Motivation and Recruitment: Why and how do volunteers come?

Introduction

This chapter discusses why people choose to give freely of their time for voluntary action. There is a compelling logic to uncovering what motivates volunteers; from a practical standpoint understanding why people are moved to volunteer is potentially useful information for recruiting more volunteers. Clary et al. (1996) note that volunteering is often not easy, people have to overcome a series of obstacles to become volunteers. What then drives them to overcome these barriers?

Perhaps, it is because the prospect of increasing volunteer numbers through understanding motivations is so beguiling to practitioners and policy-makers alike that researchers have produced such a vast number of studies that attempt to identify them. But the size of the literature, the different methods of data collection and of interpretation of results, the range of epistemological assumptions and theoretical frameworks used make the evidence on motivations hard to decipher and use practically. One handbook for volunteer recruiters simply states that there are as many motivations as there are volunteers (Ellis, 2002). If this is true, then what value is there to adding to the infinite list of reasons why people get involved? Do different groups of volunteers share broadly similar motivations? Or, can we find some underlying commonality of motivation across different groups? And, how might we use these insights to recruit and involve volunteers more successfully?

This chapter is by no means exhaustive in its review of the literature; there is simply too much. Instead, it tries to explain why research into motivation needs careful consideration. The chapter first outlines...
some of the methodological problems of researching why people volunteer and looks at a selection of theories relating to volunteer motivation, in particular psychological and sociological approaches. Within this, the chapter makes room to look at the Volunteer Functions Index (VFI) and the work of Omoto, Clary, Snyder and colleagues who have drawn together, and furthered, so much thinking in this field. Next, the chapter looks at survey data from the United Kingdom, disaggregating motives across different demographic groups. After reviewing a selection of studies in an attempt to see how thinking about theoretical perspectives can add meaning to research, the chapter concludes by looking at how volunteer-involving organisations make use of these ideas. We suggest that organisations view motives quite superficially and that approaches to recruitment would benefit from a more comprehensive overview of motivation.

Motivational research: trouble with method and meaning

Chapter 2 highlighted the fact that, although there is an array of explanations of why people volunteer, the ‘flat-earth’ view privileges altruism and the ‘gift of time’. The extent to which this happens at the expense of a richer understanding of what volunteering is, may to some extent be socially conditioned. Put simply, this would suggest that when volunteers are asked what motivates them they feel compelled to say that they are involved for the benefit of others. One study demonstrated this by looking at how people defined being a volunteer. By identifying key dimensions in common definitions, they were able to analyse how people perceive what makes a volunteer by asking them to rate these dimensions. Then, developing this idea further by asking people to rate volunteer tasks by the ‘net cost’ to the volunteer, they found that people identified volunteers most strongly in those roles where volunteers had a ‘net loss’. That is to say, volunteers should get less out of the experience than they put in (Cnaan, Handy and Wadsworth, 1996). This finding is supported to some extent by studies noted by Musick and Wilson (2008) which showed how, when talking of motives, volunteers felt compelled to give what they thought was the socially acceptable answer (it is a selfless act done to benefit others). At the same time, however, they did not want to appear ‘too saintly’ and so acknowledged that they themselves also benefited. This raises the question of how far we can trust answers of this kind to provide a true reflection of why people get involved?