



WHITE PAPER

The ROI of an engaged volunteer and the role systems play in increasing it

Introduction

The roles volunteers play within an organisation evolve as community needs and demographics change. Many organisations have already realised that volunteers are not just contributors of time and effort but ambassadors of the causes they support.

However, to truly harness the potential of this invaluable resource, organisations need to recognise factors that can enhance the volunteer experience, build systems into their programme that will encourage engagement, and utilise software to help automate and manage the process more effectively.

This white paper aims to demonstrate the return on investment (ROI) of an engaged volunteer, emphasising how an improved volunteer experience can lead to measurable economic and mental health benefits.



Economic and Productivity Gains Through Volunteering

Volunteering is an act of altruism, driven by a desire to contribute to society without expectation of financial reward. However, the economic impact of volunteering is substantial, with volunteers contributing billions of pounds' worth annually.

The economic impact of volunteering becomes particularly apparent when volunteers bring professional and managerial skills to their roles. In the United Kingdom, for example, volunteers in such positions generate an estimated £4.6 billion in productivity gains each year.¹ This equates to approximately £4,551 per volunteer.

In other countries, the economic worth of volunteering is similarly impressive. According to recent estimates, the total value of volunteer work across the United States amounts to \$122.9 billion annually.² In Australia, volunteers are estimated to contribute \$290 billion to the economy each year.³ Beyond the immediate economic impact, volunteering also plays a crucial role in skill development.



44%

of volunteers in the UK reported gaining new skills directly applicable to their professional lives.

38%

developed new skills and 32% reported increased confidence as a result of their volunteering.⁴

It's no wonder then that recent research suggests the positive impact volunteer work has on employees seeking a raise,⁵ and even more so on volunteers' earnings in their first job.⁶ With £2,301 of wage increases per volunteer being attributable to volunteering,⁷ it's evident that the volunteer sector's contribution to the economy exceeds the direct productivity gains mentioned earlier.

If you divide the economic value created by all the contributed hours, even a single volunteer hour is currently worth \$29.95, or £22.83.⁸ This goes to show how volunteers support organisations that might otherwise struggle to achieve their goals due to budgetary constraints.

Those numbers not only relate to volunteer managers' tasks or top-level management, though. They can also be part of your engagement strategy to show potential volunteers the value they could bring to their communities and society as a whole.



Mental Health

Benefits of Volunteering

Beyond its economic benefits, volunteering is widely recognised for the positive impact it has on mental health. Engaging in volunteer work provides individuals with a sense of purpose, community and fulfilment.

That said, the mental health benefits of volunteering are not uniformly experienced across demographics, and understanding these nuances is crucial for organisations aiming to optimise the volunteer experience.

Research also indicates that the act of helping others can release dopamine and other feel-good neurotransmitters in the brain, creating what some describe as a "helper's high."⁹

By contributing to a cause larger than themselves, volunteers often experience a boost in self-esteem which can translate into other areas of their lives. This sense of purpose is particularly beneficial for individuals who may be struggling with life transitions, such as retirement or unemployment, providing them with a constructive outlet for their time and energy.

The Psychological Impact of Volunteering

In general, volunteering has been shown to enhance mental health by reducing stress, anxiety and depression.⁹ It fosters a sense of belonging and connection, which is particularly important in an increasingly isolated world where remote work and online connections are increasingly common.

77%

of respondents partaking in the National Survey on the Volunteer Experience reported that volunteering improved their mental health and wellbeing.¹⁰



Understanding Demographic Differences

Different age groups, genders and cultural backgrounds may have varying motivations and needs when it comes to volunteering.

For example, younger volunteers may be more motivated by the opportunity to gain work-related experience, which can boost their confidence by increasing their employability. While only 14% of those aged 55 and older mention this as a benefit of volunteering, that number jumps to 69% for those aged 18 to 24.¹⁰



On the other hand, older volunteers may seek social engagement and a sense of community, which can help combat loneliness and provide them with a meaningful way to stay active and connected.

Gender, cultural background and ethnicity can also play a role in how volunteering affects mental health. Some studies suggest that women may derive more emotional satisfaction from volunteering than men, potentially due to differences in how men and women perceive social roles and responsibilities.¹⁰ In a similar vein, individuals from collectivist cultures may place a higher value on community-oriented activities, which can reinforce cultural values.¹¹



Tailoring Volunteer Programmes for Mental Health Benefits

To fully harness the mental health benefits of volunteering, organisations need to adopt a more personalised approach to managing volunteers. By tracking various data points, such as volunteer hours, length of service, age, gender and cultural background, nonprofits can gain insights into the diverse needs and experiences of their volunteer base. This ensures that all volunteers can reap the mental health benefits of their service.

Platforms like Rosterfy play a crucial role in enhancing the mental health benefits of volunteering by providing organisations with the tools needed to track and analyse volunteer engagement across these efforts. Custom portals and engagement trackers enable volunteer managers to personalise the volunteer experience and create programmes that resonate with volunteers on a deeper level.

Rosterfy has developed an integration with Blackbaud Raiser's Edge¹² that helps organisations gain a comprehensive overview of a volunteer's history with your programme, their preferences and fundraising behaviour. Moreover, this integration facilitates the generation of detailed reports on volunteer contributions, engagement metrics and demographic analyses, which can help identify areas where volunteers may need additional support to maximise their mental health benefits.



Psychological Fulfilment as a Driving Force Behind Volunteer Engagement

Volunteers should not be seen merely as unpaid workers but as consumers of a volunteering experience that fulfils their psychological needs. According to self-determination theory, tasks that satisfy a person's inherent psychological needs — such as autonomy, competence and relatedness — lead to higher levels of engagement.¹³ When volunteers perceive themselves as applying their skills to meaningful tasks and see their contributions' impact, their sense of autonomy and competence is reinforced, leading to greater and continued engagement.

Plus, when volunteers internalise their role within the organisation and view it as an integral part of their identity, they're more likely to be devoted to their activities. This deep sense of connection can lead to sustained volunteer involvement and even inspire community members to become advocates for the organisation's cause.



Enhancing the Volunteer Experience

A well-designed volunteer experience not only enhances retention but also drives higher levels of participation, satisfaction and advocacy among volunteers. The advent of digital technology has revolutionised the way organisations engage with their volunteers.

Virtual volunteer options have emerged as a powerful tool to maintain engagement, especially in scenarios where in-person volunteering may not be feasible. This flexibility has proven essential, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the adoption of virtual volunteering.

According to recent studies, over 80% of companies now report having a virtual volunteer programme in place.¹⁴ These programmes allow volunteers to contribute from any location and at times that suit their schedules, thereby removing geographical and time-related barriers. Virtual volunteering also opens up opportunities for individuals who might otherwise be unable to participate due to physical constraints, transportation issues or personal commitments.

Retention and Engagement Strategies

Volunteer retention remains a key challenge for many organisations, and those struggling with it are ten times more likely to report a decline in volunteer

hours compared to organisations with higher retention rates.¹⁵ The most effective strategies for improving retention revolve around providing volunteers with opportunities for growth and ensuring they feel valued and supported.

74%

Training and development opportunities are crucial in this regard. About 74% of organisations cite training as a primary method for improving volunteer retention. Covering out-of-pocket expenses is another strategy that 64% of organisations use.¹⁵

Timely and transparent communication emerges as the cornerstone of successful volunteer engagement, as it connects all the other strategies and keeps volunteers aligned with your mission. Regular updates, feedback loops and recognition of their contributions can significantly boost volunteer satisfaction. Tools like Rosterfy enable organisations to streamline communication through customised portals that keep volunteers informed about news, updates and upcoming opportunities that align with their interests and skills.



Increasing Volunteer Engagement and Reducing Barriers of Entry

Research shows that the primary motivation for volunteering is a desire to make a difference. 48% of respondents indicated they were motivated to volunteer because they wanted to improve things or help people. Another 33% stated they were motivated by a personal connection to the cause, emphasising the importance of aligning volunteer opportunities with causes that resonate personally with potential volunteers.¹⁶

Despite the strong desire to volunteer, however, many individuals face barriers that prevent them from participating.

49%

The most common obstacles include work commitments, which affect 49% of potential volunteers, childcare responsibilities (23%) and a lack of awareness about available opportunities (10%).¹⁶

To overcome these barriers and enhance volunteer engagement, organisations can implement several actionable strategies:

- **Publicise Mission and Opportunities:** One of the most straightforward ways to increase volunteer engagement is by raising awareness of your organisation's mission and the specific opportunities available.

- **Create Flexible and Remote Volunteering Options:** Offering a range of volunteer opportunities, including short-term, remote and micro-volunteering tasks, allows individuals to contribute in ways that fit their schedules and lifestyles.
- **Provide Clear Pathways To Understand Impact:** Providing personalised onboarding journeys that explain the organisation's goals, how volunteers contribute to these goals and the measurable outcomes of their work can help volunteers feel more connected to the cause.
- **Reduce Administrative Barriers:** Streamlining the application and onboarding process can help reduce friction for new volunteers. This might include simplifying forms, offering online training modules and ensuring that volunteer roles are clearly defined and communicated.
- **Recognise and Reward Volunteer Contributions:** Regular recognition of volunteer efforts can significantly boost morale and encourage continued involvement. This can be achieved through public acknowledgement in newsletters or social media, providing certificates of appreciation or offering small incentives such as discounts or branded merchandise.

How WaterAid See Volunteers as Supporters and Donors

Volunteers play a crucial role in raising awareness of WaterAid's cause and they recognise that the value of each one extends beyond the skills and time they offer. They are experts in expressing the impact of their volunteering efforts and by doing so, they have built a dedicated and engaged community around their cause.

WaterAid aims to provide clean water and better hygiene to people that need it, globally. Their volunteers support fundraising efforts and raise awareness of the work that's being done to combat the impact climate change is having on communities in need of clean water.

WaterAid utilises Rosterfy's integration with payment provider Stripe to collect deposits from people wishing to volunteer at the many festivals where they're present, such as Glastonbury and Boom Town in the UK.

The volunteers provide cleaning services to toilet areas of these festivals. They also offer water at many of the stations at each venue and engage with festival goers, raising awareness of the WaterAid mission.

Rosterfy empowers their management team to schedule volunteers across a variety of different roles. They use their volunteer management software platform to communicate the impact their volunteering efforts are having on fundraising. This has amplified their fundraising potential as many volunteers choose to donate their deposits towards the cause rather than claim it back.

When volunteers are engaged with your mission and you build a community around your cause you can encourage them to give more than just their time and skills — each volunteer has the potential to be a donor.



Increase the ROI of Each Engaged Volunteer

Engaged volunteers are more likely to refer others, complete training and participate actively in their assigned tasks, leading to significant organisational benefits.

- **Likelihood To Refer and Higher Conversion Rates:** Engaged volunteers are strong advocates for your organisation. Their positive experiences often lead them to refer friends and family, increasing the pool of potential volunteers.
- **Completion Rates and Active Participation:** When volunteers feel connected and valued, they're more likely to complete training, show up for shifts and actively engage in their roles. This reduces turnover and ensures that the organisation can rely on a consistent and committed volunteer base.
- **Financial and Mental Health Benefits:** Engaged volunteers contribute to higher productivity, which translates into economic gains for the organisation. Additionally, the mental health benefits they experience further enhance their commitment and effectiveness, providing a dual benefit for both the volunteer and the organisation.



Conclusion

Engaged volunteers are essential to the success of nonprofit organisations. They offer substantial economic and mental health benefits, which in turn lead to higher retention, greater participation and improved overall ROI. Rosterfy provides the tools necessary to enhance the volunteer experience, making it easier for organisations to engage, manage and retain volunteers effectively.

Investing in volunteer engagement is not just about fulfilling immediate needs — it's about building a sustainable and impactful volunteer base that can drive long-term success. By prioritising the volunteer experience and reducing barriers to entry, organisations can maximise the benefits that volunteers bring, ensuring a lasting positive impact on both the community and the organisation itself.



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