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Commitment and Tenure of Highly Skilled Volunteers: Management Issues in a Nonprofit Agency

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by

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Recognizing that turnover in an agency's volunteer population is especially costly in the case of highly trained volunteers, we analyzed data from a nationwide survey of crisis and suicide intervention volunteers to identify variables contributing to volunteers' attachment to their crisis center. We measured attachment both as level of commitment during the volunteer's association with the center and the length their association at the time of the survey. Although little of the variation in commitment levels could be explained, statistically significant variables included two variables under management discretion, whether agencies urged volunteers not to disclose their relationship to the center, and the proportion of the center's volunteer workforce comprised of students. In the regression explaining the length of volunteers' association with the center, agencies that provided opportunities for face-to-face counseling experience, reflecting diversity of tasks and the possibility of advancement, were seen to retain their volunteers longer. Other significant variables readily available to the agency when screening volunteer applicants include student status, age among the nonstudent population, and whether the volunteer was pursuing a career to which crisis skills were related.
We are grateful to the University of San Francisco's Institute for Nonprofit Organization Management for their encouragement and financial support, and to Andy Trasowech and the Claremont Graduate School for research assistance.
Human capital in the form of volunteer labor is an important and, often, undermanaged resource in our society. Volunteers perform valuable labor, providing services that society would otherwise have to purchase or do without. Agencies that utilize highly skilled volunteers to provide services invest many resources in the selection and training of their unpaid workforce. Therefore, retention of volunteers is often a primary goal of not-for-profit agency managers and is necessary for the agencies' continuing services to society. Objectives of this research were to discover the demographic and personality profile of a group of highly skilled volunteers and determine individual and organizational factors which might influence commitment and retention of volunteer labor.

THEORETICAL ISSUES

Volunteerism is a result of many personal individual motivations. However, all volunteer activity conforms to March and Simon's (1958) classic inducements/contributions theory. March and Simon argue that

1. Each participant receives inducements (rewards) from the organization in exchange for his or her contribution.

2. The individual continues to participate so long as the inducements he or she receives are greater than his or her contributions.
Tosi (1984: 75) points out that the evaluation of inducements and contributions "may be measured by the individual in terms of his own values, which may reflect or include those other than economic." In a pilot study (Brown & Zahrly, 1989), three motives for volunteering at crisis centers were discovered: (1) "leisure" or social value, (2) investment in skills development for careers, and (3) "psychic income" or the feeling of internally generated rewards. The feelings of psychic reward could include altruism, attempts to alleviate guilt, attempts to maintain a psychologically healthy self, as well as a host of other feelings.

Sills (1957) found that some volunteers were motivated by the ideals and the activities of the organization. Other volunteers may use service at a crisis center to develop career skills. This has to be termed an economic value, even though the dollar value of this education can not be calculated. The other motivations (agency ideals, social value, etc.) are non-economic and also can not be calculated in financial terms. If researchers can discover individual traits or organizational characteristics which are associated with the choice of volunteer agencies, with the commitment of volunteers, and with the retention of volunteer labor, agency administrators could better select, manage, and retain skilled volunteers.

Organizational commitment is the relative strength of a person's identification with and involvement in an organization (Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974). High organizational
commitment is positively correlated with employee participation, low absenteeism, low turnover, job involvement, and job satisfaction (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982). They have delineated three factors which indicate a strong commitment to the organization: (1) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values, (2) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization, and (3) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization. High organizational commitment by the volunteer to the agency is desired since there are no financial contracts and few rewards available for dissemination by agency management. Additionally, high agency commitment should deter turnover or propensity to leave.

While research on avocational preferences is almost nonexistent, the vocational preferences literature is rich, diverse, and theory-based. Individuals prefer and choose particular vocations based on many factors. However, the underlying factor in most vocational theories is personality (Holland, 1966, 1976; Osipow, 1973; Roe, 1956; Super 1957). A more recent development in vocational choice theory is that of personality style. Osipow (1973: 174) characterizes this viewpoint: "needs and personality in general lead to patterns of behavior that characterize the individual in all the settings in which it operates." Following this line of reasoning, personality style might also influence avocational choices for volunteer activity.

Individual difference variables and organizational variables
were used to predict commitment to the volunteer agency and tenure at the agency. Greater knowledge of the relationships between individual difference variables and commitment to the center could aid administrators during the selection process. Organizational variables are determined by agency managers and can be changed to improve the retention of volunteers.

**Individual Variables**

Individual personality and demographic variables were used to predict commitment to the volunteer agency and tenure at the agency. While these variables are not under management control, they are readily observable and may provide information useful in screening potential volunteer. Sex, age, and student status data were collected. Because the pilot study revealed a desire to acquire career skills as one motive for skilled volunteer activity, respondents were asked whether crisis intervention skills were relevant to their chosen careers.

Locus of control is a personality variable related to turnover. As conceptualized by Rotter (1966), locus of control is a measure of individual attributions regarding control and causality of events. Persons who have an internal locus of control tend to believe that they have great control over their activities and perceive a relationship between their actions and subsequent rewards. Those who have an external locus of control believe that they have little control over events or rewards. Blau (1987) and Griffeth and Hom (1988) have demonstrated the moderating effects
of locus of control on turnover and withdrawal cognitions. This study utilized locus of control as a predictor of organizational commitment because several studies have suggested that the propensity to become committed to the organization may be personality based and/or may be pre-existing before membership in the organization (Bateman & Strasser, 1984; Pierce & Dunham, 1987; Reichers, 1985). Job commitment for those volunteers who were employed was also measured. This assessment occurred as a control to determine the individual propensity to commit to any organization, whether for employment or for volunteer labor. We also look at whether or not the volunteer attends religious services regularly to see whether this form of observed commitment might be related to commitment to the nonprofit agency.

Organizational Variables

Managers of nonprofit organizations have discretion over the composition of their workforce, task assignments and opportunities for advancement, training, etc. much like their counterparts in the for-profit sector. This study of skilled volunteers and accredited crisis centers allowed several organizational variables to be utilized as predictors of tenure and agency commitment. The percentage of student volunteers was included to account for its possible effect on the atmosphere and organizational culture of the volunteer workplace. Agency staff and senior volunteers typically select the volunteers, so the percentage of student volunteers is an organizational variable. Students may also need more
supervision initially since they tend to be younger and have less life experience to draw upon when counselling.

The number of required training hours is at the discretion of the agency administrator and may be a factor which influences commitment. The greater the number of required hours for training, the greater the individual's investment and the greater the likelihood of "side-bets" leading to commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1984).

The primary task of all crisis centers in the study was telephone crisis intervention. Therefore, all volunteers in the study were likely to be telephone counselors. However, the possibility of face-to-face counseling and/or intervention was included as a predictor variable. In order to be a face-to-face counselor, a volunteer would have to undergo additional training and accept greater responsibility for life and death decisions. In return, the face-to-face counselor is developing skills that, for some volunteers, may be valued in the for-pay labor market. Again, it is suggested that the opportunity to perform face-to-face counselling increases the time and psychic investment of the volunteer (Meyer & Allen, 1984). This could lead to greater commitment and longer tenure. The decision to offer face-to-face crisis intervention is at the discretion of agency management and, as such, is a management-controlled variable.

Finally, an organizational variable which may influence volunteer commitment and tenure is the level of public disclosure regarding volunteers performing crisis intervention activities.
Since many of the agency clients are emotionally unstable, some crisis centers insist on anonymity for volunteer counselors. Some agency managers believe that this policy provides more safety for the counselors than does a policy of public disclosure of volunteer activity. Other centers prefer non-disclosure of volunteer identity because crisis intervention is typically anonymous initially and clients might be afraid to use the services of the center if they felt they might know the counselors. In short, non-disclosure of identity provides a shield for both client and counselor. On the other hand, the volunteer who wishes to take public pride in his or her volunteer activity is thwarted by a policy of non-disclosure. Such a person would have to derive intrinsic motivation from other factors (Deci, 1975) and forgo the public praise for volunteerism in the community. Agency policy about disclosure is not mandated by accreditation standards.

METHODOLOGY

The subjects of this study were 1086 volunteers at 30 accredited crisis centers throughout the United States in 1986. The American Association of Suicidology (AAS), a professional association of practitioners and academicians who are involved in suicide prevention and crisis intervention, maintain a rigid set of standards for accreditation. At the time of the study, 43 centers had AAS accreditation. All accredited centers were invited to participate. Some reported they did not use volunteers. Of the 32 responding centers who have volunteers, 30 centers participated
in this study. Invitations to participate and questionnaires were distributed in one of two ways. The method of distribution was determined by center directors and/or boards. Five agencies provided names and addresses of volunteers to the researcher so individual questionnaires were mailed directly to the volunteers. Other agencies chose to hand out the questionnaire at volunteer meetings or at the crisis center. All questionnaires were accompanied by a cover letter giving the general focus of the study and inviting the volunteer to participate. A pre-paid, addressed envelope accompanied the questionnaires so all responses were mailed directly to the researcher. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. The only identifying data specified the particular agency with which the volunteer was associated.

Approximately 2500 questionnaires were distributed and 1086 were returned for a 44% response rate. There was no significant difference in response rates for those centers which distributed the questionnaire and those centers where questionnaires were mailed directly to the volunteer by the researcher. Response rates by center ranged from 2.5% to 94%, indicating significant differences in levels of participation.

Variables

Locus of control (Rotter, 1966), commitment to the crisis center and commitment to the work organization were measured using multi-item standardized scales. Locus of control was measured by
20 pairs of statements (Rotter, 1966). Internal reliability (consistency) of this scale was .73, calculated by the Cronbach coefficient alpha formula (1951).

A 15-item commitment scale (Porter, et al., 1974) was administered. This scale measured commitment to the crisis center and commitment to the employing organization (for those volunteers who had jobs for pay) on a 7-point continuum. Internal consistency for the commitment to the Crisis Center scale was .90 and was .92 for the commitment to the job for pay scale.

Age, sex, months of tenure at the center, and student status were measured by the volunteer questionnaire. Since students tend to be young and in a particular life stage, they were separated from the non-student volunteers when using age as a predictor variable. A separate questionnaire to center directors asked for the percentage of volunteers who were students, the center policy on disclosure, the number of hours of required training, and whether face-to-face crisis intervention services were offered at the center.

The data were analyzed using correlation and regression techniques. The independent variables listed in Table I were used to predict commitment to the crisis center. Sex, student status, nondisclosure of volunteer counselling, availability of face-to-face counselling, religious participation, and the relevance of crisis skills to the volunteer's career were coded as dummy variables as noted in the tables. We included commitment to the job for pay as a moderator or control variable. Job commitment
was utilized in this manner because it may be an antecedent to crisis center commitment (Bateman & Strasser, 1984) or certain people may have a propensity to be highly committed to any organization, regardless of the employment or reward situation (Pierce & Dunham, 1987). The same predictor variables were used in the regression for tenure, with the exception of locus of control. Like commitment, locus of control is a personality-related variable; this is not true of the behavioral variable tenure, and preliminary explorations of the data showed no role of locus of control in affecting the volunteer's length of association with the crisis center. We also allowed the percentage of volunteers who were students to enter quadratically; in the commitment equation, the quadratic term was estimated to be very near zero and insignificant, and therefore was dropped from the estimation.

RESULTS

The average volunteer was 38 years old, white (92 percent of the sample), and had contributed volunteer time to the center for 30 months. Reported occupations were varied, with no profession predominant. Volunteers were internally oriented on the locus of control scale (.37 on a scale of 0-1), demonstrating that volunteers believed that the outcomes they experienced were directly related to their own actions and attitudes. They were highly committed to the crisis center (5.6 on a 7-point scale) and also quite committed to their jobs for pay (4.8 on a 7-point
scale). Commitment to the crisis center was significantly higher than commitment to the job for pay \( t = -16.3, p = .0000, 839 \text{ df} \). Forty percent of the centers urged their volunteers NOT to disclose that they were volunteers at the center.

Commitment to the crisis center and length of association with the center are our two measures of volunteer attachment to their center. These measures can be thought of as reflecting, respectively, the intensity and extensiveness of volunteer attachment. Results of the regression predicting commitment to the agency are shown in Table 1. Demographic variables having a statistically significant effect on commitment were sex and age. Both variables are significant at the .05 level and their signs reflect higher commitment among women and among older volunteers. Higher commitment among older volunteers is consistent with the idea that, early in adult life, people tend to "shop around" for rewarding volunteer opportunities, settling eventually into those activities which best suit them and to which they are correspondingly more committed. Reinforcing the idea that student status is a special stage in the life cycle is the positive effect of the dummy variable indicating student status; this variable is significant at the .10 level. Although among nonstudents older volunteers are more committed than younger ones, students, who tend to be young, have commitment scores about one quarter of a point higher than nonstudents, other things equal. This is almost twice as large as the effect of the dummy variable indicating sex, and student status increases commitment by as much as about an extra
50 years of age among the nonstudent population.

Hypothesizing that persons who showed commitment in other spheres of life might in general show more commitment to the center, we included as explanatory variables job commitment and religious attendance. Job commitment was statistically significant at the .01 level, with higher job commitment corresponding to higher volunteer commitment. The size of the effect, however, was small, with a one-point increase in the job commitment score (again, on a scale from one to seven) leading to a .08-point increase in volunteer commitment. Religious attendance, on the other hand, had no impact on volunteer commitment.

The regression included four variables describing characteristics of the agency's work environment that are under the control of center management. These variables are the number of training hours provided to new volunteers, the proportion of the volunteer workforce made up of students, whether or not volunteers have the opportunity to engage in face-to-face intervention activities (in contrast to working over the telephone), and whether volunteers are urged not to disclose their ties to the crisis center. The proportion of volunteers represented by students will be a hard variable for centers to vary substantially in many locations. Extra training hours and the provision of face-to-face intervention opportunities both entail substantial commitments of resources. The disclosure policy, in contrast, is fully under the control of center management and has no direct resource cost. Of the four variables, the nondisclosure variable seems to be the only
significant variable, achieving statistical significance at the .055 level. Those centers urging their volunteers not to disclose their roles as volunteers had the more committed volunteer workforces.

A variable that, while being beyond management's control, is available to management as a screening item is whether or not a potential volunteer has chosen a career to which crisis intervention skills are relevant. Although the dummy variable indicating that crisis work is relevant to the volunteer's career does not achieve statistical significance at conventional levels (it is significant at the .121 level), the point estimate indicates that volunteers choosing related careers tend to be more committed than others to the crisis center.

Our extensive measure of attachment to the crisis center is length of association. The regression results for this tenure variable are shown in Table 2. As with the commitment measure, we find that months of service are higher for students and, among the nonstudent population, for older volunteers. It should be noted of course that, since our dependent variable is months of service at the time of the questionnaire rather than completed spells of association, young volunteers have had fewer adult years in which to donate their services to the center. This makes the coefficient on the age variable seem somewhat circumstantial, and the coefficient on the student variable even more impressive. Both variables are significant at the .01 level.

Two of the four crisis center characteristics have a
statistically significant effect on tenure. Volunteers who work in a center where a large proportion of the volunteers are students are likely not to stay as long, even though the students themselves stay longer than nonstudents. The effect of the proportion students on tenure is negative but diminishing, as reflected in the respectively negative and positive coefficients on the linear and quadratic terms included in the equation. The linear term is significant at the .05 level and the quadratic term at the .055 level. This effect is small; even ignoring the moderating effect of the quadratic term, a one percentage point increase in the proportion students reduces tenure by only half a month.

The second feature of crisis centers that has a substantial impact on the tenure of its volunteers is whether it chooses to provide them with opportunities for face-to-face intervention. In centers providing this experience to its volunteers, the average volunteer had been at the center five and a half months longer than at centers not offering such services. This effect is significant at the .05 level.

Finally, volunteers who saw crisis work as related to their careers had been at their crisis center almost seven months longer than volunteers whose careers were unrelated to crisis services. This effect is significant at the .01 level.

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The regressions on commitment to the crisis center suggest a personality variable much like a "propensity toward
organizational commitment" because job commitment is positively and statistically significantly related to commitment in the volunteer setting. This lends support to the concept of "personality style" suggested by Osipow (1973). If managers of skilled volunteers are able to select applicants with higher commitment levels in general, those same volunteers will probably demonstrate higher commitment to the agency. The predicted magnitude of this effect, however, is small.

Management apparently has greater opportunities to affect volunteers' lengths of association than their measured levels of commitment during those associations. A screening procedure that favors potential volunteers who are either students, people in careers related to crisis services, or older volunteers, can substantially increase volunteer tenure. Providing volunteers with the opportunity to do face-to-face crisis work also reduces turnover in the volunteer population.

The number of hours a center devotes to training new volunteers has a notable lack of impact on either commitment or length of service. Perhaps this negative result stems from heterogeneity in this variable; the quality of training hours is not standardized across centers. If this result is not an artifact of poor variable measurement, however, its implication is clear: Training should be designed to maximize its contribution to the effectiveness of the crisis center, taking into account the resource costs of providing training but without regard to potential effects on volunteer commitment. For example, there is
no support for the notion that an especially well trained crisis worker is a more comfortable, hence a more attached, volunteer.
REFERENCES


TABLE 1

Regression Results Predicting Volunteer Commitment to Crisis Center
(N=642)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>coefficient</th>
<th>prob &gt; t</th>
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<tr>
<td>intercept</td>
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<td>.0001</td>
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<td>sex (1=male)</td>
<td>-.132</td>
<td>.0166</td>
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<td>student (1=yes)</td>
<td>.240</td>
<td>.0872</td>
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<tr>
<td>age (if non-student)</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.0432</td>
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<td>% student volunteers</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.2036</td>
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<tr>
<td>locus of control</td>
<td>.070</td>
<td>.6401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nondisclosure (1=yes)</td>
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<td>.0549</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of hours training</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.3495</td>
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<tr>
<td>face-to-face (1=available)</td>
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<td>.6052</td>
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<tr>
<td>job commitment</td>
<td>.083</td>
<td>.0003</td>
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<tr>
<td>relig. attend. (1=yes)</td>
<td>-.043</td>
<td>.4363</td>
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<tr>
<td>career skill (1=yes)</td>
<td>.092</td>
<td>.1210</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

\[F = 3.155\] \hspace{1cm} \text{Prob > F} = .0004
\[R^2 = .0521\] \hspace{1cm} \text{Adj. R}^2 = .0356
TABLE 2

Regression Results Predicting Tenure at Crisis Center

(N=885)

<table>
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<td>student (1=yes)</td>
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<td>age (if non-student)</td>
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<td>.0001</td>
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<tr>
<td>% student volunteers</td>
<td>-.576</td>
<td>.0151</td>
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<tr>
<td>(% students) squared</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>.0529</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nondisclosure (1=yes)</td>
<td>3.244</td>
<td>.2238</td>
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<tr>
<td># of hours training</td>
<td>.131</td>
<td>.2186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>face-to-face</td>
<td>5.461</td>
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<tr>
<td>(1=available)</td>
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<tr>
<td>relig. attend. (1=yes)</td>
<td>-3.535</td>
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<tr>
<td>career skill (1=yes)</td>
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F = 20.506  Prob > F = .0001
R2 = .1899  Adj. R2 = .1806