




Volunteering dynamics in leisure, tourism and hospitality: developing sustainable practices for well-being and social impact

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the multifaceted landscape of volunteering in leisure, tourism and hospitality (LTH) organisations, acknowledging its fundamental role in civil society, and serves as the inception point for an in-depth research project. Volunteerism is explored in diverse forms, ranging from serious leisure engagements to episodic commitments, focusing on its transformative nature and impact on human capital. The study emphasises the integral role of volunteering as a strategic element in addressing human capital challenges and maintaining equilibrium between paid and unpaid staff. Ethical considerations, the significance of emotional intelligence and the potential of volunteering as a stepping stone to employment are emphasised. Differences in volunteering trends across LTH sectors are examined, and the need for a healthy environment balancing paid and unpaid staff is accentuated. The article introduces an integrated approach to studying volunteerism, employing qualitative narrative inquiry to understand the nuanced interactions among volunteers, organisations and their environments. The study aims to provide practical advice for LTH organisations, fostering a stable labour market where voluntary work is recognised as vital.

KEYWORDS: emotional intelligence, human capital, leisure, meaningful volunteering, societal impact, volunteerism

Introduction

Volunteering manifests in diverse forms, playing a vital role in the functioning and survival of various destinations, organisations and institutions. Cultural institutions like museums, charitable organisations, local football clubs with volunteer coaches and nature parks requiring maintenance or guides exemplify entities reliant on volunteers for their operations. In such contexts, volunteering can be a form of serious leisure. In contrast, some organisations engage volunteers sporadically, such as schools seeking parental assistance for events, or establishing parents' councils to support school management. For these individuals, volunteering represents an episodic yet recurring commitment.

These instances underscore the integral role of volunteerism as a foundational element of civil society, evident at both local levels in leisure, tourism and hospitality (LTH) organisations and on a broader regional scale. Achieving a sustainable and robust "ecosystem" is crucial at these levels, addressing human capital challenges and maintaining a delicate balance between paid and unpaid staff. Volunteerism thus emerges not merely as a stop-gap measure for organisations facing a lack of funds or labour shortages, but as an inherent aspect of the human capital paradigm, offering solutions to these challenges.

This article acknowledges the transformative nature of volunteerism, wherein cultural institutions have transformed previously paid positions into volunteer roles. The significance of volunteering is underscored by the skills that volunteers

cultivate and the competencies acquired, rendering valuable assets in subsequent employment pursuits. Building on this, Rojek (2010) emphasises the role of emotional intelligence in leisure. Through volunteering and social interactions, individuals enhance people skills, emotional intelligence and emotional competence, positioning them as desirable members of social settings, or appealing partners exhibiting positive emotions and personal identification.

Viewing volunteering as a stepping-stone to employment, a networking opportunity and a platform for acquiring and transferring competencies underscores the expansive scope of volunteering activities. This ranges from supporting young, inexperienced professionals and the unemployed to leveraging the experience and skills of seasoned volunteers, thereby contributing to the enhancement of human capital in LTH organisations integral to a specific region.

What is volunteering?

According to Stebbins (2015), volunteering can be characterised as a type of leisure and a component of both serious and project-based leisure. Volunteering as a serious leisure activity implies that the participant derives substantial, interesting and fulfilling experiences from it. Furthermore, "they launch themselves on a (leisure) career" (Stebbins, 2015, p. 5), in which acquiring and expressing special skills and knowledge is important. Stebbins (2015, p. 9) defines volunteering as "uncoerced help offered

either formally or informally with no or, at most, token pay and done for the benefit of other people (beyond the volunteer's family) and the volunteer". Crucial is the felt absence of moral coercion to volunteer and the absence of payment for a livelihood. Familiar examples are volunteering in sports (catering duties, coaching), museum volunteering (greeting/guiding) and volunteer tourism to assist in community development (see Bargeman et al., 2016).

Duursma et al. (2023) introduce a convincing perspective on the concept of volunteering, emphasising the crucial role of a hospitable mindset. The research, breaking new ground in academic exploration, conducts a cross-disciplinary literature review across hospitality, volunteering and related fields. Findings suggest that volunteers, while often possessing an inherent understanding of hospitality, benefit from practical support measures provided by organisations. Duursma et al. (2023) underscore the reciprocity of hospitality, stating that volunteers, like visitors to these places, thrive when appreciated and supported. The study advocates for tailored training, processes and facilities, highlighting the need to view volunteers not as cheap labour, but as valued contributors. Integrating sociological, psychological and economic lenses, this innovative approach contributes to the theoretical understanding of volunteering dynamics. In essence, the concept asserts that to be hospitable volunteers require a hospitable environment and recognition of their contribution.

In line with Stebbins (2015), volunteering can be found in many parts of the LTH sector. Volunteering can also be seen as project-based leisure if the activity has a one-off or occasional, though infrequent, and reasonably complicated, character (Stebbins, 2015). Volunteering as a form of serious leisure is distinct from project-based leisure volunteering, as it provides a deeper sense of career fulfilment. However, both types may still require specific skills, knowledge and effort. Volunteering as project-based leisure can be attractive because it does not demand long-term commitment (Nichols et al., 2013), which reflects the changing distribution of available time and willingness to volunteer. Examples here might include volunteering at a festival or special exhibition in a museum, volunteering at a sporting competition, or volunteering during a children's holiday week.

Volunteering in LTH organisations

In the LTH sector, which is heavily reliant on subsidies, there is a growing demand for volunteers, extending beyond traditional roles like "meeting and greeting" to encompass sharing acquired competencies and knowledge gained throughout professional careers, such as training younger individuals (American Alliance of Museums, 2019). Young volunteers benefit from networking opportunities and professional experiences (Păceșilă, 2020).

This situation prompts important questions about the involvement of retired individuals at various levels in LTH organisations, utilising their skills while contributing to society. Additionally, it raises considerations about facilitating volunteering for those currently employed, encouraging them to make a positive societal impact. Furthermore, there is a focus on motivating young individuals not yet in employment to volunteer, fostering the discovery and development of their talents.

Fundamental questions arise regarding establishing a healthy ecosystem in LTH organisations where volunteers coexist with

paid staff. This challenge resonates at local, regional and even international levels, particularly in the LTH sectors that rely on a combination of paid and unpaid staff for economic sustainability and overall well-being. This complexity is further exemplified when considering the multifaceted realm of Dutch volunteer engagement in volunteer programmes in low- and middle-income countries, as discussed by Westerlaken (2023) and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2020). The positive outcomes of volunteer engagement, such as assistance, economic contributions and personal growth, critically examining the potential ethical challenges inherent in these settings is crucial, and there is a need for continued scrutiny, ethical considerations and collaboration to ensure that volunteerism remains a force for positive change (Westerlaken, 2023).

Volunteering must be mutually beneficial, extending beyond the volunteers to encompass the employees they collaborate with and the organisations they serve. Striking a balance in terms of numbers, profiles, responsibilities and objectives between paid and unpaid staff in an organisation is crucial. This necessitates clarifying the relationship between these two categories of employees, specifying conditions for different roles, and interpreting the underlying business model by volunteers and those that offer volunteering positions.

Moreover, LTH organisations play a pivotal role in sustaining volunteering efforts. Recent incidents, like the crisis at the International Film Festival in Rotterdam (Sabzian, 2022), underscore the significance of recognising the intrinsic value of volunteers and ensuring their motivation as integral team members. To achieve sustainability, these organisations must evolve into "great places to work", fostering an environment where people are eager to volunteer. This entails establishing supportive structures and treating volunteers as fully fledged employees, transforming the organisations into appealing workplaces for volunteers and paid staff.

Differences between the LTH sectors

Numerous trends have been identified in the extensive body of (mainly anglophone) literature pertaining to volunteerism in the LTH sectors.

- In the cultural and heritage sector, mainly mature individuals volunteer, often retirees motivated by their passion (Duursma et al., 2023). This is considered a serious leisure activity. The challenge in this sector is attracting younger volunteers.
- In the social sector, volunteering is mainly known for its engagement in low- and middle-income countries (Westerlaken, 2021; 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020); volunteering also occurs in local and regional settings. The specific challenges and trends in the broad social sector necessitate additional exploration and analysis.
- In the events sector, primarily younger individuals volunteer, often driven by passion or social connections. This form of volunteering is mainly episodic and one-off (Strijbosch, 2018; Hersberger et al., 2022). The challenge is to make it more sustainable and durable.
- In the tourism sector, volunteering seems less prominent, although examples exist (e.g. maintaining bike routes or train stations [Alexander & Hamilton, 2015]). Challenges in this sector include deepening opportunities for volunteering in domestic tourism, such as assisting in community development (Lockstone et al., 2010).

In exploring the multifaceted landscape of volunteering in the LTH sectors, the above summary provides a comprehensive insight into the definitions, types and challenges associated with volunteerism. This understanding is the basis for an exploration into specific challenges and considerations faced by LTH organisations. By exploring these intricacies, we can gain a nuanced understanding of the main implications for LTH organisations in creating a conducive environment for volunteers.

Implications of the issue of volunteerism

There are three main implications that can be derived from the identified trends:

- (1) Explaining why organisations in different LTH sectors and regions have, had, or need volunteers, how they interact with these volunteers, and the consequences (benefits and challenges) of volunteerism for these organisations;
- (2) Determining the right balance between paid and unpaid staff in the same organisation, considering the LTH sector and region, to create a healthy and sustainable ecosystem; and
- (3) Understanding volunteers' perspectives, motives and expectations, their interaction with the organisation (management, paid staff) and the benefits and challenges for people to volunteer.

We initiated a collaborative study between BUAs (Breda University of Applied Sciences) and NHL Stenden University, supported by CELTH (<https://www.celth.nl/en/research>) funding, in Q1 of 2024. The study aims to investigate the management of volunteering and the recruitment and retention of volunteers in the Dutch ecosystem. This context, marked by an increasing reliance on volunteers in LTH organisations in the Netherlands, remains relatively unexplored in the existing literature. We aim to understand how volunteering in LTH sectors in Dutch regions can be shaped sustainably for volunteers and organisations.

Integrated approach

Utilising an integrated approach, as depicted in Figure 1, we focus on the interactions between volunteers, paid staff and the organisation during volunteering in specific LTH contexts. Based on the leisure practice approach (Van der Poel, 2004; Bargeman & Richards, 2020), our approach goes beyond existing literature by considering both actor-side and context-side elements, examining volunteers' and organisations' characteristics and the external conditions influencing volunteering.

This study will contribute to creating healthier and more sustainable solutions in LTH organisations, sectors and regions. This aligns with our objective to foster a more stable labour

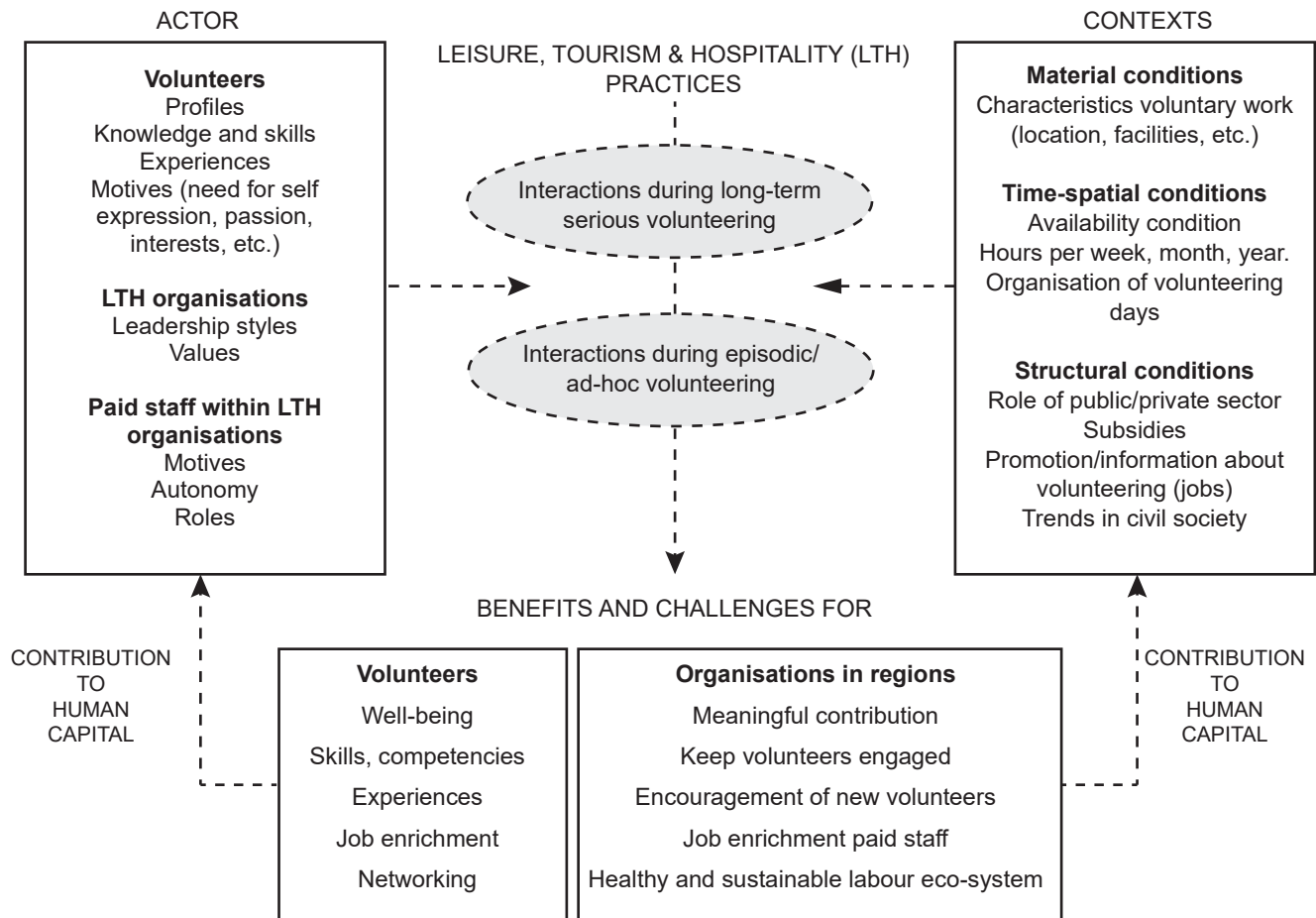


FIGURE 1: Volunteering from a leisure practice approach (based on Bargeman & Richards, 2020)

market in hospitality, leisure and tourism, where voluntary work is recognised as a crucial component of a healthy labour ecosystem.

Qualitative narrative inquiry

In contrast to the prevalent quantitative methodologies employed in the literature, particularly the use of surveys for understanding volunteerism and assessing motives, this study adopts a qualitative approach centred on narrative inquiry. Our research methodology involves active engagement with volunteers and the collection and analysis of individual narratives, offering a distinctive lens for comprehending the intricacies of volunteerism. Aligned with our integrated approach, we concurrently explore how LTH organisations perceive the role, value and future of volunteerism. This multifaceted exploration is designed to provide a nuanced understanding of the dynamic interactions among volunteers, organisations and their contextual environments.

Qualitative data from volunteers will be gathered through narrative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000), which is a methodological framework employing generative questions to elicit new narratives on the subject. In this approach, emphasis is placed on individuals' resources, abilities and strengths to stimulate the generation of innovative ideas. Volunteers will be invited to articulate their personal stories, with a specific focus on the physical context of their volunteering, their roles in that context (e.g. volunteer, thematic expert, gender roles) and the historical aspects of the place or organisation and its connection to the volunteer's personal history. This approach moves beyond mere motivations for volunteering, enabling us to understand and explore the personal meaning individuals attribute to their actions and their connection to the place or organisation in which they are engaged. This qualitative exploration is closely aligned with the integrated approach outlined earlier, offering insights into how individuals construct their unique understanding of being a volunteer. The narrative inquiry will be complemented by direct observations of volunteers at work, interviews with other (paid) staff members and the analysis of relevant documents.

Anticipated outcomes

This study aims to contribute to the LTH sector in three fundamental ways: by providing a comprehensive understanding of meaningful volunteering, offering a precise assessment of the value volunteers bring to LTH organisations, and delivering a more explicit estimation of the broader societal impact of such activities in the Dutch context. The tangible output of this research will be translated into practical advice tailored for LTH organisations, outlining interventions that ensure the aforementioned contributions.

This study introduces innovation by crafting new narratives on volunteerism and designing an engaging pathway for volunteers to become integral parts of organisations. Simultaneously, the research addresses the challenges organisations face in recruiting staff for volunteer or paid positions and outlines sustainable frameworks for working with volunteers.

Insights gained from volunteers across different sectors will enhance the quality of their work, or their alignment with the organisations they are volunteering for, by uncovering factors

influencing satisfaction, turnover, motivation and passion. Managers can learn from these insights to effectively train and retain volunteers, integrating them into specific events and the broader community. Recognising that robust volunteering programmes are crucial for contemporary social cohesion, our approach is how storytelling can reinforce these processes. Additionally, the study will explore the implications for future research on the labour market, considering the challenges organisations face in attracting, recruiting and retaining volunteers in the context of an aging population.

Conclusion: inaugurating an academic exploration

This discourse forms the start of an academic inquiry into the intricate dynamics of volunteering in leisure, tourism and hospitality (LTH) organisations. Acting as a precursor to research by Breda University of Applied Sciences (BUAs) and NHL Stenden University, supported by the Centre of Expertise Leisure, Tourism & Hospitality (CELTH), this article outlines the academic intent to scrutinise and comprehend the nuanced facets of volunteering in LTH contexts in the Netherlands. These include:

- Navigating critical dimensions. Initial dialogues have outlined crucial dimensions for examination, encompassing diverse volunteering forms, the balance between paid and unpaid personnel, ethical considerations and the role of emotional intelligence. The formulation of sector-specific insights and an integrated approach establishes the foundation for a comprehensive research framework. The proposed study seeks to unravel the intricate interactions among volunteers, paid staff and organisations in the LTH sector.
- Anticipated academic contributions. Significant contributions to the scholarly discourse on LTH volunteering dynamics, pending the completion of empirical investigation, is anticipated. The study aims to translate its findings into academic insights by visualising a comprehensive understanding of meaningful volunteering, an assessment of the value volunteers contribute and an estimation of societal impact. This research endeavours to offer innovative perspectives on volunteerism, aligning with theoretical underpinnings in the field.
- Qualitative narrative inquiry as methodological rigour. Embracing a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, the research anticipates active engagement with volunteers by collecting and analysing individual narratives. This qualitative methodology promises a unique lens for comprehending the complexities of volunteerism, surpassing conventional motivations to explore the nuanced meanings individuals attribute to their actions in specific LTH contexts.

In conclusion, this article serves as an introduction to a fascinating research journey. As the academic inquiry progresses, the study anticipates producing scholarly contributions delineating the contours of volunteering dynamics in LTH organisations. The research will offer theoretical and empirical outcomes in an academically rigorous manner, thereby advancing the scholarly understanding of volunteering in the realms of leisure, tourism and hospitality.

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