

Motivating Generation Z — the volunteers of the future

Henrik Pahus*  & Tina Knuth

Department of Hospitality, Dania Academy, Randers, Denmark

*Correspondence: hpa@eadania.dk

ABSTRACT: In this article, we present the results of an ongoing research project from 2020 to 2023 on volunteerism and Generation Z. The purpose of the overall project is to examine which elements are motivating or demotivating to volunteers from Generation Z in the hospitality sector. We present the analysis of 12 interviews with leaders of volunteers and the results of a survey with 514 volunteers from Denmark. Our findings show a generation that are much more reliant on their parents than previous generations, especially in the way they make decisions. It is also a generation with endless opportunities, which seems to be a double-edged sword, since this is also the root cause of many of their concerns. Companies in the hospitality sector who are keen to attract volunteers from Generation Z must pay attention to their inherent needs for meaningfulness and purpose. Likewise, it is essential that the companies where Generation Z seek employment are clear about their values and that they abide by them. Suggestions for further research include more comprehensive research into attitudes towards volunteerism — especially considering the cultural context. So far most of the research concerning volunteerism and motivation in Generation Z stems from the USA and Denmark.

KEYWORDS: events, destination management organisation, DMO, tourism, volunteerism

Introduction

Generation Z (individuals born between 1995 and 2007) is a group of people that have a wide variety of nicknames in popular culture: Generation Digital, Generation Diagnosis, Generation Sustainability and so forth. They are, however, also the future workforce of companies in the years to come and it therefore behoves employers to learn about the appropriate leadership styles and motivational behaviours of this generation. The same applies to leaders of volunteers. These are the fundamental topics of this research article.

The overall research project (from which the results presented in this research note are drawn) is a longitudinal study from 2020 to 2023. The purpose of the research project is to investigate what motivates or demotivates young people from Generation Z that volunteer in a hospitality setting — primarily at events and in tourism. The final results from the overall research project (in-depth interviews with Generation Z volunteers) will be the topic for the next article from the research group once all the interviews have been analysed.

The research project is conducted in close collaboration with Visit Aarhus, which is the second largest destination management organisation (DMO) in Denmark. They manage a group of approximately 2 500 volunteers who work in tourism, and they are, to an increasing degree, finding it difficult to recruit and manage volunteers from Generation Z. The results presented in this article are the findings of this mutual research collaboration.

This article presents the findings from interviews with 12 leaders of volunteer groups conducted in 2022, and subsequently a survey of 514 members of Generation Z. Based on the findings from the interviews and the survey results, we make a number of suggestions for motivating and retaining volunteers from Generation Z, as well as suggestions for further research.

Literature review

An extensive literature review was conducted at the beginning of the project to help shape the questions for the initial interviews. In general, it was found that research literature specifically related to volunteerism in events, tourism and Generation Z is scarce. The vast majority of the research literature on Generation Z is primarily concerned with motivation and retention of employees in paid positions, which is not the focus of those involved in volunteering.

One of the pivotal research projects that helped form the initial considerations, and the initial question frame for the qualitative interviews with the leaders of volunteers, was the work done by Cho et al. (2018) on Generation Z event volunteers in Florida. They conducted interviews with 306 event volunteers to gain an understanding of the motivations for Generation Z to volunteer. Their main findings were that four elements seemed to lead to greater motivation among the Generation Z respondents: "value", "career", "learning" and "self-esteem". The topics "value" and "self-esteem" resonated particularly well with previous research done by our research group on volunteerism

in Denmark (Pahus, 2020; Pahus et al., 2021) which helped to shape the overall framing for the overall research project.

Methodology

The research project, which spans from 2020 to 2023, is rooted in the pragmatic world view (Creswell, 2022). The research design is exploratory sequential mixed methods (Creswell, 2022) consisting of the qualitative interviews conducted in February to March of 2022 with leaders of volunteers, and the quantitative survey with members of Generation Z based on the results of the interviews. The quantitative survey was conducted in December 2022 and January 2023.

The qualitative interviews were conducted with 12 leaders of volunteers from some of the major festivals and event venues in Denmark. The purpose of these interviews was to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of volunteer leaders towards Generation Z, and the development of the questions used was based on a preliminary literature review conducted in 2021.

The quantitative survey was conducted among 514 members of Generation Z who all had experience as volunteers (A more elaborate description of the survey results can be found below). It was crucial that we were able to reach broadly into the segment in terms of education, age, profession, etc. to get a wide representation of Generation Z and not just members of the segment with a higher educational background. To ensure this, we cooperated closely with a Danish labour union (HK Østjylland) who have members from various educational and professional backgrounds.

Findings

The interviews with leaders of volunteers

Below are the essential findings of the interviews with the leaders of volunteers from different festivals and events in Denmark. We observe convergence in several responses, and some intriguing trends in the actions and behaviours of Generation Z begin to emerge. We are facing a generation that lives in a world with infinitely more possibilities than previous generations. This also means that it is challenging to engage them, as they are constantly presented with a plethora of options and opportunities. *"It is more challenging to sustain their motivation along the way because so much is happening around them all the time. Difficult to maintain their attention"* (Laura, leader of volunteers in culture).

We see a generation with a focus on values that they expect to be taken into consideration: diversity, gender roles, sexuality, education, the future, and particularly sustainability, both now and in the future. Outwardly, they may appear much more mature for their age compared to previous generations, as their causes are significant to them. They are driven by purpose and personal development, displaying a high level of ambition on their own behalf, which also brings about more concerns. *"They want to feel seen, heard and individually appreciated — a challenge with 6 000 volunteers"* (Louise, leader of volunteers at NorthSide Festival).

We see a generation that is closely connected to their parents, which is why several of the leaders of volunteers describe them as "curling children", the Danish phenomenon of helicopter parenting and the flattering term for overindulged kids. They are rarely humble and are often mentioned by many as experiencing

"FOMO" (a fear of missing out) in connection with social media. Close relationships mean much more to them than the larger community. *"Where Generation Z differs from other generations: Personal development takes precedence over community"* (Jonas, leader of volunteers at Aarhus Volume).

This also reflects new considerations regarding the recruitment of Generation Z as new volunteers, as they seek different things as volunteers compared to previous generations. Most of them do not come for the free ticket — it is paid for by their parents anyway — so it is important that they can see meaning in the tasks to be accomplished. They will not engage in something where they feel that they cannot deliver 100%.

What is Generation Z's attitude towards volunteering? About 22% have never been volunteers. What prevents them from volunteering? The time they need to spend on it. Generation Z is a busy group of people with many different activities they can engage in, and as we saw in our previous interviews, there is competition to capture their attention.

The survey

When it comes to education and work, it is clearly the parents who have the greatest influence. This aligns with information from earlier interviews. Friends come in a clear second place. In terms of leisure activities, friends have the greatest influence, consistent with previous interviews — highlighting the importance to focus on recruiting in pairs. The sense of belonging to a larger community no longer holds the same attraction as previously — it is close relationships that matter. When it comes to major life choices, friends and parents are key.

War and climate are their primary concerns, followed by job opportunities and education. Sustainability is a relevant topic for this generation. It is important to them that the company they are employed in considers sustainability. They are willing to pay extra for products if sustainability is considered, but only when it comes to food and clothing. Regarding culture, travel and trade unions, it is not relevant. Diversity is very relevant for Generation Z, and 89% agree or strongly agree that equal pay, equality and sexuality are relevant topics that future employers should consider. This is further supported by the information we have gathered from interviews with volunteer leaders.

Basic statistics from the survey

In total, we had 514 respondents, and the survey ran from December 2022 to January 2023. To reach a suitable number of respondents, we distributed the survey through the local membership base of a Danish labour union (HK Østjylland). They are strongly represented in the demographics of this project with members of different educational and professional backgrounds. Additionally, they work extensively with volunteers, making them a perfect match. The questionnaire was distributed to 1 958 respondents in the target demographic in the region of Eastern Jutland. There was a response rate of 25%, which is considered to be a satisfying number of respondents.

Bias

The majority of respondents were in the age group between 21 and 27 years old (86%). This is most likely caused by the distribution channel. A labour union is not likely to have members below the age of 20 years old, and thus we have a bias in terms of not having included respondents of between 14 and 20 years old. Seeing that our research project is conducted in

collaboration with the DMO Visit Aarhus, and that their age limit for volunteers is 18, we do not consider this to be a major flaw. It does, however, preclude us from drawing conclusions related to the whole group of people in Generation Z.

Equally, we had a bias in terms of the distribution of gender. The predominant number of respondents were female (69%), while male respondents made up only 31%. No respondents chose the "other" category that was listed as the third option. The reason for this uneven distribution is not clear.

Recommendations

Concluding from the findings from the interviews and the survey, we can make the following recommendations for working with Generation Z:

- Generation Z are much more reliant on their parents than previous generations. This is significant in several aspects for companies working with volunteers from this generation: First and foremost, companies need to consider the increased influence from parents on the decision to become a volunteer;
- They live in a world with endless options, and which provides them with unlimited possibilities. This is, however, also the root cause of several of their concerns and thus a double-edged sword;
- Volunteering has to be meaningful, otherwise it has little value. The creation of meaningfulness and purpose is thus a mandatory part of the leadership role; and
- It is important that there is an alignment between the *values* of the organisations and the individual volunteer.

Further research

As stated in the literature review, there is an overall lack of research on this topic. This remains true of the state of available literature when we initiated the project, and this is still very much an issue at the time of writing this article. By November 2023, the number of search results on volunteerism and Generation Z is still remarkably low and virtually no new research has been conducted in the three-year period since starting this project. Seeing that volunteerism is a valuable asset for the community and for hospitality companies, we urge others to investigate the topics listed here.

Conclusion

Overall, there is a lack of knowledge in the area of Generation Z and volunteering in a hospitality setting. Hopefully, this article can spur other researchers to look more closely into this field, as volunteerism holds great value for companies in the hospitality sector. Based on the qualitative interviews with 12 leaders of volunteers from festivals in Denmark which was followed by a survey among members of Generation Z, we have found several issues that are of importance when it comes to motivating Generation Z volunteers: They are more reliant on the opinions of their parents; they have more possibilities, but also more concerns as a consequence thereof; volunteering for them needs to be purposeful; and companies have to be aware of their own values as this is of great importance to volunteers from Generation Z. More research is needed in this area.

ORCID iD

Henrik Pahuš – <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4083-7692>

References

- Cho, M., Bonn, M., & Han, S. J. (2018). Generation Z's sustainable volunteering: Motivations, Attitudes and Job Performance. *Sustainability* 10(5), 1400. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su10051400>
- Creswell, J. W. (2022). *Research Design* (6th edn). Sage Publications.
- Pahuš, H. S. (2020). The art of retaining volunteers. *Research in Hospitality Management*, 10(2), 117–121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/22243534.2020.1869459>
- Pahuš, H. S., Fischer, S. L., & Bradescu, B. (2021). The value of volunteers in tourism and events: A leadership perspective. *Research in Hospitality Management*, 11(3), 249–254, <https://doi.org/10.1080/22243534.2021.2006918>