

A gateway to work? The role of Volunteer Centres in supporting the link between volunteering and employability

Nick Ockenden and Matthew Hill
The Institute for Volunteering Research

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Introduction

The impact of the current recession on volunteering remains unclear. Much evidence suggests that it is creating a major challenge for the sector, with many volunteer-involving organisations having experienced a reduction in income or an increase in running costs (NCVO, 2008; Charity Commission, 2008). The recession may also present a significant opportunity. Given that lack of time is consistently provided as the primary reason for not volunteering (Low et al, 2007), higher rates of unemployment may mean that people find new spaces to get involved. Furthermore, increased numbers of job seekers may mean that people will be looking for new ways to get back into the labour market, of which volunteering may be one approach.

This potential link has not escaped the attention of government. The Department for Work and Pensions has, for example, recently launched an £8 million volunteer brokerage scheme that aims to get 42,000 volunteers into employment over two years. Such an approach is not necessarily new in itself. Volunteering has for a long time been discussed in the same breath as unemployment by policy makers; the 1980s, for example, saw several similar programmes around volunteering and employability set up. The evidence on which to base such policy and practice is, however, limited and far from straightforward.

The research on which this paper is based set out to add to this limited research base and help develop understanding around the link between volunteering and employability. It did this specifically in relation to the work being done in this area by Volunteer Centres throughout England. The Institute for Volunteering Research carried out an in-depth qualitative study of eight good practice examples of Volunteer Centres and a quantitative telephone survey of 220 Centres. The research was funded by Capacity Builders' National Support Services programme.

The link between volunteering and employability

Research has so far failed to provide convincing evidence that volunteering leads directly to employment. National surveys have, for instance, found that people who are unemployed volunteer less than those in employment (Low et al, 2007), while it has also been observed that people volunteering can take longer to find employment than non volunteers (Hirst, 2001). This may not,

however, indicate the absence of a link. Rather, it may simply point towards the complexity of the relationship; that unemployed people can face numerous barriers to taking part in volunteering (Davis Smith et al, 2004) or that their frequently complex support needs may mean that volunteering is not suited to a 'quick-fix' solution.

Much evidence, however, does seem to suggest that volunteering can help individuals secure paid jobs as a direct route to employment. Forty-one per cent of respondents to one study reported that their volunteering had helped them get their current job (Hirst, 2001). Similarly, 45 per cent of people on Birmingham Voluntary Service Council's 'Volunteering into Employment' project went on to secure paid employment as a result of their experience (Rochester, 2009).

The value of volunteering is, however, perhaps more easily understood as helping an individual progress along a path *towards* employment. Indeed, volunteering is seen by many as a means to improve their employment prospects, with nearly two-thirds of current volunteers reporting that an important motivator for them was the opportunity to learn new skills (Low et al, 2007). Our research with Volunteer Centres identified a range of hard skills that volunteers gained as a result. IT, language, media and customer relations skills were all discussed by volunteers as something they could take directly into the paid work environment. It was far more common, however, for volunteers to describe the 'soft' skills they gained; improvements in individuals' communication and teamwork skills were frequently discussed. While not specifically a hard or soft skill in itself, the most frequently reported benefit of volunteering was increased confidence and self-esteem, volunteers describing their experience as 'life changing' in some cases.

Many people, however, may simply not be seeking paid employment as they are not in a position to be able to take on, or sustain, a job. For such people, volunteering can offer a meaningful alternative. The social interaction that much volunteering involves, for example, may help counter the isolation that can affect many unemployed people. Similarly, wider research has highlighted the positive impacts of volunteering on mental and physical health (see, for example, Lum and Lightfoot, 2005; Thoits and Hewitt, 2001; Musick and Wilson, 2003; Lewis, 2005; Reynolds, 2000).

Volunteer Centres and the employability agenda

The Volunteer Centre network in England consists of over 300 centres which promote and enable volunteering and community involvement, and provide support at a local level for individual volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations. The research found that large numbers, over one-third, had carried out work, projects or activities around volunteering and employability in the twelve months before the survey. Similarly, over three-quarters described the level of interest from volunteers in using their experience to find employment as 'high' or 'very high'. Subsequently, nearly six in ten Volunteer Centres reported that work around volunteering and employability was a high priority for them.

Most Volunteer Centres were developing their work in this area by recruiting and referring volunteers on to other organisations. In many cases, individuals were referred to the Volunteer Centre by employment agencies, including Jobcentre Plus. Indeed, nearly two-thirds undertaking work around employability had partnerships with their local Jobcentre Plus. The support provided by Volunteer Centres tended to continue beyond placing the volunteer in an opportunity. Their involvement ranged from occasional 'trouble-shooting' by staff to regular contact in the form of drop-in sessions, visits to their placements, or volunteer reviews and supervisions. In some cases Volunteer Centres also provided financial assistance with travel, child care, equipment or tools and specialist help with issues such as mental health or debt advice. Given that more than eight out of ten Volunteer Centres focused their work on people who were long-term unemployed, such comprehensive and personally tailored support was seen to be particularly important. Most schemes also offered assistance to organisations in setting up the volunteer placement and ensuring the right kinds of support were in place. This could include financial support for equipment and materials, or training around involving and supporting volunteers. Wider research into volunteering and employability has also stressed the value of comprehensive support (Gay and Hatch, 1983).

In the past year, the majority of Volunteer Centres had involved at least 50 volunteers in their employability projects. Most Volunteer Centres tended to be positive about the outcomes of their work. Fifty-five per cent felt that it had been successful in helping volunteers find paid employment, and only two per cent felt that it had been unsuccessful. Furthermore, just over half of Volunteer Centres monitored the number of volunteers going on to paid work. Half of these reported that up to 25 per cent of volunteers went on to paid employment as a direct result, while a further quarter said that the proportion was between 25 and 50 per cent.

Practical issues and challenges

While Volunteer Centres often considered Jobcentre Plus to be a core partners in their work around employability, evidence suggests that it could frequently be a challenging relationship. Some case studies had experienced negative attitudes about volunteering, which could be based on a lack of understanding of the contribution that it makes to society in general and to unemployed people in particular. Opinion could range from dismissing volunteering as a 'waste of time' to seeing it as a last resort when all other options had failed. It is possible that this could also threaten the ethos of volunteering itself. In some instances, Volunteer Centres had been provided with referrals from Jobcentre Plus who had been instructed to volunteer, potentially jeopardising the element of choice within volunteering.

Many Volunteer Centres had, however, developed successful and productive relationships in which they had observed an attitude change towards the part played by volunteering. Effective and sustained engagement with Jobcentre Plus staff, especially managers, front-line staff, and key advisors, was seen to be central. As part of this, it was considered important to ensure that the message that volunteering could make an important and positive contribution

to someone's employability was passed on; as one member of staff from a Volunteer Centre said:

'Don't sell yourself short. Don't ever think that volunteering is demeaning or second-best.'

The capacity of Volunteer Centres remained a major issue, and it seems that demand for their services may be increasing. The telephone survey found that 87 per cent had experienced an increase in the number of enquiries about volunteering in the six months prior to the research. Challenges did not simply concern the number of opportunities, and would also be rooted in the *type* of opportunity that was available to volunteers. One case study could not find openings for men who were over 40, others experienced a geographical mismatch, with opportunities concentrated in one part of their area where there were few potential volunteers, and some found that certain fields of activity would be particularly over-subscribed.

In addition to challenges surrounding securing and sustaining funding, our research suggests that relationships with funders could become fraught as a result of very different views of volunteering and what it could contribute to employability. Opinion was that funders and other agencies in the employment field could take an instrumental approach, in which volunteering is seen to be a means of meeting concrete goals, such as reducing the number of people who are out of work, or increasing the numbers of those achieving specific vocational qualifications. As a result, Volunteer Centres were frequently making significant effort to record these 'hard' outcomes; nothing was seen to be more persuasive to funders – or indeed policy makers – than statistics showing the numbers of people who had been helped into employment by volunteering. Volunteer Centres were, however, acutely aware of the limitations of such an approach and often seemed uneasy focusing on 'hard' outcomes. They acknowledged that it could frequently be difficult, if not impossible, to say that someone had gained employment as a direct result of their volunteering. Volunteer Centres also felt that a sole focus on employability outcomes risked missing the wider social and cultural benefits that a volunteer could experience. Indeed, wider research has found that many unemployed people volunteer for reasons such as self-development, widening their horizons and combating social exclusion (Gay and Hatch, 1983; Hirst, 2001; Burchardt et al, 2002).

A further potential implication of an instrumental view of volunteering and employability is that Volunteer Centres may risk becoming distracted from the delivery of their core functions, such as brokerage and the promotion of volunteering. Meeting funders' requirements may, for example, encourage Volunteer Centres to drift away from their mission by focusing on the delivery of contracted services and fulfilling targets, effectively become a voluntary sector employment agency. This was not, however, directly observed within our research, although concerns were raised.

Implications for policy and practice

Our research suggests that policy makers and practitioners already engaged in, or wishing to engage in, the employability agenda should focus on four key areas in order to promote the effective development of this work:

(a) Protect the organisational mission

Organisations should carefully consider how engagement with the volunteering and employability agenda will contribute to its core functions and is consistent with its values, so as to avoid any occurrence of 'mission drift'.

(b) Protect the ethos of volunteering

The motivations of those involved, both the volunteers themselves and the referring organisations, should be based on a genuine understanding of volunteering and the element of freewill. Volunteering should not be seen as mandatory or confused with work placements. In cases where misunderstanding occurs and is not rectifiable, a working relationship may not be possible. Significant effort should therefore be made by Volunteer Centres and volunteer-involving organisations to ensure that all partners have a comprehensive understanding of the relevance and importance of volunteering to the employability agenda.

(c) Recognise the value of ongoing and comprehensive support

Ongoing and comprehensive support to volunteers can often be fundamental in ensuring that the outcomes are as positive as possible for all parties, especially when volunteers are drawn from more vulnerable groups. It is also important to adopt an individual-centred approach, concentrating on the specific needs and motivations of each volunteer, adapting support as necessary.

(d) Properly value soft outcomes and benefits

While recording 'hard' outcomes remains important in demonstrating the impact of work around volunteering and employability, including soft targets in monitoring may be more appropriate for some groups of people. Furthermore, it is important to adopt a holistic approach to the link between volunteering and employability.

Conclusion

While there remains scarce evidence to prove that volunteering leads directly to employment, our research indicates that in many instances volunteering can help someone progress *towards* employment; volunteering has a key part to play in helping unemployed people become 'job ready'. Furthermore, the supportive and flexible environment it offers can suit people in long-term unemployment who may have more complex support needs. This has already been recognised by numerous Volunteer Centres who are undertaking a great deal of positive work to support this agenda. Many, however, are facing the twin challenges of increased interest from people wanting to volunteer, as highlighted by our research, and a lack of resources and organisational capacity (see, for example, Osborne, 1999; Macmillan et al, 2007; Rochester et al, 2008; Ellis Paine and Donahue, 2009 forthcoming). Despite this, Volunteer Centres remain well-placed to develop and deliver programmes and

projects to promote and support volunteering for unemployed people. In a climate of economic uncertainty and increasing unemployment, this presents a major opportunity for the sector and has the potential to bring in additional resources and offer opportunities for collaboration throughout the network.

It remains vital, however, that the volunteering movement does not become the servant of policy-related targets, outcomes and performance measures. It would be a step backwards if the hugely diverse benefits to volunteering were by-passed in favour of a drive forwards focusing on a single agenda. Many unemployed volunteers give their time for reasons of personal satisfaction, social contact, or contributing to the community; reasons not necessarily associated with directly securing paid employment. Improvements to an individual's employability are simply one, albeit an important and timely one, of the multiple and holistic benefits of volunteering.

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