
Marginalizing Australia's volunteers

The need for socially inclusive practices in the non-profit sector

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ABSTRACT

Our concern in this paper is to demonstrate that it is essential volunteer organisations do not marginalize their volunteers. We draw on national data to identify areas of social exclusion; and demonstrate how change in the sector may be affecting particular groups and individuals. This data suggests the need for non-profit organisations to ensure that their recruitment and retention processes are inclusive and that 'potential' volunteers across the spectrum of society are given adequate and appropriate assistance and consideration. We propose that human resource management policies and practices should enable all volunteers to be adequately supported, mentored and encouraged. We argue, too, that government has a role to play to ensure that volunteering does not become a political football and that adequate funding is available to support these processes. In this way, bridging social capital will continue to be developed and civil society will be inclusive of all Australians.

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing recognition of the importance of social capital in maintaining a healthy and dynamic civil society (Onyx & Leonard 2000). The key themes of social capital, such as social connectedness, reciprocity and trust highlighted in Robert Putnam's work (2000), are also characteristics associated with volunteering (Baum, Modra, Bush, Cox, Cooke & Potter 1999). Indeed, some argue that volunteer activities, particularly those involving community groups, lie at the heart of social capital (Cox 2000; Onyx & Leonard 2000).

In this paper, we examine contemporary trends in the volunteer world and suggest that there are issues that need attention if volunteering is to contribute towards positive social capital development. We argue that we need to be concerned about the politicisation of volunteering and the capturing of the volunteer agenda. We also suggest that there are elements of exclusivity in volunteering that need to be addressed if a broad, inclusive civil society is to be achieved in Australia.

Specifically, we address three dimensions of volunteering of concern to the sector. First, we argue that it is essential that individuals and groups are not marginalized through volunteering, as they are in paid work. We examine the broad demographic data on volunteering and suggest areas that may lead to forms of exclusion. Second, we look at current trends in the sector which are resulting in a split between charity or 'old' models of volunteering, and 'new' or social enterprise volunteering. The dangers of such a dichotomy are highlighted. Finally, we look at human resource management in the sector and argue that it is essential that volunteers are treated professionally and that human resource (HR) issues are recognised and addressed.

CIVIL SOCIETY

The contribution of volunteers to civil society and to the development of social capital in Australia is increasingly being recognised (Baum et al 1999; Lyons 2000). More recently, it has been suggested

that volunteering is an act of citizenship, and is a crucial part of our democratic tradition (Oppenheimer 2000). As Wilkinson and Bittman (2002) suggest, if democracy is true social participation, then volunteering is an important indicator of citizen involvement in civil society and a healthy democracy.

Members of our current federal government certainly applaud the notion of personal responsibility associated with democratic processes. The Treasurer, Peter Costello, for example, presents volunteers as active citizens who demonstrate personal responsibility, a position he much admires (2001). A more critical analysis of such statements, however, highlights the problems associated with more market oriented approaches to welfare service delivery (Kerr & Savelsberg 2001). In particular, concepts such as civil society, community capacity and social capital have been politicised and utilised to legitimise changes in social policy (Wilkinson & Bittman 2002). These changes have led to a reduced role for the state accompanied by increased reliance on the family and the community (Cox 2000). Reliance on non-government welfare comes at a cost, particularly as the community services sector is forced to comply with other facets of a marketised system, such as competitive processes (Kerr & Savelsberg 2001). This places extreme pressure on a sector dependent on volunteers.

The current political emphasis on active citizenship has another dimension. Market liberalism also emphasises active participation over passive receipt of welfare, in an attempt to control and discipline welfare recipients into becoming good citizens (Warburton & Smith 2003). For those unable to access paid work, voluntary work is offered as a way of earning their welfare dollar (Kerr & Savelsberg 2001). Mutual obligation programs such as work for the dole utilise volunteer type activities, although recipients, often young people, are under no illusion that there is anything voluntary about it (Warburton & Smith 2003). These programs require the unemployed to undertake community work in return for their welfare benefits, and for sanctions and penalties to be imposed on those who refuse (Bessant 2000). And, they act to regulate and control the unemployed, who are portrayed as responsible for their inability to find paid work. Participants respond negatively, however, to the compulsory elements of mutual obligation programs such as

work for the dole; and many organisations are loath to invest in such reluctant 'volunteers' (Warburton & Mutch 2000; Warburton & Smith 2003). Thus, programs of 'compulsory volunteering', such as work for the dole, threaten the essential heart of volunteering as a freely chosen gift of time to the community (Warburton & McDonald 2002).

Overall, recent government attention to volunteering challenges the essential attributes of volunteering as an activity. Cynically, it appears to be a way of reducing government output while at the same time ensuring that the unemployed pay their debt to society. Building civil society and encouraging the growth of social capital is thus attractive to governments. Social networks, such as vital communities and active voluntary organisations, represent a resource to governments. Governments are also able, as Wilkinson and Bittman (2002) suggest, to "freeride on their externalities" such as improved health and social functioning and lower crime. Discourses of civil society and social capital are merely a way to ensure these objectives.

Recent studies of social capital have distinguished between bonding and bridging social capital (Putnam 2000). Government discourse tends to emphasise bonding social capital. The dense multiple ties and strong localised trust within communities (Onyx & Leonard 2000) provides the local support that can replace government services. However, the capacity to build bridges between strangers, epitomised in the concept of bridging social capital, is that which is important for a socially inclusive society (Wilkinson & Bittman 2002). It is this that leads to a truly civil society.

In Australia, an emphasis on bridging social capital is needed to broaden participation and build connections between strangers. Certainly volunteering has the capacity to build bridges between strangers.

TRADITIONAL DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

Volunteering has always shown signs of marginalisation especially with regard to the paid workforce. National statistics on volunteering were not even collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) until 1995 despite monthly statistics on the paid labour market. Volunteering continues not to be measured within the Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

of all OECD countries, and remains outside the dominant economic frameworks of major western countries (Oppenheimer 1998). As Marilyn Waring (1988) controversially wrote in her seminal work, *Counting for Nothing*, if unpaid workers and volunteers were given a monetary valuation, then their work would become 'visible' and therefore accountable and more important.

Demographic trends have shown that volunteers are more likely to be white collar workers, in paid employment, middle aged, and from an English speaking background (ABS 2001). This is thus *not* a marginalized group, despite its status in relation to paid work. When looking at the trends within volunteering, it is clear that there are signs of excluding processes. Consequently volunteering may be a gendered activity, with class, age and work experience advantages maintained in the volunteer work force.

Current ABS data (2001) shows that 32% of the Australian population volunteers. A typical profile suggests that disadvantage and exclusion from paid work can be reflected to some extent in volunteering. Hence, volunteers are more likely to come from the groups that have greater success in the paid labour market. Generally volunteers are more likely to be in the middle years, with highest rates in the 35-44 years and 45-54 years categories (ABS 2001). These are also the age groups most likely to be in paid work. Thus, people in paid employment, whether full time or part time, are more likely to volunteer than those who are unemployed or not in the labour force (ABS 2001). Why is this so? Are there marginalizing processes in volunteer recruitment and retention practices that act to exclude some groups, particularly those who are old or young and outside the paid workforce? This may reflect negative societal and political attitudes towards these groups, leading to assumptions about the old, the young and the unemployed.

This is interesting because those who volunteer among these 'excluded' groups tend to give more time than other volunteers. Thus, those not in the labour force and older volunteers aged over 65 years donate more time than other age groups and are thus deemed 'highly committed volunteers' (ABS 2001; Lyons & Hocking 2000). This analysis suggests that it may be cost effective to recruit these groups as volunteers.

Looking at the overall data, volunteers who are in paid work are more likely to come from white collar occupations, such as professionals (46%); advanced clerical, sales and service workers (45%); and managers and administrators (42%). The lowest levels of volunteering were undertaken by blue collar workers, such as production and transport workers (22%); labourers and related workers (24%); and tradespersons (29%) (ABS 2001). This suggests that class disadvantage is also played out in volunteer activities, and that organisations may seek out those with professional or management skills.

The ABS data (2001) shows that the nature of people's volunteer work is closely related to their type of paid employment. Thus, managers and administrators are more likely than other occupational groups to do management and committee work and tradespersons to undertake repairs or maintenance activities. The class system may be reinforced in voluntary organisations, which begs the question: are there sufficient opportunities for unskilled workers to learn and develop their skills in an alternative to the paid labour market?

Lack of volunteer opportunities may also be the reality for a range of disadvantaged and marginalised groups, such as those with disabilities or poor health and Indigenous Australians. National data, for example, show that people born in Australia (35%) are more likely to volunteer than those born outside Australia (25%); the same is also shown in the number of hours spent on volunteer activities (ABS 2001; Lyons & Hocking 2000). There is, however, very little empirical research into why there is less volunteering documented by those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds or those from Indigenous communities (Kerr & Tedmanson 2003). It may be, as Kerr and Tedmanson suggest (2003, p. 23) that non-mainstream groups simply 'fall outside the square'. This means that these groups may contribute actively to the social fabric and the community, but tend to do so outside formal organisations. Indeed, it may be that the concept of volunteering may not be shared by those from other cultures (Martin 1999). It is certainly of concern that whole areas are excluded because they are not counted as volunteering (Kerr & Tedmanson 2003). However, arguably of more concern is the question as to whether this is a positive choice or whether organisations themselves fail to recruit and adapt to the

special needs of particular social groups. It may be that the monocultural nature of many mainstream agencies acts as a disincentive to more inclusive practices and greater diversity in the sector (Kerr, Savelsberg, Sparrow & Tedmanson 2001). Perhaps organisations need to look at alternative ways of integrating people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds as well as other marginalized groups into their volunteer programs. Both organisations and the broader community will then benefit from the inclusion of such a rich and diverse resource (Kerr et al. 2001). This must be an active process if those 'outside the square' are to be included as volunteers.

Gender is an interesting variable in relation to volunteering, given that women have traditionally been the major source of volunteers, particularly in social welfare (Baldock 1990). National data shows that there is little difference in numbers of volunteers with slightly more females volunteering than males across all age groups (overall 33% females: 31% males). While both men and women volunteer, the evidence suggests that they volunteer for different types of organisations and they undertake different roles within these organisations (ABS 2001). As in the paid labour market, volunteering is a gendered activity.

The image of a 'Lady Bountiful', an elegant middle class woman dispensing largesse, has perhaps been superseded, but women still maintain their roles as carers. In terms of types of organisations, women are more likely to volunteer for a community welfare organisation (39% females: 31% males). Men, on the other hand, are more likely to volunteer for sport or recreational organisations (44% males: 26% females) (ABS 2001). Although trends have changed since women have entered paid work in large numbers, there are still stereotypical differences in the activities undertaken (for a historical account, see Baldock 1990; Oppenheimer 2002). Thus, recent data shows that women are more likely to volunteer in counselling or befriending roles (28%), and in preparing and serving food (47%). Men, on the other hand, are more likely to volunteer as coaches or referees (29%), in maintenance roles (38%), or on management committees (50%) (ABS 2001). A feminist analysis suggests that the danger of volunteer work is that it maintains women's roles in stereotypical and devalued activities and may further

act to marginalise women (Baldock 1998; Leonard & Burns 2003).

It is interesting to note that having spare time is not the defining issue for whether an individual volunteers (Warburton & Crosier 2001). According to national data there is a higher volunteer rate among those who probably have less spare time, such as those in paid work, and women with dependent children (ABS 2001). Volunteer motivation is complex and multifaceted, but what is interesting is that it is affected by the social context (Warburton et al. 2001). Thus, groups marginalized by the labour market or social attitudes may be less likely to offer themselves as volunteers.

The interesting question is: does the non-profit sector sanction these processes and practices? The myth of pure virtue associated with the sector has been debunked (McDonald 2000). Ageism, sexism, and racism are just as capable of occurring in the non-profit world. It is important, therefore, that marginalization of the kind suggested here as it pertains to volunteers is addressed by organisations, particularly as change occurs across the sector. It is this notion of change that we will examine next.

FROM CHARITY TO SOCIAL ENTERPRISE MODELS

Community services and non-profit organisations are operating within an environment that has experienced rapid change over the last decade. As a result of these external and internal changes, many non-profit organisations are re-examining their approach to volunteers. Several studies have suggested that we are witnessing the emergence of a new 'model' or 'type' of volunteering that is different to the 'traditional' or 'charity' model that characterised community services for so long (McDonald & Warburton 2003; Zappala 2001). It is argued that this 'new' or 'social enterprise' model has implications for issues such as volunteer recruitment, the types of volunteer activities, training, recognition and staff-volunteer relations (Zappala 2001).

In the current environment, there is pressure on organisations to move from a charity type model to that of social enterprise (Zappala 2001). There are a number of drivers for such change. Government funding mechanisms have resulted in growing competition for funding, which in turn has put pressure on the sector to adopt business-like principles (Kerr

& Savelsberg 2001; Lyons 1997; Warburton & Mutch 2000). Many of these organisations are now being led by a new type of professional manager drawn from the business or management sectors. A tighter legislative and regulatory framework has challenged traditional ways of operating with, for example, changes to workplace health and safety requirements. This, combined with higher expectations of service levels, has led to organisations adopting a social enterprise model of volunteering.

These changes have led to a growing trend towards the professionalisation of volunteers (Warburton & Mutch 2000). There is less need for unskilled volunteers, and a declining need for 'charity' model volunteers. The future may see less of a role for those who merely want to serve, indicated perhaps in the declining numbers of volunteers for organisations such as meals on wheels. For those in traditional volunteer occupations, the environment has certainly become more complex. Thus, those serving food have to be aware of health regulations and requirements; those in caring roles need to pay attention to potential abuse and neglect of clients and have to submit to background checks.

While many would argue that these changes are important and necessary to protect both clients and volunteers, especially in an increasingly litigious society, there are other implications that should be considered. Specifically, what are the implications for those who are already marginalized through lack of access to paid work or through other disadvantage? These changes could well result in *fewer* opportunities for this group - the old, the young, those from a low socio-economic background, the culturally and linguistically diverse, the unemployed. This should be a concern for all of us involved in volunteering.

The existence of a dichotomous model, such as charity and social enterprise, could be said to neglect the complexity of the volunteer world. There are undoubtedly a range of models and ways of operating. There is widespread evidence of change across the sector, and with such change, a need to ensure that social and economic exclusion is not played out here as in paid employment. A diversity of models and opportunities could be a positive move for volunteering and the sector, provided that diversity is addressed. Organisations need to consider ways by which everyone can participate as a volunteer and in building community.

Inclusive recruitment strategies are particularly important if organisations are to attract people new to volunteering. Some of the indicators suggest that groups which currently volunteer less may be very useful to recruit, as the evidence suggests that they may give more time and remain with organisations longer (ABS 2001). These are cost effective strategies for a sector strapped for cash and where training is becoming more essential. It may be that there are many people in the community who want to be involved but are unsure of how to go about it. There are also suggestions that organisations that attract and retain their volunteers may be the ones that have the infrastructure to create a safe, supportive and well-managed environment. Adequately funded organisations are more able to do this. There are clear implications here for human resource management in the sector. These implications are addressed in the final section of the paper.

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

While volunteer labour makes a significant contribution to many non-profit organisations and the broader economy, the area of human resource management has often lagged behind especially as it pertains to volunteer workers (Cuskelly & Brosnan 2001; Oppenheimer 2001; Oppenheimer 2002). There have been major shifts and changes to the non-profit sector over the past ten years. The environment within which it works is changing and is being continually reshaped by important social, economic and political trends. The sector is becoming an increasingly important source of employment and work - both paid and unpaid. The human resource management issues faced by both paid workers and volunteers in the sector are inter-related and closely connected, and the 'presence of volunteers creates an additional and unique set of HR issues' (Betcherman 1998).

A key point to be made here is that volunteer labour is not 'free'. In order to prevent the marginalisation of volunteers within organisations, volunteer labour requires a certain amount of investment, similar to that of a paid employee in terms of time, money and effort. Organisations should pay close attention to a number of areas such as the writing of position descriptions, recruiting, training, managing

and supervising volunteers. Indeed the need for non-profit organisations to invest (both in time and money) in their volunteers may be increasingly important if people are to see the sector as a place in which to gain skills and possible future employment.

According to a Canadian study carried out in 1998, it was found that the lack of basic human resource management information and policies placed constraints on the non-profit sector's ability to cope with the increasing pressures, especially when there was an increase in the overall use of volunteers. Key human resource issues include volunteer management, recruitment and retention; volunteer board management training; skills training; recognition of volunteer contributions; leadership training; liability and insurance issues; and managing and encouraging diversity such as cultural, age and income differences (Betcherman 1998).

Non-profit organisations, therefore, need to address these issues to ensure that volunteers do not experience additional disadvantage by virtue of their volunteer activities. It is essential that they are mentored and supported in their volunteer positions within organisations. Volunteers need to be valued as co-workers and given recognition, policies, procedures and processes. Through this strategy, organisations can develop commitment and strong relationships with their volunteers; and create an environment that is conducive to volunteer retention. Thus, it is important to develop appropriate recruitment and management strategies, particularly for those with special needs. This is important because stereotyping around gender, class or ethnicity in the non-profit world could affect people even more than in the paid labour market because it is a 'voluntary' activity. Governments clearly have an important role here because non-profit organisations have a strong relationship with state and federal governments with implications for funding, regulation. Governments must not renege on its role and debate is needed to ensure that the full extent of this role is assessed and assured.

CONCLUSION

With ongoing change occurring across the third sector generally, it is essential that social and economic exclusion is not played out in non-profit

organisations as well. It is important organisations' recruitment and human resource management practices are inclusive, and that suitable volunteer opportunities are available for everyone.

The increased publicity surrounding high profile, special interest volunteering needs to be utilised by the sector to attract volunteers across the broad spectrum of society. Change in relation to models and opportunities for volunteering could be a positive move, provided that diversity is addressed. Volunteering is not the poor second cousin of paid employment but contributes much towards personal growth as well as social and economic development.

Volunteering involves free choice, but in a world of high unemployment and growing need, it is time to set differences apart and look at how more people can be socially included as volunteers. This cannot be achieved through policies such as mutual obligation which has a negative impact on both participants and organisations. Instead, people should be attracted to volunteering as a positive way of spending time, learning and developing while at the same time doing a useful activity that benefits the broader community. Governments have a role to ensure that adequate funding is provided to support organisations in their move towards inclusive practices. The result would be an increase in bridging social capital and the development of a true civil society inclusive of all Australians.

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