4 Top Trends in Volunteering

Whilst the number of people volunteering across the UK has stayed relatively stable over the last decade, there have been shifts in the way people volunteer and the way organisations think about volunteering.

Having worked in volunteer management for the past seven years there are four distinct trends that I feel should be part of key conversations volunteer organisations have when considering the future of their volunteer programmes.

1. **An ageing population**

We know that the population of the UK is ageing and living longer, which means in the next 10 years there will be a dramatic shift upwards in the number of those with the time and energy to volunteer. By 2033 25% of the population will be aged 65+, a huge resource for voluntary organisations to draw on — but are they prepared?

   1. Decision time: Will the voluntary sector embrace the age of opportunity? [Final report of the Commission on the Voluntary Sector & Ageing](http://example.com) (March 2015)
The Commission on the Voluntary Sector and Ageing was set up in 2013 to look specifically at this problem and in their March 2015 report they said that the voluntary sector isn’t ready for this opportunity. They estimate that the value of volunteering by older people in the UK is expected to be worth more than £15bn by 2020, £5bn more than it was worth in 2010. That’s a lot of potential to be missing out on.

**So how do we start to maximise the volunteering potential of this generation?**

A few ideas that can have an impact include:

- **Tackling Ageism** — People are healthier, active for longer and view themselves as younger for longer — only 6% of over 65’s view themselves as old.\(^2\) Organisations need to shift their perceptions of an ‘older’ volunteer force and remove age-based limits on the opportunities and services provided.

- **Enabling and empowering talent** — Enabling and empowering volunteers within an organisation to use their knowledge and life-long experience is a vital and highly underused resource by most organisations. Widening the roles available to volunteers at all levels and offering opportunities for them to use their valued skills is a good place to start.

- **Engaging the middle ground** — Studying the demographics of volunteers we know that most volunteers are at either end of the age spectrum, the shortfall is in the 45-64 age gap. How can we engage this group for the long-term to see them choosing to volunteer with us when they do reach retirement?

2. **Falling time commitment — the rise in micro-volunteering**

Demand for short term volunteering opportunities is increasing; as people feel the pressure to be able to do it all, the age of FOMO (fear of missing out) is on the rise. Work, childcare, socialising, going to the gym, hobbies, ‘me time’ are all encroaching on people’s time and ability to make long-term commitments and people feel increasingly time poor. As a result a simple, fluid approach to volunteering is on the rise — ‘micro-volunteering’.

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\(^2\) Decision time: Will the voluntary sector embrace the age of opportunity? Final report of the Commission on the Voluntary Sector & Ageing (March 2015)
The NVCO in November 2013 released a report on the potential of micro-volunteering within the sector. The main eight characteristics of micro-volunteering they identified were: small amounts of time, easy to access, immediate, convenient, task rather than role orientated, informal agreement, can take place online or offline, it can be a one-off or more regular.

The main element being that the volunteer is in control of how and when they participate.

They also found that while the increase in demand for micro-volunteering opportunities is on the rise the voluntary sector is struggling to utilise this demand by providing enough opportunities and supporting this shift in the nature of how some people would like to volunteer.

Highly successful examples of this phenomenon are becoming more and more widespread:

- Rockcorps, started in Los Angeles in 2005, is the simple premise of volunteer for 4 hours, get a concert ticket. To date over 160,000 people across 10 countries have taken part.

- In the UK the RSPB ask for just an hour of time on an annual basis through their Big Garden Bird Watch. On the 13th May 2015, 585,000 people took part in the event, recording 8.5 millions birds from the comfort of their own back gardens.

It is important to bear in mind that this is not how everyone would like to volunteer. This form of volunteering is unlikely to replace the traditional forms, but it does offer an accessible approach to a younger generation and also to those who are time poor in the 45-64 age bracket.

It’s worth considering the following:

- How can micro-volunteering work for your organisation?
- Would it work for your organisation?
- If we offer opportunities, but aren’t appealing to a wider audience, how could we do this?

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3. The value of giving a little time: Understanding the potential of micro-volunteering. (Brown, Jochum, Paylor 2013)
3. Virtual volunteering

With the increase in technology throughout our lives, a completely new form of volunteering has been created, Virtual volunteering. This is now the most popular form of micro-volunteering.

In contrast to traditional volunteering opportunities, where people come together to complete a task at a specific time and place, this can happen anywhere/anytime by anyone who has access to the internet.

“Help From Home” offers over 800 actions that people can take part in. Blogging, tweeting, document review, policy work, graphic design, website testing and translating are all popular online activities that people all over the world are volunteering to take part in.

It has been used by BBC Stargazing Live 2015 during the last eclipse, engaging viewers to compare images of the same part of the sky, taken at different times to track changes in starlight. The result was the discovery of five supernovae.

Most notably it has allowed people to have an impact in disaster relief through tangible actions beyond donating money.

The Standby Task Force came about as a result of recent disasters in Pakistan and Haiti. Online volunteers were able to collect and map thousands of tweets and images being shared online by those within disaster zones and then pass these on to humanitarian agencies working in the area. Volunteers have been instrumental in crisis mapping for the benefit of humanitarian organisations that haven’t had the resources to pull together a co-ordinated approach.4

4. Decreasing red tape

A trend that has been seen across all sectors and organisations is the increase in bureaucracy and the number of processes seemingly required. The volunteer sector has not escaped this — from recruitment (DBS checks, applications forms, reference checks, interviews, mandatory training) to monitoring success (surveys, timesheets, reports, risk assessments). It is this increase in bureaucracy that is seen as obstructive by volunteers, and not what they signed up for. This is another reason why flexible micro-volunteering has become increasingly popular.

4. ‘How AI, Twitter and digital volunteers are transforming humanitarian disaster response’ - blog by Katie Collins
The government set up the Red Tape task force to make volunteering easier, looking at streamlining obstructive bureaucracy. They were instrumental in the shift from CRB checks (locally run checks that had to be repeated by the same individual across different organisations) to the DBS database, one centralised database that someone only needs to sign up to once.

Read about the Civil Society Red Tape Challenge.

It’s worth questioning why the processes you have in place exist:

- Are they necessary?
- Can you tailor your approach to individuals?
- Is there any way to use technology to your advantage?

How can =mc help?

These four trends are increasingly coming to the forefront of volunteer management thinking. At =mc we are keen to help managers and individuals develop the skills and abilities to be more effective. So naturally, when we began to think about these four trends we began to consider what we do could help support managers keen to make the most of volunteers. So below I've outlined a number of tools and approaches that can help you as a manager work through each situation.

Adopting a flexible approach to managing volunteers

Our Intelligent Leadership approach takes into account the individual person and situation to assess which leadership style to take. This can be applied to volunteer management, allowing a flexible approach when it comes to encouraging volunteers to become involved at all levels of the organisation, appropriate to their skills and experience.

For example; a long standing volunteer (familiar with the organisational values, ways of working and staff), whose previous work had included running their own organisation, could be encouraged to help input to the organisational strategy or take on more responsibility on projects. Our Intelligent Leadership model also allows for a more flexible approach when considering the amount of bureaucracy needed to induct, train and assign tasks to a volunteer.

For further info on this approach view this article on Leadership - finding your style.
Running projects in a way that allows volunteers to take part

Relating project work to volunteer involvement is something we come across regularly in our training courses. Throughout our training we ask participants to relate everything in the project back to their original purpose — the same is crucial when thinking about volunteers and the roles they can contribute as part of a project team. Applying this thinking can help organisations work out what tasks could be allocated as ‘micro-volunteering’ opportunities. For instance, an organisation responsible for regularly checking land to report problems to the local authority was relying on recruiting and inducting volunteers, with volunteers expected to fill in regular reports on any problems they encountered. By going back to the purpose of ensuring a good relationship with the local authority through regular problem reporting, the organisation saw an opportunity to provide additional data through members of the public submitting photos through their website of any problems they encountered. This is a form of micro-volunteering that engaged with the public and increased the amount of information they were able to provide to local authorities.

To find out more about this approach view this download on Project Planning Tools.

Being emotionally intelligent with different people and their different needs

Volunteers are often not like the people who are managing them. They may be older, younger, a different gender, a different faith, a different culture. There are also fundamental differences in their motivation in comparison to employees where there is normally an explicit contract about deliverables, performance etc.

With volunteers, the motivations may be very different and you may need to be brave empathetic and responsive to what their desires and needs are as well is how they can help you deliver your mission or project.

Being responsible in this way relates face strongly to the idea of emotional intelligence (EI) where you improve your skills to balance out the results you are responsible for with the needs and interests of the individual.

To find out more about EI and the benefits of it, read this article on Emotional Intelligence at work.
What’s next?

If you’ve found this article helpful and you would like more information, please call +44 (0)20 7978 1516 and speak to one of our experienced consultants.

Several of =mc’s training programmes relate to the topics in this download, and are available as scheduled Public Training programmes or tailorable In-house Training at a time that suits you and your organisation:

Leading & Managing for Results (includes =mc Intelligent Leadership model)
Project Management
Emotional Intelligence in Management