The Paralympic Volunteer: Exploring Motivations and Experiences of Unpaid Staff at the 2014 Sochi Paralympic Winter Games

Joshua Pate, James Madison University
Robin Hardin, University of Tennessee

Management/leadership

Thursday, June 2, 2016

20-minute oral presentation (including questions)

Abstract 2016-053

1:40 PM

Forum East 4

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of volunteers who worked the 2014 Sochi Paralympic Winter Games. Mega-events such as the Olympic Games draw the interest of researchers for good reason, but the Paralympic Games are an understudied phenomenon despite the size of the mega-event (Gilbert & Schantz, 2008; Prystupa, Prystupa, & Bolach, 2006). More specifically, there has been little effort to capture the experiences of volunteers at the Paralympic Games. Volunteers are essential for the successful operation and management of sporting events (Berlonghi, 1994; Daly, 1991; Farrell, Johnston, & Twynam, 1998; Green & Chalip, 1998; Strigas & Jackson, 2003a; 2003b; Williams, Dossa, & Tompkins, 1995). Event organizers have a plethora of responsibilities and turn to volunteers to assist in the operation of the event and to help offset the costs of staging an event (Farrell et al., 1998; Strigas & Jackson, 2003a). The growing use of volunteers at sporting events and the importance of volunteers to the successful operation of sporting events make volunteer recruitment, management, and retention essential duties of sport managers and event planners.

Scholars have found a variety of motivations among volunteers. Clary et al. (1998) used a functional approach in examining volunteer motivations and proposed six dimensions as to why people volunteer: (a) values—volunteering on principles, (b) understanding—to desire to gain knowledge or skills, (c) self-enhancement—volunteering for sense of fulfillment, (d) career—volunteering for career advancement or networking, (e) social—volunteering to meet people or spend time with friends, and (f) protective—volunteering as a way of escape from life’s everyday worries. Wang and Wu (2014) found motivations consisted of doing something good for the community and for career enhancement. Bang and Chelladuria (2003) identified the motive of patriotism that is present in large-scale events held on a world stage as volunteers want their country to be portrayed positively. There is also a motivation of tangible rewards such as clothing, access, tickets, and food (Bang & Chelladuria, 2003) as well as the notion of continuing a tradition in volunteering and the pure enjoyment of volunteering (Wollebaek, Skristad, & Hanstad, 2014). Finally, some volunteers are motivated by a need to believe their services are useful and beneficial to the organization or event (Wollebaek, Skristad, & Hanstad, 2014).

A unique approach to volunteering for the Paralympics is the notion of “love of sport” and in this case, all of Paralympic sport. Bang and Ross (2009) found that their association with running motivated marathon volunteers. This was also found in regards to golf by Coyne and Coyne (2001) and Love, Koo, Hardin, and Morse (2011). An affinity with the sport was true for tennis (Pauline & Pauline, 2009), soccer (Bang & Chelladuria, 2003), and snow skiing (Wollebaek, Skristad, & Hanstad, 2014). There can also be a desire for Paralympic volunteers to provide the best experience possible for the athletes (Kim, Zhang, & Connaughton, 2010). Wang and Wu (2014) found this in their examination of volunteers for the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. There was not necessarily love for a particular sport but love for the event itself (Ferrell et al., 1998; Wang & Wu, 2014). Wilson (2012) also proposed examining volunteerism in the context of the organization or the event, and the Paralympics provide an excellent opportunity for this.

Participants were invited through convenience sampling (e.g., in-person invitations during the volunteer experience) and snowball sampling (e.g., invitations were posted on social media sites for Sochi volunteers) following the conclusion of the 2014 Sochi Paralympic Winter Games (Creswell, 2009). The final sample included 10 participants from five countries. Skype interviews were conducted with eight of the participants, while e-mail interviews were conducted with two participants. This study used Bang and Chelladurais’s (2003) six motivational factors of (1) expression of values, (2) patriotism, (3) interpersonal contacts, (4) personal growth, (5) career orientation, and (6) extrinsic rewards along with a seventh motivational factor tested by Bang and Ross (2009): love of sport.
Experiences were analyzed thematically as constant comparative method was used to construct Level 1 codes and ultimately group the related codes into themes, or natural meaning units (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Findings revealed that five of Bang and Chelladurai’s (2003) six factors were present among Paralympic volunteers: expression of values (volunteers served due to a concern for society), patriotism (volunteers sought pride in their country and being in a global environment), interpersonal contacts (volunteers desired a social networking opportunity), personal growth (volunteers desired valuable work tasks), and career orientation (volunteers anticipated the opportunity to enhance their resumes). The sixth factor of extrinsic rewards was not present among the volunteers. Interestingly, Bang and Ross’s (2009) seventh factor, love of sport, was not a motivation to volunteer but did become present during the volunteer experience.

Implications for mega-event organizers suggest that they do not need to target sport-specific individuals to work an event but rather promote community contributions, patriotism, career enhancement, and the experience overall (Bang & Chelladurai, 2003; Wang & Wu, 2014; Wollebaek et al., 2014). Given that the volunteers had little experience working in sport, event organizers should seek volunteers with varying backgrounds, understanding they will develop their own love for the sport or event (Ferrell et al., 1998; Wang & Wu, 2014). Furthermore, event organizers should trust volunteers with responsible positions. Volunteers are often used to fill roles with low responsibility, and the volunteers in this study felt underused in their work roles. Not all volunteers can be placed in decision-making and management roles, but they can be trusted with greater responsibility to validate their investment, which may include international travel at mega-events like the Paralympic Games. More specific to the Paralympic Games, findings from this study show that organizing committees can take this as an opportunity to inform volunteers about the movement in order to increase investment in the games. Volunteers may not have a direct interest in the sport, which is in contrast to prior research (Bang & Chelladurai, 2003; Bang & Ross, 2009; Coyne & Coyne, 2001; Love et al., 2011; Pauline & Pauline, 2009; Wollebaek et al., 2014). Still, organizers can use the event to educate others on the values of Paralympic sport and expand the global movement knowing that love of sport can exist after the actual experience.