

COMMENTARY

IOP volunteerism: Acting as individuals, acting as a community

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Abstract

Tippins et al. (2023) challenge I-O psychologists to more actively – in Miller’s oft-quoted APA presidential address – “give psychology away.” Their article provides stirring examples of the impact several of our colleagues have made in giving psychology away. In thinking about how to encourage and facilitate more of us to volunteer, we’d like to share several thoughts on our roles as I-Os, both as individuals and as a community. In particular, we propose that volunteerism is an expression of our calling as I-Os; suggest five roles we can play as individuals; discuss three roles for the community at-large; and conclude with a call to action.

Keywords: Volunteerism; professional identity; industrial psychology; organizational psychology; industrial-organizational psychology

Volunteerism as an expression of our calling as I-Os

Tippins et al. (2023) challenge I-O psychologists to more actively — in Miller’s oft-quoted APA presidential address — “give psychology away.” Their article provides stirring examples of the impact several of our colleagues have made in giving psychology away. In thinking about how to encourage and facilitate more of us to volunteer, we’d like to share several thoughts on our roles as I-Os, both as individuals and as a community.

Many of us are involved in a variety of volunteer projects near and dear to our hearts — often short-term activities — on behalf of worthy nonprofit organizations but — doing work that does not necessarily draw on our I-O skills and experience; cleaning up strewn debris in cemeteries, helping to plant neighborhood vegetable gardens, dishing out meals in inner city soup kitchens, setting up emergency shelters for flood victims, and in a recent example, one of us helping homeless Ukrainian refugees on the streets of Brussels.

Although these activities are admirable, Tippins et al., focus more narrowly on leveraging — our skills and experiences as I-Os. For many of us, our professional role as an I-O psychologist is not merely a source of our livelihood, a job, something to which we dedicate talent and time on behalf of our employers or clients. For many of our colleagues, being an I-O psychologist is a *calling*. And viewing our careers as a calling has strong psychological and practical rewards.

Reed et al. (2022) identify four elements associated with seeing our careers as a calling:

1. *Effort*. Being fully committed to and engaged in exerting the effort required to get the work done.

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2. *Reflection*. Thinking deeply about the quality of one's work and genuinely examining what needs to be done to improve that quality, including dedicating greater time and attention to any self-development deemed to be required.
3. *Appraisal*. Very consciously developing strong self-awareness by actively seeking direct and indirect feedback on one's work.
4. *Identity*. Fusion between one's work role and one's self-identity, built on an alignment between one's personal values and the perceived purpose and culture of the organization where one is doing their work.

Dear reader, isn't this how you prefer seeing yourself as an I-O psychologist? We would argue that by investing time and effort on a voluntary basis as an I-O psychologist — outside the context of a defined, remunerated job — we are in effect declaring that our career transcends just a job. It is a *calling*. The payoff of seeing ourselves that way? Reed et al. (2022) provide strong research evidence that seeing one's role as a calling is associated with greater life satisfaction and with physical and emotional well-being. Moreover, experiencing voluntary activity as a reflection of seeing our careers as a calling stimulates greater focus on personal life-long development.

Individual volunteerism

In the examples given by the contributors to Tippins et al., and in our collective experiences and observations, there are many ways we as individual I-Os can give I-O away. Here are some key categories:

As institutional-level consultants to nonprofits in our communities

It is relatively easy to identify local charity organizations, social service agencies, educational and religious institutions, and local branches of national or even global organizations and find contact information for their professional or lay leaders. Set up a meeting. Like most organizations, these may well have challenges articulating their strategy, evaluating their programs, enhancing the leadership team's effectiveness, establishing a process for hiring new leaders or developing potential successors, and building a value proposition that would attract a larger number of volunteers. Do these tasks sound familiar? Of course, they do — it's what we do! Don't underestimate the value of what you bring; the expertise and methodologies needed to address their challenges. Indeed, in our experience, the leaders of these organizations often don't even know that there is a body of knowledge and experience out there to address their challenges.

As personal consultants

We know one retired I-O who helps young immigrants in the community where he lives apply to grad school and med school. He also helps build their interview skills, drawing on his years working in talent acquisition. Word of mouth has brought dozens of young people each year to his door. Another colleague counseled the recently unemployed in their job search and the recently retired in their transition to the new circumstances in their life, setting up shop in the local library. All it took was getting a local reporter to write a short column describing his I-O background, contact information, and hours of availability. Of course, there are organizations such as SCORE (as described by Moses in Tippins et al.), Young Presidents Organizations, and university-based innovation incubators through which individual I-Os can connect with people needing pro-bono coaching/consulting support. A dramatic instance of this recently was when one of our colleagues took on the role of a search consultant, looking to find employment opportunities for recently arrived Afghan refugees.

As employees

Many of us work in organizations that have clear corporate social responsibility statements. We can take the initiative to volunteer our time to bring the elements of that statement into reality. Similarly, as good organizational citizens, we can volunteer to act as sponsors, facilitators, or advisors to employee resource groups. Can we act as “volunteer multipliers,” for example, getting the organization to create an annual award for the individual or team that demonstrated exceptional acts of voluntarism? Can we take the personal initiative to more powerfully advocate to those who control our organization’s charitable priorities for causes we deem worthy and are particularly meaningful?

As force multiplier opportunists

Although discretionary time is a scarce resource, there are still ways in the course of plying our practice to live our lives as I-O practitioners as a calling by identifying opportunities to infuse broader beneficial societal impact in the course of our more routine project work. As an example, one of our colleagues was responsible for a midlevel leadership development program and found a way, beyond the defined mission of nurturing more effective leadership skills, to stimulate participants to realize deeper purpose to their work (Cardona *et al.*, 2019). She had them reflect deeply and redefine what their organizational leadership role means to their lives and then consider how that deeper understanding of their potential power as influencers can be extended to their roles within the broader communities in which they live and serve. As participants completed the program and returned to their communities, they wasted no time engaging their employees to increase their involvement in local community service. Soon the pages of social media were adorned with team photos of smiling faces at community service events. Investing the effort in the course of designing a leadership development program by adding an exercise intended to nurture a broader societal sense of leadership purpose resulted in the launch of multiple community service events across the country, in the process impacting the organization’s culture and the communities it serves.

As “brand ambassadors”

An earlier *IOP* paper suggested ways that I-Os can get the word out about the work we do in the name of “bringing science to the masses” (Rogelberg *et al.*, 2022). The same strategies detailed in that paper can be repurposed in service of getting the word out about volunteerism by I-Os in an I-O context. These included writing a trade book, writing for trade magazines (HBR, MIT) and online blogs (*Fortune*), leveraging social media (more LinkedIn than Twitter), submitting op-eds, producing or being a guest on a podcast, and joining a speaker’s bureau.

Volunteerism as a community

The community that is Tippins *et al.*’s focus is SIOP and, perhaps, on the SIOP Foundation as vehicles for enabling/facilitating member volunteerism. But let’s also remember other existing communities that exist in our profession. Here we include the local formal I-O networks like the Metropolitan Association of Applied Psychology in New York City, Gateway IOP, Personnel Testing Council of DC, and Chicago IOP (see <https://www.siop.org/Membership/Local> I-O Groups for a complete listing) and informal networks like the Friday Group to which we belong and has been around for some 50+ years (Moses & Kraut, 2014). The three levers highlighted by Tippins *et al.* — communicating, funding, and networking — can all be actioned both on the national and local I-O community levels. In our view, the imperative is not limited to SIOP alone to act for the I-O community. We can act as an I-O community through multiple channels.

Establishing connectivity

In the early phases of the pandemic, a senior I-O who headed human resources at a major organization organized a consortium in which a platform was designed on which job information was posted so those workers being laid off or furloughed in large numbers could identify opportunities in organizations looking to hire (Bazigos, *in press*). One of our colleagues similarly created a site on LinkedIn on behalf of folks getting laid off from recent downsizing (<https://www.onemodel.co/roles-in-people-analytics-hr-technology>). SIOP might seek corporate sponsors (or use Foundation financial support) to fund the design and launch of a similar searchable (by type of nonprofit, location, commitment required/availability) platform/app where members could post availability and describe their skill set and qualifications, and approved nonprofits could post opportunities and scope, thereby facilitating connections.

Sponsorship

Our community can take on formal sponsorship of organizations or groups in which we as a community have a strong interest. Obvious examples that have long been embedded in SIOP are graduate students, early-career academics, and early-career practitioners. Every conference has channels for veteran I-O volunteers to connect with these three groups. Can we expand that to other conferences at the national and more local levels and an expanded set of target segments? Venue options include the Leading Edge Consortium, those state psychological conferences in which we participate, within the APA and Academy of Management conferences, with sessions targeted at groups underrepresented or with special needs (e.g., disabled, recent immigrants) that could benefit from the wisdom of experienced I-Os. Several of us have volunteered to serve as mentors for members of Blacks in I-O Psychology, a group approaching 300 members. We suggest that SIOP become an official sponsor of that organization and others like it, for example, Asians in I-O Psychology (670 followers), Latinos in I-O Psychology (805 followers), financially supporting local networking and education events and arranging mentoring grad student/early-career members.

Recognition

We believe that SIOP and local I-O communities should more prominently highlight the volunteer activities of members. Annual awards, a conference theme track to highlight volunteer activity presentations (a la the stories in the focal article), adding one element in the evaluation criteria for new Fellows, and increased prominence in our major venues (e.g., the Opening Plenary of our conference) and on our organizational web sites could all bringing added visibility to I-O volunteerism and expand participation.

Our call to action

If you have read this far, we venture to guess that you are also inclined to “give psychology away.” Consider the attributes that we outlined earlier: Are you willing to exert the effort? Do you reflect deeply on the quality of your work? Do you consciously engage in self-appraisal? And, perhaps most importantly, is there a fusion between your work role and your own self-identity? Consider our call to action: How can we contribute our I-O expertise as individuals and as a community to form a movement of I-O volunteers? How can we take our own personal calling as I-Os and more widely infuse a sense of broader purpose in our I-O colleagues (Cardona et al., 2019; Zu, 2019)?

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