

COMMENTARY

Best practices, *pro bono*: Volunteering for early career I-O psychologists

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The focal article (Tippins et al., 2023), “I-O Psychologists and Volunteer Work,” showcases an impressive array of *pro bono* and charitable achievements, capitalizing on the writers’ deep expertise and skills. However, for many aspiring and early career industrial-organizational psychologists (“EC I-Os”), such opportunities may not be as readily accessible. For example, as demonstrated in the case studies, established I-O experts may encounter volunteer opportunities through their existing networks or be approached to assist in charity work; junior employees may not be as readily connected or consulted. Furthermore, EC I-Os may not have the time, energy, and resources (e.g., organizational support) to develop a sustainable model of volunteerism. Indeed, it is often easier to devote oneself to personal causes at later career stages: during retirement, when one’s work experience has afforded enough stability and latitude, and/or when substantial paid time off has accrued. For those at an earlier, more precarious place in their careers, getting one’s “foot in the door” and finding space for meaningful volunteerism may be markedly more difficult. The focal article features experts with long and illustrious nonprofit experiences, but EC I-Os may be wondering how to build toward such careers in today’s demanding, fast-paced world.

In light of these considerations, our commentary offers practical recommendations for EC I-Os interested in developing their volunteerism profile. We highlight several best practices, focusing on opportunities specific to I-O (rather than more general volunteering). We share some experiences in our own early careers and provide additional examples to help spark inspiration.

Best practice #1: Identify your motivations and causes

As in most endeavors, we would be well-served following the old adage, “Know thyself.” Individuals may have particular causes and settings to which they are naturally drawn. Some causes are longstanding and well-known within most communities, such as housing development, food instability, disaster relief, disease eradication, and animal welfare. As society and technologies progress, new and growing areas of need emerge, including media and research transparency, information security and privacy, environmental conservation and climate change, gun violence and safety, and youth and elder advocacy. As we will discuss later, there are rich opportunities for EC I-Os to harness their skills in many different interest areas. In the words of Elizabeth Kolmstetter, “find a cause you care about.”

In addition to exploring causes at the macro level, EC I-Os should also understand how volunteerism fulfills their individual needs. Because traditional work incentives do not exist as with paid labor, motivation becomes especially important with *pro bono* efforts. One helpful tool

is the Volunteer Functions Inventory (Clary et al., 1998), which describes factors that may drive individuals toward volunteer work: personal values, a quest to understand the world, psychological enhancement, career goals, social motives, and/or the protective reduction of negative feelings. Understanding one's desires may help highlight more specific and sustainable opportunities. For example, someone who is driven by career goals may seek out high-visibility roles integrated into their organization and industry, whereas an individual with social motives may respond positively to team-based volunteerism or networking and recruiting tasks.

Best practice #2: Take stock of your competencies and constraints

This commentary is focused on helping EC I-Os find relevant volunteer opportunities commensurate with their education and interests. In other words, we want to achieve a good fit among the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) of EC I-Os and the volunteer roles they occupy. Although I-O psychologists may wish to serve food at the local shelter on Thanksgiving, our competencies may be better applied by helping the organization to devise processes guiding the intake, training, performance, and long-term retention of holiday volunteers. To be clear, each person can and should volunteer as they find fit and fulfilling. That said, our greatest opportunity to contribute perhaps emerges when our motivations and skills align.

As recommended throughout the focal article, EC I-Os should understand the unique KSAs they bring to the table. The case studies describe diverse applications of I-O skills, from psychometric evaluation to leadership development and human resources management. As a useful exercise, we recommend sitting down and listing out all your KSAs; then, envision creative applications for them in the nonprofit world. Relatedly, EC I-Os may already be donating their time in ways that are less apparent. EC I-Os often engage in uncompensated service work, such as informal mentorship and employee resource group participation. Identifying invisible forms of labor not only empowers EC I-Os in their current roles but can also reveal ways to affect change (e.g., growing these opportunities or translating relevant KSAs into other tasks).

In addition to understanding what we can do, we also must know what we cannot. EC I-Os should identify potentially important limiting factors, such as time availability (hours per week, month, or year), regularity (e.g., one-off events or a standing commitment), and duration (from temporary to long term). For EC I-Os, we anticipate that demands on time can be particularly difficult to negotiate. In light of this, EC I-Os can consider "low touch" opportunities that may be available in their current organizations. David Oliver described beginning his journey through his company's existing corporate social responsibility initiatives. Additionally, many EC I-Os can access professional organizations, which often have opportunities at conferences and meetings (e.g., being an interviewer for SIOP's Career Center). Smaller efforts can organically grow into more significant volunteerism commitments over time.

Best practice #3: Partner with external organizations carefully

Should EC I-Os prefer greater community involvement, there are several avenues for developing external relationships. In some cases, industries or organizations may already have facilitating mechanisms in place. In the focal article, Joel Moses and Karen Grabow discuss partnering with national organizations that provide pro bono services. In academia, EC I-Os may consider getting involved in Volunteer Program Assessment, a volunteer assessment system started at UNC Charlotte by Dr. Steven Rogelberg (Olien et al., 2014). In this nationwide effort, I-O graduate programs provide free consulting to nonprofit organizations and their volunteer programs. For EC I-Os, it may be practical to join an existing charity framework with a robust network and clear goals and operating guidelines.

On the other hand, EC I-Os may seek to directly partner with nonprofit organizations. The case studies in the focal article point to different ways of forging these ties. As will be described later, we have reached out to organizations offering assistance and have been warmly received. However, as with any new work collaboration, it is vital to be clear about stakeholders' abilities and mutual expectations. To this end, EC I-Os and organizations should collaboratively and preemptively identify "SMART" goals that are: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound.

Importantly, EC I-Os should consider the character of the partnering organization. In the words of Karen Grabow, it is rewarding to support "high quality nonprofit organizations." It is tempting to see all charities through rose-colored glasses, but, as in the corporate world, there are actors that may be unreliable or unscrupulous. Some organizations may lack transparency regarding their mission, finances, or activities. Others may have poor track records with previous volunteers or clients. M. Peter Scontrino described organizations that suffer from a lack of top-down support. Yet others may have questionable practices or aims that do not align with the volunteer's values. In any case, it is recommended that would-be volunteers conduct proper due diligence before agreeing to assist an organization. It may even be possible to vet the organization by seeking publicly available information and talking to the organization's staff, clients, and other volunteers. A website database like Charity Navigator can help EC I-Os and anyone else ensure their efforts are directed at the right organizations.

Best practice #4: Understand (and maintain) your boundaries

Finally, in thinking about sustainable volunteerism, EC I-Os must consider balance. It can be tempting to give too much when giving back, especially when the work is rewarding and specialized to one's skills. However, boundaries exist to protect all stakeholders. A trustworthy organization will limit the scope of any work done by volunteers, as well as the authority vested in volunteers. As Joel Moses related, EC I-Os should not be asked to make decisions outside of their areas of expertise, especially financial decisions and other choices that might incur a conflict of interest. Volunteers should also not be doing the work of the organization's staff and should be cautious stepping beyond their roles. Although nonprofit work is admirable, many volunteers are susceptible to overcommitting to altruistic goals. In such cases, volunteers, as with any other labor force, can risk disillusionment, disengagement, and burnout.

Should EC I-Os find themselves in an untenable situation, they can and should feel empowered to walk away. EC I-Os may be swayed by the sunk cost fallacy, imagining the time and energy that will be wasted if a project sits half finished. Guilt, social pressures, and the desirability of volunteering may tug at one from many directions. In the end, however, it is up to the individual to communicate boundaries, maintain those boundaries, and end a collaboration if those boundaries are not respected. Volunteering can sometimes be difficult, grueling, and even unpleasant work, but it should always be a net positive for the stakeholders, including EC I-Os.

To illustrate these best practices, one of us, the lead author, offers our own story volunteering as an EC I-O. In 2017, Hurricane Harvey landed in the southeastern United States, seriously damaging hundreds of communities and displacing thousands of people (Kimmelman, 2017). I was among the countless citizens compelled to volunteer in the aftermath. I first got involved through a newly created crisis response program. As part of a group, I was assigned to demolish buildings without proper training, leadership, or equipment. Not only was this an ineffective use of my time and skills as an EC I-O, but I was subjected to unsafe working conditions by a poorly-managed organization. A more appropriate way to contribute would have been to work with organizations to assist with large-scale volunteer management—which is exactly what I did. Earlier, I'd observed that disaster shelters were overwhelmed and underequipped to onboard and deploy volunteers en masse. I understood that nonprofit organizations could benefit from I-O psychology, and felt I had the tools to assist them. I cold-emailed a community-building nonprofit

Table 1. Volunteer Opportunities for EC I-Os

Area of interest or expertise	Potential applications and tasks
Recruitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyze existing materials and data to help develop better targeted strategies for recruiting employees/volunteers. • Develop and administer surveys and conduct interviews to better understand the skills, preferences, motivations, and barriers to participation of potential employees/volunteers.
Selection and placement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perform job analyses to identify relevant competencies, tasks, and responsibilities required for the various employee/volunteer roles offered by the organization. • Create a standardized employee/volunteer application system, including designing forms or structured interview materials. • Develop a placement system for an organization's employees/volunteers that match employees/volunteers with assignments based on fit (KSAs, interests, etc.). • Analyze attrition of employees/volunteers, such as by conducting exit interviews.
Training and development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a training needs analysis to identify potential areas of intervention among employees/volunteers. • Design training programs, including orientation, skills training for specific roles, etc. • Give a talk or conduct a workshop on a specific topic (such as leadership development, team building, communication, safety, or wellness) to employees/volunteers. • Create handbooks, videos, or e-learning modules to allow remote training of employees/volunteers. • "Train the trainers" on best practices for delivering training.
Performance measurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify employee/volunteer key performance indicators (KPIs) related to the organization's goals. • Develop a performance measurement system that tracks employee/volunteer performance against identified KPIs.
Workplace motivation and reward systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyze survey and interview data to help develop better motivational strategies, including recognition, incentive, and performance-based reward programs, to drive employee/volunteer engagement and satisfaction. • Create processes by which employees/volunteers can provide feedback or participate in relevant organizational decisions.
Quality of work life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop policies and procedures that promote better work-life balance for employees/volunteers, such as more flexible scheduling, remote work options, etc. • Develop well-being initiatives related to stress management, time management, and self-care. • Start employee resource or affinity groups, such as identity-based groups that develop a sense of belongingness, community-building groups that engage in corporate social responsibility, initiative-focused groups that are devoted to social and community causes, etc. • Create a shadowing or mentoring program for students or youth interested in careers in I-O.
Structure of work and human factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess the work environment(s) in which employees/volunteers are situated, including physical spaces, culture, policies, and procedures. • Analyze training and safety data for organizations with higher-risk roles or tasks.
Organizational development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partner with nonprofit agencies to write grants and assist in obtaining funding. • Assist organizations in writing and designing their mission or vision statements and business strategy plans.

organization and offered to analyze their volunteer management system. Together, we developed and deployed surveys to assess volunteer engagement and needs. This experience turned out to be much more fulfilling, impactful, and sustainable than the one prior. Nonlinear as my Hurricane Harvey volunteerism journey was, it touches on each of the best practices above: from understanding my motivations and skillset, to finding the right partnering organizations and establishing healthy boundaries. Our hope is that other EC I-Os can similarly find their calling.

With this in mind, we present Table 1, which lists several potential volunteering applications by areas of interest or expertise. This is by no means an exhaustive list of tasks available to EC I-Os. Opportunities can be found in many realms: focusing on employees and staff members or unpaid volunteers; in the corporate world or with not-for- and nonprofit organizations; in industry or academia; internal to one's company or within the greater community. We share some ideas to help you envision options and possibilities as EC I-Os interested in volunteering.

Ultimately, we encourage EC I-Os to be proactive and cautiously optimistic when considering volunteering opportunities. By identifying their passions and strengths, EC I-Os can begin to give back in specific and concrete ways. As with any individual effort, however, it is important to consider how one can best use their talents. EC I-Os should be encouraged to explore healthy community partnerships and boundaries. By applying many of the best practices found in the workforce, we can create meaningful volunteer careers. Though much of our work in I-O psychology focuses on the individual and organizational levels, we can take a more expansive view and affect change in our communities and society.

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