

**Exploring the Volunteer Life Cycle: A Preliminary Investigation of Back on My Feet Volunteers**

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Volunteers are an indispensable segment of the workforce, contributing time, knowledge, skills, and resources to the success of many organizations. In 2010, over sixty-three million Americans contributed more than eight billion hours of volunteer service, resulting in just under \$170 billion in economic value to the US economy (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2010). The economic impact of volunteerism is substantial and tangible, with the value of volunteers' donated time estimated at \$20 per hour (Eisner, 2009). Nonprofit sport organizations, in particular, have grown to rely heavily upon volunteer participation. For example, sport and recreation organizations account for over twenty-six percent of total volunteer participation in Australia, the most prevalent segment of that country's nonprofit sector (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2007). In the US, 3.8% of volunteers donate their time to sport, hobby, cultural, or art organizations, and 10.1% of male volunteers coach, referee, or supervise sport teams (United States Department of Labor, 2011).

Despite the popularity of sport and recreation volunteering, this sector is not immune to concerns of volunteer retention. Since 2005, roughly one-third of America's volunteer workforce failed to volunteer during the subsequent calendar year (Eisner, 2009; United States Department of Labor, 2011). Indeed, volunteer retention has been identified as a significant challenge for community-based nonprofit sport organizations, as attrition limits the ability of such organizations to provide consistent, high-quality member services (Kim, Chelladurai, & Trail, 2007). In order for volunteer-based organizations to manage the costly continual cycle of recruitment and loss, indicators of potential volunteer withdrawal should be identified.

Several authors have used a marketing approach to examine issues of volunteer recruitment and retention (Bussell & Forbes, 2003; Green & Chalip, 1998) but this approach fails to recognize the underlying dynamics of volunteers' ongoing exchange relationships with an organization. In addition, numerous conceptual models have described the manner in which volunteer involvement develops over time but have failed to identify and empirically test the dropout point within the volunteer life cycle (Gaskin, 2003; Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008). While research on volunteers and volunteering has grown significantly in recent years, a comprehensive understanding of volunteers' career trajectory remains ambiguous. Empirical research is needed to identify and test temporal and psychological indicators at which point volunteers may be in danger of dropping out. Thus, the current study examines psychological and temporal aspects of the volunteer lifecycle in the context of Back on My Feet (BOMF), a running-based community service organization which helps the homeless and underserved population within the US by engaging them in regular physical activity.

Social exchange theory provides a useful framework with which to examine volunteers' tenure and the lifecycle in nonprofit sport organizations. Scholars suggest volunteers expect to receive some type of benefit, such as skill development or social fulfillment, as a result of their participation (Cnaan et al, 1996; Dolnicar & Randle, 2007). Accordingly, the act of volunteering is a continuing relationship based upon the exchange of costs and benefits (Fitch, 1987). To sustain volunteer engagement for any length of time, benefits must meet or exceed one's costs of involvement (Schafer, 1980).

Volunteers' perceptions of their exchange relationship with an organization will weigh heavily upon volunteer outcomes such as future intention, satisfaction, and psychological involvement with the organization over time. Future intention represents a significant factor in one's initial decision to engage in volunteer activity (Okun & Sloane, 2002) as well as one's determination of their subsequent level of involvement (Greenslade & White, 2005).

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Future intention also reflects the importance and influence of key related psychological indicators. A distinct connection between volunteers' satisfaction, future intentions, and actual turnover behavior exists (Bang & Ross, 2009), with satisfaction enhancing one's future intentions of volunteering with an organization to the extent that one's expectations are fulfilled (Galindo-Kuhn & Guzley, 2001). Previous research supports a link between volunteers' level of involvement and key behavioral outcomes (Davila & Chacon, 2004). Accordingly, this study used a cross-sectional approach to examine these psychological indicators across tenure groups.

Three separate studies were conducted over a two year period. An online questionnaire was distributed to BOMF volunteers for data collection. The survey assessed three key psychological measures (psychological involvement, satisfaction, and future intention to continue volunteering). Length of volunteer service was initially evaluated using categories of: <1 month, 1-3 months, 4-6 months, 7-9 months, 10-12 months, and > 12 months, however the abundance of long-term volunteers prompted the researchers to modify these tenure periods for the third sample. Tenure groups for this sample were categorized as <2 months, 2-4 months, 4-6 months, 7-12 months, 13-18 months, and >19 months. The characteristics of all three samples were consistently representative of the larger volunteer workforce in that the respondents were primarily female, Caucasian, and had higher levels of education and income (Clary et al, 1998).

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted for each separate study in order to examine trends in mean scores for each psychological indicator across tenure periods. For Study 1, future intention showed no significant differences across tenure groups, however, satisfaction  $F(5, 387) = 3.63, p = .003$  and psychological involvement  $F(5, 387) = 2.85, p = .015$  did vary significantly according to tenure. Both of these indicators increased steadily across tenure periods, peaking for the 10-12 month cohort, and then dropping sharply for those with over one year of tenure. In Study 2, only psychological involvement  $F(5, 229) = 4.08, p = .001$  varied significantly across tenure groups. This indicator exhibited a trend in mean scores similar to that found in Study 1, with initially low scores trending upward and peaking for the 10-12 month cohort before once again declining sharply. In Study 3, future intention  $F(5, 384) = 2.81, p = .017$ , satisfaction  $F(5, 384) = 3.29, p = .006$ , and psychological involvement  $F(5, 384) = 7.00, p < .001$  all varied significantly with regard to tenure. All three variables of interest followed a pattern similar to that established in the first two studies, with initially lower mean scores increasing to a peak as volunteers approach one year of service, then decreasing sharply for the 13-18 month cohort before rising again for long-term volunteers with over 19 months of service.

These findings provide empirical support for many of the conceptual models previously suggested while also identifying distinct temporal markers aligned with significant changes in psychological indicators associated with volunteer retention. During the first six months of service with an organization, volunteers appear to be in a honeymoon phase (Wymer & Starnes, 2001) while they may still be determining the exact parameters of their exchange relationship with the organization. Psychological indicators slowly trended upward during an apparent maturation stage, peaking after one year of service, before entering a stage of decline. Interestingly, results of the third study indicate that revitalization occurs for volunteers with over 19 months of service. This lifecycle provides empirical support for McCurley and Lynch's (1996) anniversary effect, indicating that volunteers may re-evaluate the costs and benefits of their ongoing exchange relationship with the organization as milestone anniversaries approach. Additionally, the identification of a lifecycle affords the organization an opportunity to introduce well-timed, strategic initiatives designed to reinforce the value of volunteers' involvement, potentially extending the lifecycle and addressing factors which may contribute to volunteer attrition.