

The role of the psychological contract in volunteer retention

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Abstract 108**

Retaining volunteers has been a critical issue for organizations utilizing volunteer labor (e.g., Cuskelly, 2006; Kim, Chelladurai, & Trail, 2007; Wymer, Jr. & Starnes, 2001). Although, turnover of volunteers is not as problematic or expensive as that of paid-employees, it is undeniable that it is still costly, both financially and non-financially. These costs have risen for many sport organizations in the last decade because the number of people volunteering for these types of organizations has dropped significantly from 1989 to 2005 (Grimm, Jr., Dietz, & Foster-Bey, 2006). Thus, retaining volunteers is more imperative than before. Because of this, researchers have suggested several models to enhance volunteer retention in sport contexts (e.g., Cuskelly, 2004, 2006; Kim et al., 2007). One of these studies is Kim et al.'s (2007) research on youth sport volunteers, which showed that the fully mediating effect of empowerment on the relationship between Person-Organization Fit (P-O Fit), Person-Task Fit (P-T Fit), and Managerial Treatment (MT) and intention for retention as a whole. P-O Fit is how well the employee's personal values and goals mesh with the organization's values and goals while P-J Fit is determined by how well the employee's abilities match the demands of the task. Empowerment is defined as intrinsic motivation reflecting one's orientation to his or her work role. The results of Kim et al.'s study is in accordance with previous results in the business literature (e.g., Barker & Camarata, 1998; Brkich, et al., 2002; Chen, 2005; Eby, et al., 1999; Spreitzer, 1995; Spreitzer & Mishra, 2002). We feel that the concept of psychological contract (PC) has been used in some instances to explain positive outcomes of volunteering or of being employed and that its inclusion in the model will help explain additional variance in empowerment and return intentions beyond the existing variables. PC is defined as "an individual's beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between that person and another party" (Rousseau, 1989, p.501). Thus, we are proposing to modify Kim et al.'s model of volunteer retention which includes the concept of PC. In addition, MT was not included in the proposed models because MT of Kim et al.'s study, unlike the other independent variables, did not measure the match between the expectation and the experience.

Models: In the current study, three retention models were proposed and tested. First, based on the psychological contract theory (e.g., Argyris, 1960; Blau, 1964, Rousseau, 1989), we felt that the relationship between Fits (P-O and P-T fits) and Empowerment is influenced by the level of the perceived psychological contract that the individual has with the organization. For those with lower levels of perceived PC the relationship between fit and empowerment will be more positive. As perceived PC increases, the relationship between fit and empowerment will decrease. Thus, we proposed the moderated model. In addition, two mediated models, fully mediated and partially mediated models, were proposed based on the notions that Fits is an antecedent of PC and the Empowerment is an outcome of PC. That is, the significant relationships between Fits and Empowerment, which was shown in Kim et al.'s study (2007), would decrease (partially mediated model) or disappear (fully mediated model) when PC is introduced between Fits and Empowerment.

Methods and Results: The data of the current study were from 227 Special Olympics volunteers in a Midwest state, US (Females = 148; Males = 76). The ages of the sample were almost evenly distributed from 18 to 78; about 50% of the respondents had a college degree; more than 85% have full-time jobs; and approximately 55% were married.

Instrument: Fits was measured by five items of Lauver and Kristof-Brown's study (2001) and PC was measured by three questions directly asking the PC fulfillment in three different areas (work duties, socialization, and learning/career). Empowerment was measured by nine items in three dimensions of Spreitzer's (meaning, competence, and self-determination, 1995). Two items were used to measure Intention to Continue Volunteering.

Data Analysis and Results- Measurement Model: Mplus v.4.21 was used to test both measurement and structural models. The CFA results of the measurement model were acceptable. The chi-square per degree of freedom ratio (272.81/137) was 1.991 and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was .067. The internal consistency estimates range from .79 to .91. All Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeded .50, which indicates that all of constructs were represented well by the items. The correlations among variables were from .34 to .69.

Results-Model Fits and Comparisons: The fit indices for all of the three structural models tested were acceptable and all path coefficients in all models were significant. The fully mediated model (chi-square/df [417.115/146] =2.857, RMSEA= .091, CFI=.904) and the partially mediated model (chi-square/df [284.297/145] =1.961, RMSEA = .066, CFI= .950) fit the data well but the results of the moderated model (chi-square/df [222.722/143] =1.557, RMSEA = .050, CFI= .963) showed even better fit.

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Discussion: The purpose of the study was to explore the effect of Psychological Contract on the volunteer retention model previously proposed and tested in Kim et al.'s study (2007). As expected, the PC fulfillment of volunteers influenced volunteer retention model. All of three models (fully mediated, partially mediated, and moderated models) were acceptable. However, the moderated model fit the data better than the other two models and was accepted as tenable. In the moderated model, the relationship between Fits and Empowerment was negatively influenced by the level of the volunteer's PC fulfillment. That is, when PC was fulfilled well, the relationship between Fits and Empowerment was weak while Fits strongly influenced Empowerment when PC of the volunteer was not met or poorly met. Thus, it is important for the organization to explain and advertise volunteer positions clearly and let potential or current volunteers set realistic PC. By doing so, the organization can help their volunteers to be empowered regardless of the level of the actual fit between the volunteer's abilities and values and the volunteer task and organization. In addition, we chose the moderated model as the best model because of its better fit indices than two other models; however, the fits of the other two models were not poor; thus, it is necessary to test all of three models again with different samples in further research. Also, the current study was conducted on Special Olympic volunteers in a State; thus, the results cannot be generalized to other sport volunteers in different areas. Replication of this study in other volunteer settings should be followed.

References will be provided upon request.