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COMMENTARY

Making the volunteer journey a better one with I-O psychology knowledge

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We concur with Tippins et al. (2023) that not-for-profit and volunteer-involving organizations (VIOs) have not had enough access to the expertise of industrial and organizational (I-O) psychologists, and volunteer managers rarely have access to professional development opportunities that stem from I-O psychology knowledge. Through collaborative research partnerships with VIOs, our team of I-O psychology researchers have spent the last two decades building the science to inform and guide evidence-based volunteer management practices that enhance the volunteer journey. Our work spans a great part of this volunteer journey (Kragt & Holtrop, 2019), from helping VIOs attract the right volunteers (Holtrop et al., 2020), to enhancing VIOs' onboarding (Dunlop, Holtrop, et al., 2022), and improving the quality of the volunteering experience through designing better volunteer work (Millette & Gagné, 2008) and enhancing leadership (Forner, 2019; Gagné, 2003). In providing commentary, we hope to enrich the conversation by offering an I-O-psychology researcher perspective on volunteer work to complement the valuable case studies in the focal article.

Our research stems from a practical need to address significant workforce issues facing the volunteering sector. VIOs are struggling to attract and retain enough volunteers to sustain their activities. Volunteering rates have been on the decline for a decade across the world, and this decline has worsened during the pandemic (Davies et al., 2021; Luksyte et al., 2021). In just 4 years, from 2018 to 2021, almost half (44%) of the global volunteer workforce stopped volunteering, a loss equivalent to 48 million full-time workers (Forner et al., 2022; Holmes et al., 2022; UNV, 2018, 2022). VIOs have had to adapt to the lifestyle and work-related changes (e.g., rising costs of living, prevalence of contract work and "fly in–fly out" work) that hamper volunteers' commitment to regular and long-term volunteering.

Some VIOs have large volunteer workforce. Scouts Australia currently has over 20,000 adult volunteers running the programs, many of whom volunteer between 10 and 20 hr per week. In 2019, on the eve of one of the worst bushfires the country ever faced, Australia counted over 195,000 volunteer firefighters and support staff. Other countries also rely heavily on volunteer firefighters: China counted over 7.5M of them in 2019, whereas Germany had close to a million. Training and managing these volunteer numbers without proper resources, let alone expertise, would likely be disastrous. Yet, VIOs render crucial services to nations that cover health and social assistance, education, and emergency services.

Following the first author, author order is alphabetical reflecting equal contributions.

What can SIOP and I-O psychologist do?

To address the unique challenges facing VIOs, we need to explicitly study volunteer contexts rather than generalizing findings from studies of paid employees (Forner et al., 2023) as the *science* is not quite there yet (Kragt & Holtrop, 2019). We advocate for the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) to not only encourage volunteer work among its members but help VIOs in whatever ways it can. We call for SIOP members in academic roles to engage with VIOs and contribute to building scientific understanding of volunteer work. Like how SIOP members volunteer to review each other's work, we can offer our pro-bono services to our local VIOs. We have, for example, offered our services to translate research for policy and practice through contributing to state and national volunteering peak body organizations by serving on committees, participating in their conferences, summarizing evidence on key topics to inform a national strategy for volunteering (Forner et al., 2022; Kragt et al., 2022), and sharing volunteers' insights from our analyses of surveys and interviews that we developed with our expertise in I-O psychology (e.g., Holtrop et al., 2018).

We welcome the suggestion that the SIOP Foundation provide grants for members to conduct work with charitable organizations. We have received funds for our volunteering research through national grant schemes, such as an Australian Research Council Linkage Project Grant and a grant from the former Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre in Australia. These grants have allowed us to conduct action research with VIOs that directly impact volunteer management and gave us an opportunity to publish high-impact research. Through this generous support, we have developed psychometrically sound annual engagement surveys that were completed by thousands of volunteers. The reports from these surveys helped VIO management to understand critical information about their organizations and formed the basis for many of our other contributions, including the creation of free evidence-based tools, such as recruitment toolkits, and a "Massive Open Online Course" set of microlearnings for volunteer managers to upskill their recruitment, onboarding, and leadership of volunteers (https://www.bnhcrc.com.au/resources/volunteer-leader-resource-kit/). We offer some examples below of this work.

How we utilized I-O psychology expertise in VIOs

We have applied our I-O-psychology expertise to various management activities in VIOs such as recruitment, onboarding, leadership, and work design.

Because VIOs often struggle to attract enough volunteers, they perceive no opportunity to turn down offers from people who do not "fit" or have the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities to do the work. Indeed, many VIOs tell us their only requirement to volunteer is "having a heartbeat" (one leader even told us the heartbeat was optional!), making the idea of rigorous selection out of question. However, our research shows that fit is important for volunteers' engagement (Holtrop et al., 2019). The solution therefore came from developing better recruitment tactics.

During recruitment, VIOs struggle to balance attracting volunteers by making the volunteer work appealing versus realistic. Indeed, not all volunteering work is "fun." For example, scouting involves fun activities with children, yet it also necessitates compliance paperwork (e.g., child protection, safety, and health). Firefighting and rescue are not constant adrenaline-fueled adventures; they require regular, extensive, and sometimes repetitive training. We found in our research that unfulfilled expectations can cost VIOs through lack of retention (Kragt et al., 2018). Using our I-O psychology expertise, we created attractive but realistic recruitment tools that have proven to help in attracting volunteers who are less likely to be disappointed by the experiences (Dunlop, Holtrop, et al., 2022; Dunlop, Farid, et al., 2022; Holtrop et al., 2020). We also spent time trying to understand levers to increase diversity and inclusion in traditionally older, White, male-dominated emergency volunteer organizations (Gagné et al., 2019).

Onboarding volunteers is often neglected due to a lack of knowledge and resources. For example, we found it was common for volunteers to turn up at a site that is not prepared to integrate them in volunteer activities. Volunteers too often find themselves idle and feeling that the time they devote to a VIO is not used effectively, undermining the impact they expected to have on beneficiaries; many leave for this reason. We have been involved with VIOs that require extensive training to safely deliver educational programs to children, rescue, or fight fires. This training is expensive, so retention is crucial to make these VIOs sustainable. But training is not enough as an onboarding experience. Mentoring and adequate integration into a team require the involvement of volunteer leaders who need to ensure volunteers become both efficient and embedded in the organization's activities as soon as possible. Providing volunteer leaders with tools to achieve this has been part of what we have produced (Dunlop, Farid, et al., 2022).

Quality leadership is critical for a positive volunteering experience, a key driver of volunteers' decisions to continue volunteering. Volunteers are especially sensitive to ineffective or abusive leadership because they are not financially bound to their volunteering role as they are to their regular work. Undoubtedly, leading volunteers is more challenging than leading paid workers (Kragt et al., 2022). Leaders of volunteers are often volunteers themselves and have not necessarily had education or training to undertake a leadership role. VIOs rarely have resources to train them, let alone the luxury of having rigorous selection processes. Using our I-O psychology expertise, we have helped numerous VIOs improve their leadership. Our partnerships with State Emergency Services in Australia (which consists of 43,000 volunteers across the country who provide search and rescue during floods, storms, and fires), Scouts, Surf Life Saving (another Australian VIO with 190,000 volunteers), and animal shelters have helped us uncover how empowering and motivational leadership is essential to the engagement and retention of volunteers (Forner et al., 2020; Gagné, 2003), and helped develop leadership training programs that have been effective at developing this interpersonal leadership style among VIO leaders (Forner, 2019).

Work design is another relevant issue for volunteer managers. Although many people volunteer to make a difference, not all volunteer work is challenging, exciting, and intrinsically motivating. Many tasks are monotonous and tedious, yet they need to be done. Animal shelters need volunteers to clean cat condos and dog kennels, and animals are often not in a psychological state to be playful or cuddly. Firefighting and rescuing is not like in action movies; there is a lot of downtime and demanding training. Volunteer managers may not have the necessary knowledge to organize volunteer work in a way that provides variety, autonomy, feedback, and significance (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Yet, these work characteristics are as important in volunteer work as they are in paid work (Millette & Gagné, 2008).

Future steps for integrating I-O psychologists in VIOs

We concur with Tippins et al. that we must ask ourselves as I-O psychologists whether our frameworks and evidence-based practices apply to VIOs. We will only know if we conduct research in VIOs. Consequently, we encourage our I-O psychology colleagues to invest their time undertaking research to better understand the psychology of volunteering and the nature of volunteer work. Given people's regular paid work has become more flexible and contractual, it has become more difficult for VIOs to require regular long-term commitment from volunteers (Luksyte et al., 2021). VIOs also need to adapt to the rise of informal and "spontaneous" volunteering that we have seen emerge during disasters and political campaigning (Chong et al., 2022; McLennan et al., 2022). Managing spontaneous volunteers as well as providing flexible yet sustainable volunteering arrangements are realities with which VIOs are currently contending, and I-O psychology likely has much to offer to help them. Also, what better way to find areas in need of improvement by becoming volunteers ourselves? Our team includes volunteers at an

animal shelter, surf lifesaving, sporting associations, and a volunteer paramedic. Serving on boards, as the focal article promotes, can also be an effective way to contribute. We can all work together, as a SIOP community, to make VIOs more effective, ultimately helping VIOs attract volunteers who will stay longer and contribute more effectively. But who knows? Perhaps the results we get from working with VIOs might help craft better evidence-based practices for other types of organizations too, particularly when it comes to crafting flexible working arrangements (Gagné et al., 2022) and motivating workers with other means besides financial incentives (Gagné, 2003; Gagné & Deci, 2005).

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