

VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT

in

COMMUNITY SPORT CLUBS

A Study of Volunteers' Perception



Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

This study comprised Phase 2 of a larger project on community sport volunteers. The purpose of the study was to investigate volunteers' perceptions of community sport organization practices and needs with regard to volunteer management. The specific focus was on volunteer recruitment, training, support, evaluation, recognition, and retention.

Telephone interviews were conducted with a sample of 90 volunteers representing 49 clubs in 8 sports from 19 small and large communities across Ontario. The sports included in the study were: Badminton, Basketball, Curling, Hockey, Soccer, Softball, Track & Field, and Volleyball. The small communities included: Timmins, Parry Sound, Perth, Renfrew, Madoc, Orillia, Goderich, Port Elgin, Owen Sound, and St. Thomas. The large communities included: Sudbury, Thunder Bay, Ottawa, Toronto, Windsor, Guelph, London, St. Catharines, and Hamilton.

1 Background

1.1 Interview Participants. Of the 90 volunteers, 13 (14.5%) were coaches, 38 (42%) were executive or board volunteers, 13 (14.5%) were administrators, and 26 (29%) were both coaches and executives. They had been with their club an average of 11 years, and 53 (71%) had a child or spouse involved. Seventy-three participants (81%) were from large communities and 17 (19%) were from small communities.

Just less than half of the participants (45%) had been asked to get involved, 41% offered their services, 13% started the club themselves, and 1% were involved as a requirement of club membership. The most common reasons why the participants started volunteering were: (1) Child was involved (33%); (2) Saw a need (29%); (3) Wanted to help provide a positive activity for children (21%), Was a former player and/or love the sport (21%); (4) Feel a responsibility to volunteer in the community (15%); and (5) Have the skills (12%), Can make a difference/change in the club (12%). There was some variation in these reasons by the participants' sport and role.

The most common reasons why the participants have stayed with their club were: (1) Opportunity to stay connected in and promote the sport (20%), Helping kids develop (21%), Providing positive activity for kids (20%), Positive, social working environment (18%), Meeting a need in the club (20%), Enjoyment (20%); and (2) Have the skills to offer (12%), Making a difference in the club (12%), Child still involved (15%). There was some variation by volunteer role. The most common reasons why participants might eventually leave were: (1) Child is no longer involved (36%), Heavy time commitment (31%); (2) Negative environment because of politics and parents (21.5%), Conflict with family responsibilities (21.5%), Time for new people and ideas (17%); and (3) Other reasons: Conflict with work (9.5%),

Conflict with other volunteering (9.5%), Conflict with other leisure (12%), No longer a member (12%). There was some variation by volunteer role.

1.2 Community Sport Clubs. The average length of time the clubs had been in existence was 23 years. They had, an average of 55 volunteers (ranging from 2 to 200 volunteers), and 11 clubs (27%) had a paid staff person.

Sixty percent (60%) of participants felt their club did not have enough volunteers to get the work done. Their club was particularly lacking executive and administrative volunteers (42%) and coaches (29%).

2 Volunteer Recruitment

2.1 Difficulty Getting Volunteers. Most participants (69%) said their club had difficulty getting volunteers. Many (35.5%) said there was difficulty getting coaches, because people do not feel they have the skills or ability to coach and the club tends to agree, and because of the heavy time commitment involved. Many (31%) said there was difficulty getting executive volunteers, because of the heavy commitment right off the bat, and board work is behind the scenes rather than working with kids directly. Participants identified the main reasons for the difficulty getting volunteers in general as conflict with family and work, and making a regular commitment.

2.2 Addressing the Challenges of Getting Volunteers. Two-thirds of participants (67%) said their club tries to do something to deal with the perceived challenges to getting volunteers. The use of assistant coaches and role sharing is the main way that clubs try to reduce the burden of the heavy time commitment. Offering coaching clinics, or cover expenses for coach training, as well as two-way communication and encouragement, is the main way clubs try to assist volunteers (especially coaches) develop their skills and abilities. Other strategies to try to overcome the barriers to volunteering include financial incentives, such as honoraria, and reduced or free registration for children.

2.3 Recruiting Volunteers. Almost all participants (90%) said their club does something to recruit new volunteers. The most common methods were: (1) word of mouth requests (77%; e.g., direct invitation to an individual, formal presentation to members and parents), and (2) written requests (68.5%; e.g., club website and newsletter, newspaper ads, flyers or posters, in child's registration package). The large majority of participants (83.5%) indicated that their club also targets its recruiting efforts. The most common targets were: (1) parents (43%), (2) former athletes (31%), and (3) former volunteers, and individuals with specific skills (13%). The most common recruiting messages were that the club needs help, the club appreciates help, and volunteers are important to the club.

2.4 Volunteer Succession. Over half of the participants (56%) said that their club has some form of plan for replacing volunteers. This ranges from casual

inquiries about whether volunteers are returning next year and subsequently recruiting to fill any expected gaps, to formally grooming assistant coaches to be head coaches or executive volunteers for the president's position. The remainder (34%) said their club does not do anything formal for volunteer succession and tends to "go by the seat of our pants". However, many felt it would be worthwhile with a larger or growing club.

2.5 Interviewing and Screening. Half of the participants (51%) indicated that their club interviews and/or screens its new volunteers. Half of those (50%) said the club does a police background check, but mostly with coaches, and half (50%) conduct some form of interviews, again mostly with coaches, to determine ability and potential fit with the club. The half of participants (49%) who indicated that their club does no interviewing or screening said that their club is small and volunteers are handpicked, everyone who volunteers is well known to the board, or it is left to the person recruiting to determine a volunteer's capabilities. Concerns with the process had to do with complicating the recruitment process and adding to the workload of an already over-extended board, and turning off prospective volunteers. Nevertheless, interviewing and screening were considered to be valuable to learn who the club is dealing with, avoiding weak or non-committed volunteers from the start, and really knowing who is taking over the more sensitive roles (e.g., head coach, treasurer).

3 Orientation, Training and Development

3.1 Role clarity. Most participants (76%) said the volunteers in their club have a clear understanding about what they are expected to do. This role clarity was attributed mostly to a club constitution, job descriptions, and rules and procedures, as well as an initial orientation and subsequent regular meetings to keep volunteers informed. Those who indicated that some role ambiguity and confusion exists (24%) said it was with regard to technical expectations for coaches, new volunteers who had not caught on to the unique aspects of the club, deviation from club policies and job descriptions, confusion when having to cover for other volunteers, and overlap in volunteer roles.

3.2 Volunteer Manual. Forty percent (40%) of participants reported that their club has a manual or guidebook for volunteers, although half said it is exclusively for coaches (e.g., game rules and regulations, practice schedules, coaching tips). Of the remaining participants (60%), 20% thought there should be some sort of club manual in place; containing, for example, the club's constitution, policies and procedures, job descriptions, code of conduct, budget procedures and expense claim forms.

3.3 Orientation for New Volunteers. Most participants (71%) reported that their club has some formal orientation for its new volunteers. Orientation appears to be more common for coaches than other types of volunteers. The main way in which clubs orient their volunteers is by having the person start out in an

assisting role (e.g., assistant coach, committee members rather than chair). Other ways include being mentored on the job and coaching clinics. The remaining participants (29%) said that executive volunteers in particular tend not to have any formal orientation to the club because they were recruited/elected for their skills and expertise, and they are expected to know what is involved and to hit the ground running.

3.4 Professional Development for Veterans. Most participants (69%) said their club offers or supports further training for its veteran volunteers, however this is almost exclusively focused on coaches. The most common support for professional development for coaches was covering expenses to attend clinics (75%), although 30% of participants noted that it was a financial and logistical struggle to help coaches in this way. A few participants (18%) said their club runs its own coaching clinics, although 21% indicated that it was a challenge to get coaches to commit the time to participate. Only 9% of participants indicated that their club supports or provides professional development opportunities for its executive volunteers. Again, it was expected that these volunteers already have all the skills they require, and any necessary training takes place through committee work. The approximately one-third of participants (31%) who said their club does not offer any professional development explained that there were no funds for this activity and/or it was not a priority use of funds within the club.

4 Support and Retention

4.1 Help With Tasks. Almost all participants (97%) said their club assists its volunteers with their tasks. The most common means of support were: (1) Support to coaches (51%; e.g., athlete registration, booking facilities and referees, setting schedules, providing equipment), (2) Volunteers help each other out (47.5%; e.g., pick up the slack, tasks are spread around, coaches help each other, support within each team), (3) Support from the president and executive (45.5%; i.e., open communication, president is approachable and helpful, executive volunteers are at the field, board helps deal with parents), (4) Cover expenses (21%; e.g., for travel, phone, supplies), and (5) Regular meetings (17.5%).

4.2 Volunteer Manager. Just less than half of the participants (45%) reported that their club has some sort of volunteer manager. Most indicated that the club president fills this role (64%) and fewer indicated that it was the job of the head coach or a coaching coordinator (28%). The remaining participants (55%) said there is no single person for this role. Of those, 77% described recruiting and overseeing volunteers as a shared responsibility within the club, particularly within teams or leagues or program/event units (e.g., tournaments, fundraising, banquet). Half of the participants whose club does not have a volunteer manager thought a volunteer coordinator or “go to” person would be useful.

4.3 Difficulty Keeping Volunteers. Most participants (87%) felt their club had no difficulty keeping volunteers; once they were in, they were there to stay for a while. This was felt to be particularly the case for coaches, but also a core group of executive volunteers that tended to stay on. Nevertheless, participants described the most common reasons why volunteers do leave as: (1) Child is no longer involved (36%), (2) Heavy time commitment (16%), and (3) Conflict with others (10%; e.g., personality clash, dealing with parents), Lifestyle change (e.g., moving, 10%; change in work responsibilities, 8%; change in family responsibilities, 5.5%). Participants further indicated that their club tends to do little to try to overcome these challenges because, again, keeping volunteers is not really a concern, and those who leave either do not belong (because they cannot make the time commitment) or they have paid their dues.

5 Evaluation and Feedback

5.1 Evaluation and Feedback to Volunteers. Only 25% of participants indicated that their club does any formal evaluation of its volunteers. The most common ways were: (1) Parent and/or player survey of coaches (50%), (2) Coaches and board meetings where feedback is provided on one's work (17%), and (3) General club survey that includes questions about coaches, board members and other volunteers (11%), Election process (11%). The remaining participants (75%) said their club only has informal evaluation and feedback, primarily through recognition of volunteers' efforts (38%; positive feedback only) and/or verbal feedback on volunteers' performance (38%; positive and negative feedback). A number of concerns about evaluating volunteers were noted, including the difficulty evaluating volunteers and the need to be delicate and sensitive with people who are giving their time freely. However, 49% of participants felt that there should be (more) formal evaluation of volunteers, to the benefit of the organization and the individuals themselves.

5.2 Volunteer Feedback to the Club. About two-thirds of participants (63%) reported that their club has a formal mechanism in place to allow volunteers to provide feedback to the club. The main and most effective way was through regular coaches and board meetings, and the annual general meeting. All of the participants (100%) said their club welcomes informal feedback, which typically occurs on an adhoc basis when problems arise, always verbally, and reflects open communication in the club. Many indicated a preference for more formal mechanisms, especially formal requests for input from volunteers and a formal forum in which to present their comments.

6 Recognition and Rewards

Most participants (85%) reported that their club has in place a formal means of recognizing and rewarding volunteers. The most common means were: (1) Volunteer appreciation night and/or year-end banquet (55%), (2) Special volunteer awards (36%), (3) Club clothing or a gift (28%), and (4) Recognition

and/or rewards within the team (17%). The remaining participants (15%) said their club has nothing formal in place, because of a lack of time and money for organizing or providing recognition events or awards, and/or it was not a priority for the club to spend money on volunteers. Nevertheless, almost half of the participants (48%) thought their club should be doing something (more) to recognize and reward its volunteers.

7 Overall Attitudes

7.1 “Best Thing”. According to the participants, the “best thing(s)” about volunteering with their club was: (1) Working with kids (32%), Helping kids by providing a good experience in a positive activity (30%); (2) Good people are involved (16%), Positive work environment (18%); and (3) Contributing to a successful organization (14%). There was variation by volunteer role in the “best thing” about volunteering.

7.2 “Worst Thing”. According to the participants, the “worst thing(s)” about volunteering with their club was: (1) Time commitment involved (31%), (2) Dealing with parents (25%), and (3) Lack of volunteers to do the work and volunteers don’t carry through on their commitments (13%). There was some variation by sport in the “worst thing” about volunteering.

8 Key Challenges to Volunteering in the Future

According to participants, the key challenges for volunteering in their club in the future were: (1) Getting enough volunteers for the existing work and for the club to grow (34%), (2) Getting volunteers who can commit to the time and can be trusted to follow through (20.5%), (3) Getting qualified and quality volunteers (18%; especially coaches) and (4) Other recruiting challenges: Getting younger volunteers (11.5%), True “volunteers” (7%) and New volunteers with fresh ideas (6%).

9 Support, Information and Resources

Participants requested help with: (1) Guidelines, tips and best practices on volunteer recruitment, retention, selection, training, and/or recognition (36%), (2) Any new information from which the club could pick and choose what it needed (13%), and (3) Specific areas (about 10% each): promoting community awareness of volunteering, samples or templates or organizational documents, coaching development through local clinics in isolated communities, fundraising. They would like to receive this information or support particularly via: (1) Workshops, seminars or clinics (33%), (2) E-mail and/or paper documents (31% and 26%, respectively), and/or (3) Website or CD (17%), Provincial sport organization (17%).