key part in understanding the issue of value contribution.

Leaders' perception of working with volunteers

In this sub-section, we will investigate the positive and negative aspects of working with volunteers. All leaders were posed questions regarding the positive and negative aspects of working with volunteers to understand how they perceive volunteers, their work and their contribution to the organisation. Consequently, the answers were compared and patterns were identified. It may be worth noting that when talking about how the volunteers were perceived, the ECoC volunteer leaders were predominantly seeking to project a positive picture, portraying the volunteers as the core of the organisation. To counterbalance this predominantly positive view, we asked them specifically to address the positive as well as the negative aspects.

Positive aspects

There were three recurring themes when talking about the positive aspects of having volunteers — ambassadors, community and relationship — supporting the assumption that volunteers play a big role in the organisation's culture and development.

Firstly, volunteers are seen as the "face" of the organisation (ambassadors), and in events and different programmes, they are also the promoters of their city. For example, in Aarhus (cultural capital 2017), volunteers identify as "rethinkers" (a name given to them by the DMO in Aarhus to identify them as a specific group of volunteers). When the cruise ships arrive in the port of Aarhus, the rethinkers are the first to greet the cruise guests and give them a tour of the city. They are easily recognisable due to their badges and same colour T-shirts, and they play a pivotal role for the image of the city. The volunteers in their "uniforms" create the first impression for the visitors, and the way they present themselves has a strong initial impact on the visitors' perception of the city as a whole.

Showing enthusiasm, being easily visible and displaying a "sense of pride" in their work are good indicators that volunteers are seen as "ambassadors" of the organisation and therefore also of the city they represent. Elena Toniato (All participants signed full consent forms allowing their names to be used), the volunteer leader from ECoC in Galway, elaborates:

First of all, the thing that comes to mind is the enthusiasm that volunteers bring and the will to help and often to go the extra mile. According to my experience, I also find that most of the time, they have a sense of pride, and really try to own the project. They also become ambassadors for the organisation, which is a very positive element.

Additionally, the volunteer leaders perceived and presented volunteers as an energetic and enthusiastic community.

Intentionally or not, the volunteers managed to create a community that is held together by shared goals, interests and visions. The community is to a certain degree formed and sustained by the volunteers, who manage to influence people with similar interests to join the organisation. Franz Kadiri, the volunteer leader from ECoC in Bulgaria, elaborates:

There is an opportunity to create a society, a special society among the people, a learning experience for our younger volunteers. Here with us, they have an opportunity to work in a team in a real working environment without being judged in any way. Creating friendships, that's the most important outcome I can point out, friendships among themselves and with us.

The creation of a sense of community was, of course, also greatly aided by the volunteer leaders. However, the continued maintenance of a strong sense of community stemmed primarily from the volunteers themselves. Volunteerism offers a whole new life world to the volunteers in which they can play, experiment, meet people and learn valuable skills and competencies relevant for their personal as well as professional development. This life world not only attracts volunteers, it also charges the volunteers with passions and motivation which makes the job of leading and motivating volunteers more meaningful. The findings from our interviews challenged this article's instrumental management perspective in which the value of volunteers is in focus. This can be seen from the interview with Ajša Brusic, the volunteer leader from ECoC Rijeka:

"Using" volunteers is not exactly the appropriate term, I prefer "including" volunteers. Volunteers are persons who decided to put their free time at your disposal. They are generous and open people who want to make this world (in our case, the city of Rijeka) a better place for all of us.

This understanding of volunteers should make leaders reconsider how they conceptualise their personal leadership of volunteers. The fact that volunteers' value and approach to their contribution can be characterised as giving, honest and transparent offers new perspectives and opens a door to a new way of reimagining and reconceptualising leadership of volunteers. If leaders neglect this opportunity and instead "copy-paste" their usual leadership approach, they miss out on understanding the unique, potential value that volunteers bring to the table. This value is a potential asset as volunteer leaders have to understand the uniqueness of leading, guiding and facilitating volunteers and at the same time be able to adjust leadership styles and communication to this ethical, authentic and powerful free-spirited group of volunteers.

The management

Finally, the specific word "relationship" was not used directly by all the volunteer leaders, yet the relationships that are created between the volunteers are strongly underlined throughout the interviews. The volunteer leaders highlight that people with similar interests, values and passions meet through volunteerism, and those similarities constitute a strong foundation for long-lasting relationships among the volunteers. These relationships are beneficial in the long term for the organisation — if volunteers trust the organisation and their peers, chances are that they perform better, are more involved and are thus able to recruit new volunteers through their networks. Additionally, this also has a significant impact on the retention of volunteers.

Overall, the volunteer leaders emphasised elements of ambassadorship, community and relationship building when talking about the positive perception of their volunteers.

Challenges

The volunteer leaders all agreed that working with volunteers is not exempt from challenges. Some challenges were predominantly cultural, whereas others were associated with a specific problem in the city hosting the ECoC event. Below, we look at the common obstacles faced by the volunteer leaders collectively. A major underlying obstacle is the financial aspect, which almost all the leaders emphasised to a varying degree, together with obstacles in building trust and handling expectations.

Most ECoCs count on volunteers to create events in the city for the long term — not just in the year of being the ECoC. This is seen as part of the subsequent "legacy" that is created from the events. Event legacy refers to the longevity of the event. All the volunteer leaders expressed hopes that their ECoC event was not a standalone event, but rather something that would be viable for several years to come.

However, even though the work of volunteers is not paid per se, the organisations face considerable financial challenges because there is an inherent need to invest in their volunteers indirectly. All the volunteer leaders agreed that for the events to be successfully carried out, there is a need for motivated, involved and determined volunteer teams. Here, finances play a pivotal role. Without a budget for uniforms, recognition and development, it can become impossible for volunteer leaders to create an organisation where volunteers find structure, uniformity and feel appreciated. Elena Toniato, the volunteer leader from ECoC in Galway, elaborates:

From the budget you have to have the organisation to really embrace the idea of volunteers and support them and fight the little battles. I suppose to have a budget that can cover enough for uniforms, for recognition, for feeding the volunteers can be an obstacle sometimes, depending on the scale and on the motivation and the budget of the organisation.

Ulla Lund, the volunteer leader from ECoC in Aarhus, agrees:

We always need to look at our finances. If you have the idea that volunteering is for free, then you are wrong. You need to be very organised, to communicate, and operate on schedule. If you have a task the needs four volunteers, don't ask 20 because you are wasting their time. So, if you don't have the money to put into the organisation, you will lose your volunteers. They don't want to waste their time, have too little information, too little to do, too much to do.

When discussing trust as an obstacle, the leaders emphasised that it goes both ways, as there is an inherent need for the volunteers and volunteer leaders to be able to trust each other. Unlike paid work, the "contract" between the volunteer and leader is based on trust, and it is hard to keep each other accountable in many other ways. The absence of trust might thus lead to a sense of breach of contract, resulting in demotivation from both parties.

Handling expectations seems to be both a challenge and a strategy that the volunteer leaders try to handle by making sure that they clearly communicate their expectations to the volunteers and that they understand the expectations of the

volunteers. When expectations are not met, the volunteers lose motivation, and as a side effect, they lose their trust in the organisation. To avoid this from happening, leaders must make sure that the content of the job tasks fits with the motivation and values of the volunteers. This can be done in many ways, and one key theme that several respondents talk about is the word *meaning*. By imparting the volunteers with the sense that their work has meaning, and by handling the expectations of the volunteers, the leaders used this as a motivational device.

Working with volunteers is thus by no means exempt from challenges. The positive aspects, however, seem to have a more powerful effect than the obstacles. Overall, the volunteer leaders present the financial aspect as the biggest challenge that they face, although this has nothing to do with the volunteers' involvement, performance or motivation directly. Having enough resources to keep the volunteers engaged and motivated can help in resolving other obstacles, which is why it may have a substantial impact on the success of the organisation.

Perceived value

In this sub-section, we will look into the answers given by the volunteer leaders regarding the specific value volunteers bring to the organisation they work for, and to the city where they volunteer. What was interesting to notice during the analysis of the interviews was the fact that while all the volunteer leaders agreed that volunteers bring value to the organisation they work for and, indeed, to the city they are volunteering in, it is difficult to find consensus among the volunteer leaders on how to define this value. This will be further elaborated below.

Multifaceted value to the organisation

When asked about value in the organisational setting, several volunteer leaders once again mentioned that they view the volunteers as the "ambassadors" of the organisation. However, none of them focused on the exact jobs that the volunteers do. The value was more indirectly inferred in terms of 1) new input, by bringing together volunteers with different skills, 2) new audiences, by promoting the events and attracting different attendees, and 3) networking, by "recruiting" new volunteers with similar values and drive as themselves for the organisation. As Ajša Brusic, the volunteer leader from ECoC Rijeka, says:

Those people volunteering is your voice among other people in your city, among their friends, among their families. They spread positive energy and good news, good information about you if you are connected with them in a good way. They are, as I said, ambassadors of your project.

Value to the city

The ECoC leaders acknowledged the value that volunteers bring not just to their organizations, but also to the ECoC city. Being the energetic and visible actors in the events and bringing new audiences to the events that the organisation is planning, volunteers are once again seen as ambassadors. They are the ones that interact with visitors from around the country and from abroad, and the way they present themselves shapes how tourists perceive the ECoC city. One can argue that due to the increasing influence of social media and word-of-mouth, the value of engaging volunteers as ambassadors increases because the volunteers act as opinion leaders in their social networks online and offline. In this way, volunteers shape and influence

tourists' perceptions and guest satisfaction via their dialogues and services.

Another interesting aspect that the volunteer leaders mentioned was the help that the community in the city received from their volunteers during the 2020 pandemic. Volunteers offered their support by going to buy groceries for the elderly because there were restrictions and fear of the virus. Volunteers thereby proved to be valuable in a time of crisis and thereby vastly extending the original purpose of their effort.

As we mentioned in the beginning of this sub-section, all the volunteer leaders agree that the volunteers contribute value. This value is seen in the way volunteers present themselves, the city and the organisation. Acting as ambassadors, they are the ones that can change perceptions for guests, and through their work, they can create memorable experiences for those who visit their community and their city.

Motivational strategy

The focus of this sub-section will be the motivational strategy applied by the volunteer leaders as well as the elements of motivation and demotivation that affect the volunteers. Overall, the findings from our interviews show that the volunteer leaders had different approaches in their motivational strategies. However, they all emphasised the recruitment process as a crucial part of their strategy. There is also clear evidence that future ECoC organisations learn from strategies that worked for previous ECoC organisations and adopt them.

Motivation

According to the volunteer leaders, the overall principle of volunteering seems to be reciprocity — whether it is getting free things, recognition or something else, there is a need for a mutual understanding of reciprocity. Because motivation of volunteers plays a crucial role in the success of the events, the volunteer leaders try to understand what motivates and demotivates their volunteers.

Even though the volunteer leaders have different motivational approaches, they agreed on several issues that can be used in a motivational strategy. Among these, the need for creating an identity among the volunteers was paramount as it kept their volunteers motivated, loyal and proud of being part of that organisation. Ulla Lund from the rethinkers in Aarhus stressed her experience at the Smukfest (a festival in Denmark), where the volunteer leaders were able to create an identity for their volunteers as a model for working with the identity issue of the volunteers from ECoC:

...we have been working a lot on creating an identity for the volunteers at ECoC. I often wondered what was going on with volunteers at Smukfest because they are on waiting lists there to be a volunteer, and I thought it couldn't only have something to do with the ticket. And then I came to the conclusion that we have actually done a lot to create this identity. They are very proud of being a volunteer, the whole communication to them was full of energy.

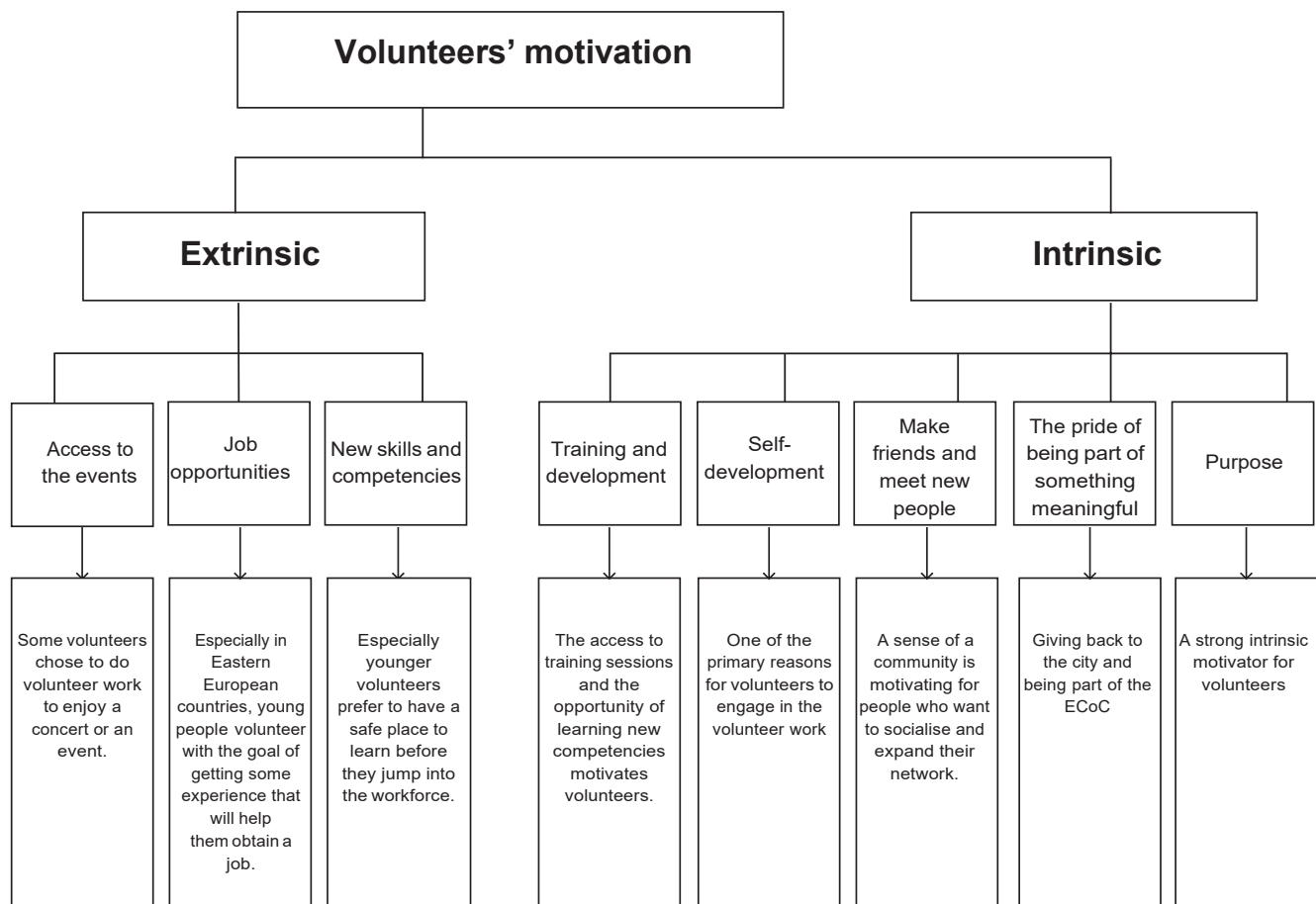


FIGURE 1: Conceptual model of volunteer motivation

A reward system was also used as an integral part of their strategy on the ECoC. Since there is no monetary payment, other incentives are offered. Some of these are tangible: A ticket to a show, a T-shirt with a logo — something that shows that a person is part of the volunteering community. Others are intangible: new skills and competencies, a community and a sense of belonging.

There is a common understanding among the volunteer leaders that the motivation of the volunteers is both intrinsic and extrinsic. While some become volunteers because they want to attend a certain event, others volunteer because they desire to be part of a community. Based on the interviews, we identified the most common reasons and motives that volunteers have when volunteering in the ECoC.

Overview

Demotivation

There are, however, also several aspects that demotivate volunteers. Volunteer leaders identified them as a mismatch of expectations, experiencing a lack of meaning in the work they do, a feeling of being misused as free labour and wasting their time.

Aligning expectations seems to be essential when working with volunteers. When expectations are aligned, volunteers understand why they need to do a certain job, and their tasks

become meaningful to a much larger degree. On the other hand, a mismatch of expectations can lead to frustration and a lack of meaning among the volunteers at the ECoC. The latter was accentuated as having a substantial effect on the levels of motivation.

Another substantial factor of demotivation identified by the volunteer leaders was the fact that volunteers can be misused as nothing more than free labour by the organisations. This could lead to frustration and disappointment, ultimately affecting the reputation of the organisation for which they have volunteered.

As volunteers are not employees in a traditional sense, they choose to invest their time and energy in certain activities, expecting different outcomes in return. If there is a sense of “wasting their time” with meaningless tasks, this will also be experienced as a substantial demotivational factor.

Conclusion

We have summarised our findings in the “onion” circle (Figure 2). In many ways this is reminiscent of the Culture Onion proposed by Edgar Schein, as the further one delves into the layers of the “onion”, the more complex the leadership task becomes. Below the circle we have added an explanation for the different layers.

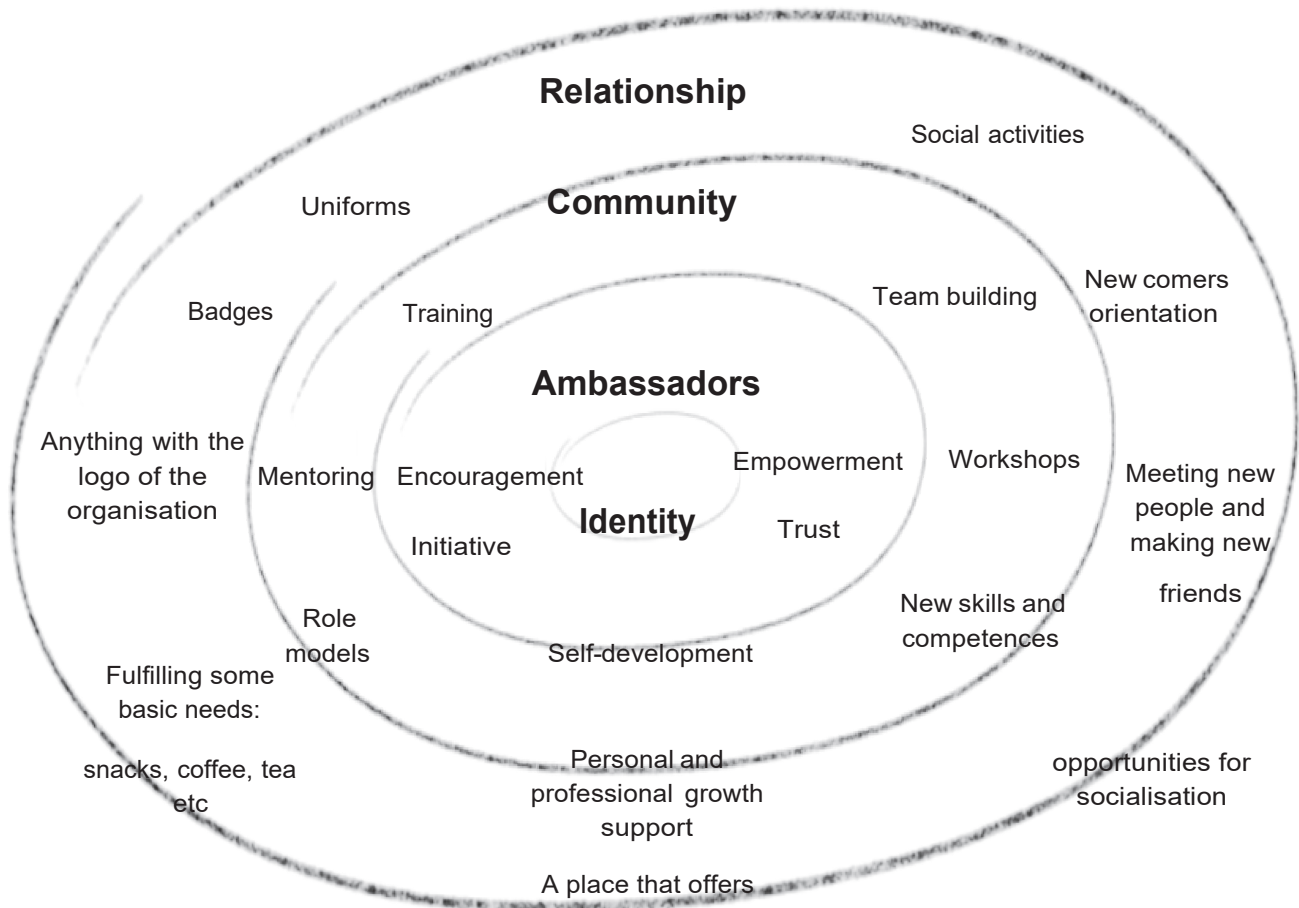


FIGURE 2: Onion model

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