



Supporting volunteers through best practice: People Know How and "Investing in Volunteers"

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Abstract

One year on from People Know How's appointment of a dedicated VIP (volunteer, interns and placement students) Coordinator, this research briefing takes as its starting point how organisations may support their volunteers through best practice. People Know How's volunteer management policies and procedures are used to exemplify these best practice models. This briefing considers how the charity has implemented and is implementing them, relating it to the goal in their Strategic Plan to achieve a Volunteer Accreditation Mark. Indeed, the charity is currently seeking to achieve Volunteer Scotland's "Investing in Volunteers" award, the indicators of which also reinforce best practice.

The research briefing concludes that volunteers can be supported by adopting 11 best practices which encourage creative-thinking and supportive work and volunteer environments. This is covered in Section 1 which focuses on supporting volunteers. The points made are demonstrated by the work of People Know How and its striving towards "Investing in Volunteers". In Section 2, the briefing discusses impact, considering best practice around volunteers' direct contribution towards achieving outcomes. People Know How again presents a clear example of an organisation which regularly highlights volunteer contributions to impact and outcome, something which is also integral to Volunteer Accreditations.

The briefing also examines the impact of volunteering on volunteers, concluding that there is a largely positive relationship between volunteering and mental health. This research, which considers the benefits of volunteering for volunteers, is illustrated by People Know How's approach throughout the volunteering process, something also at the centre of "Investing in Volunteers".

Keywords

Volunteer, volunteering, Strategic Plan, VIP

Key points

- Volunteers can be supported by adopting best practices found in academic literature.
- People Know How provides clear examples of how this best practice can be implemented within a third sector management structure.
- The "Investing in Volunteers" award provides further illustration of best practice at work.
- To achieve this goal, an ambitious, cross-sectional approach is needed

Foreward

As a Volunteer Management Professional whose years of experience and learning are soundly rooted in the good practice standards of the Investing in Volunteers Framework, I have been able to develop and grow programmes of volunteer engagement across the third sector and presently in my dual role as part of Volunteer Scotland's Volunteer Practice/Investing in Volunteers Team I spend my time delivering good practise training to volunteer management practitioners and supporting organisation through their Investing in Volunteers journey towards achieving the accreditation.

As you read this briefing you will realise that People Know How are very committed to their volunteers and volunteer programme, striving to offer the best possible volunteer experience which, evidence shows, leads to the most effective volunteer contributions to organisational impact and outcomes. The writers on this project are themselves volunteers with the organisation, recruited specifically to create briefings which support their work and equally to gain experience and knowledge in the field of academic writing.

Knowing this, it is not a surprise that the People Know How's Strategic Plan includes working towards the achievement of a Volunteer Management accreditation and the recruitment of a dedicated VIP Coordinator. As more evidence of the importance of best practice in volunteer management, this organisation has also created a People Pledge, the content of which links directly with Investing in Volunteers indicator addressing volunteer support, supervision and ongoing motivations.

The commitment to the volunteer programme through the implementation of thoroughly researched methods and procedures embedded in the Investing in Volunteers standard and other recognised volunteer management models is impressive and although we are only at the start of the Investing in Volunteers journey together, this briefing and the initial evidence fills me with encouragement that it will be a worthwhile, welcomed and valuable experience.

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Introduction

Volunteer management is the subject of how organisations best support their volunteers. In 2013, Studer and von Schnurbein carried out a comprehensive literature review into volunteer management which included a review of many human resource management practices. It outlines 11 best practices. These are empirically supported behaviours, associated with positive outcomes, that an organisation can adopt. These best practices are considered because they contribute to, and open up a space for, an understanding of how volunteers can be supported.

The work of People Know How with its volunteers will be used to demonstrate these best practices. It has been one year since the charity brought on a dedicated VIP (volunteer, interns and placement students) Coordinator, something which is central to the organisation's Strategic Plan (Strategic Plan, 2019). This past year provides various examples of implemented best practice in working with volunteers to support the theory behind the research briefing. What is more, the charity is seeking to achieve a Volunteer Accreditation Mark, namely Volunteer Scotland's "Investing in Volunteers" award (Quality Standard). The Award's indicators also provide further evidence of what is best practice in volunteer support.

In holding up something of a mirror to the idea of supporting volunteers, Eisenberger et al. (1986) consider the perception a volunteer has of how supported they are by their organisation. This is operationalised as perceived

organisation support (POS) for which their research includes several widely utilised measures. The volunteer experience is also, of course, central to People Know How's work, as well as the "Investing in Volunteers" award.

The research briefing then discusses impact, considering best practice around volunteers' direct contribution to achieving outcomes. People Know How again presents a clear example of an organisation which regularly highlights volunteer contributions to outcomes, something which is also integral to Volunteer Accreditations.

The briefing also examines the impact of volunteering on volunteers, concluding that there is a largely positive relationship between volunteering and mental health. This research is illustrated by People Know How's approach throughout the volunteering process, something also at the centre of "Investing in Volunteers".

Method

This briefing was carried out by consideration of recent literature reviews of volunteer management, most notably the review by Studer and von Schnurbein (2013) and the other by Einolf (2018). Guidance documents were obtained from the Volunteer Scotland website as examples of practitioner material and literature reviews by Harlock (2013) and Konrath (2014) were drawn upon in discussion about the impact of volunteering. In terms of bolstering this theory-based literature, People Know How's work was used as

a case study, with its Strategic Plan and other documents providing key examples (Strategic Plan, 2019, People Pledge, 2017). The briefing also uses the "Investing in Volunteers" award to further exemplify, with the "Investing in Volunteers Quality Standard" documents providing the material.

Section 1 - Supporting volunteers

Cuskelly et al.'s 2006 model conceptualises volunteer management as a linear process which passes through the following stages: recruitment of volunteers, retention of volunteers, volunteer performance assurance and separation of volunteers (Studer and von Schnurbein, 2013). Throughout each stage, there have been identified recommended best practices.

Recommended best practices

Studer and von Schnurbein (2013) have carried out the most recent literature review of volunteer management practices and summarised 11 empirically supported best practices: get liability insurance for volunteers; clearly define volunteers' roles; design good volunteer jobs; recruit volunteers; screen and match volunteers; give new volunteers orientation and training; supervise, communicate with and support volunteers; recognise volunteers' contributions; satisfy volunteers' motivations; encourage reflections; and encourage a supportive environment.

Supporting volunteers

Employing many of the best practices will have the effect of supporting volunteers. Supporting volunteers is arguably

embedded in a comprehensive volunteer management model which incorporates, as far as possible, the best practices above.

The implementation of liability insurance coverage for volunteers is said to be one of the more practical aspects of "nurturing" a successful environment for recruitment but, more importantly, a safe environment within which individuals can volunteer (Studer and von Schnurbein, 2013). Taking People Know How as an example, the charity has in place full and universal coverage for its staff members, volunteers, interns and placement students. This coverage includes Employers Liability Insurance, Public Liability Insurance and Professional Indemnity Insurance. This is certainly a key component to People Know How's achieving of the "Investing in Volunteers" Award. Indeed, the scheme's Indicator 5 emphasises a commitment to protecting volunteers from "physical, financial and emotional harm" and Practice 2 subsequently calls for volunteers to be "covered by appropriate insurance" (Quality Standard).

Identified next as best practice points are the clear definition of volunteers' roles and the creation of "good" volunteer jobs. These have an impact on the "importance given to the volunteers' voice within the organisation" (Studer and von Schnurbein, 2013). It is also clearly central to Volunteer Scotland's guidance, with the "Investing in Volunteers" award providing clear indicators and practices on this issue. Indicator 4 sees organisations develop "appropriate roles for volunteers" which are also "of value to the volunteers" (Quality Standard). There are four practices drawn up under this indicator which largely emphasise role

descriptions, the outlining of necessary skills for the roles, the diversity of roles and the adapting of roles where possible.

To exemplify, People Know How has implemented these practices, satisfying this indicator of the Award. Indeed, as a starting point, the charity recognises that volunteering is mutually beneficial and constitutes a "win-win situation", with volunteers being integral to the delivery of services but also benefitting themselves from the experience. This sentiment is summed up in People Know How's "People Pledge" (People Pledge, 2017). It is a commitment to providing the best opportunities for volunteers (and interns and placement students), adapting roles where possible, and ensuring volunteers get the most out of their experience. Indeed, the charity writes: "we are committed to ensuring that our VIPs gain as much from their experience with us as we gain from their efforts" (People Pledge, 2017). The Pledge also commits to opportunities "tailored to your needs", directly tying in with "Investing in Volunteers" Indicator 4, Practice 4 which calls for "adaptability" (People Pledge, 2017, Quality Standard). Written and signed by the charity's Chief Executive, the Pledge itself reads: "We believe that everyone should benefit personally from being part of our team and fulfil their personal aims and objectives in equal measure to that of our organisational aims and objectives" (People Pledge, 2017). This is a clear and unambiguous statement of what is outlined in Indicator 4.

This statement is operationalised by the charity in various ways. Indeed, People Know How always provides full role descriptions for volunteers with clear responsibilities and outlining of required skills and the support offered. It is often provided on the website e.g. the newly adapted role descriptions for remote continuation of servicedelivery throughout the COVID-19 lockdown were recently on the website (Coronavirus Volunteering Opportunities, 2020). However, as well as adapting to COVID-19, the charity often adapts to specific volunteer situations and constantly develops new roles. There is a diverse array of volunteer positions with which individuals can get involved. There is a diverse range of roles, from IT roles to Wellbeing Callers to supporting children and young people one-on-one to research briefing writers. Two recent examples illustrate the charity's ability to adapt. The VIP Coordinator has recently inducted a volunteer who wanted to work on policy issues and review the charity's literature and publications. A role has been tailor-made which constitutes a "win-win situation" for both parties. Further, the newly appointed Development Officer is seeking to manage his own team of volunteers, opening up some new roles for those interested the HR and financial work, with the goal of "helping people who help people". Overall, diversifying the roles available for volunteers and having some adaptability is key to a positive volunteer experience and People Know How provides a successful example of an organisation which has operationalised this.

Studer and von Schnurbein also identify an active and open recruitment strategy as central to good volunteer management (2013). It reinforces a commitment to a mutually beneficial volunteering relationship. Indeed, this is evidently reflected in the "Investing in Volunteers" indicators, with Indicator 3 not only calling for active recruitment of volunteers, but for volunteers to "reflect the diversity of the local community" (Quality Standard). Practices 2-5 highlight the embracing of diversity amongst staff, the use of diverse marketina images, accessible information and the monitoring of the diversity of the volunteer team (Quality Standard). These aspects of the award scheme can also be exemplified by the practice of People Know How. The charity actively advertises its roles in full on the website, as well as through Volunteer Scotland and other parties. Most recently, the charity launched a campaign for COVID-19 volunteers, sharing its vacancies regularly on social media platforms. This resulted in the taking on of well over 100 new volunteers who are currently being inducted and trained, with many already matched to service-users. Further than this, however, People Know How implements Indicator 3 in full. Take, for instance, Practice 5 - to ensure diversity when recruiting, equality and monitoring is central (Quality Standard). In inductions, volunteers are made aware of moral and legal duties to guard against unfair discrimination for volunteers. Indeed, this is ensured through careful and anonymous monitoring. After induction, volunteers are encouraged to fill out an equal monitoring form which feeds into making the charity diverse and reflective of the local community.

The best practice literature also refers to the effective screening and matching of volunteers (Studer and von Schnurbein, 2013). Studer and von Schnurbein argue this ensures that both the service-user and volunteer get the most out of the experience, by being appropriately matched according to personalities, goals, ages and so on.

This is something which the "Investing in Volunteers" award does identify in Indicator 6; Practice 2: "matching procedures are appropriate to the ... individual's needs" (Quality Standard). People Know How demonstrates the operationalisation of this criterion. Indeed, a thorough matching process always takes place for volunteers. VIP coordinators create matching forms and a detailed handover, based on first impressions and information about the volunteer's background. They ensure a support plan has been completed and that they have a discussion about what the volunteer wants to do in the charity. Indeed, the matching process is informed by volunteer aspirations, as illustrated by People Know How's induction. It includes an opportunity to talk about volunteers' "motivations", "visions" and "values". Overall, appropriate matching ensures volunteers and service-users benefit as much as possible from the service. People Know How provides a successful example of how this can be implemented.

The best practice criteria also include giving new volunteers full orientation and training. Studer and von Schnurbein highlight that comprehensive training gives volunteers a sense of "personal benefit" and that volunteers feel more confident about their role after training. Of course, this is central to achieving the "Investing in Volunteers" award, with Indicator 7; Practice 2 highlighting the need for all "necessary information and/ or training to carry out their roles" (Quality Standard). Clearly, this is a large part of a volunteer's route through People Know How, with the charity providing a general induction and comprehensive rolespecific training. Training is designed to be interactive, giving volunteers a chance to engage in "common scenarios", as well

as covering boundaries, confidentiality and boundaries. Training is, thus, specialised for volunteers, following a general overview of the charity in the induction. As such, the implementation of this best practice and Indicator 7 of "Investing in Volunteers" should be guided by the likes of People Know How.

Studer and von Schnurbein emphasise supervision and communication with volunteers as key parts of successful volunteer management. Alongside this comes creating a "supportive environment". The literature identifies this as an essential component in making volunteers feel included in the organisation's vision and ensuring management listens to volunteers' goals (Studer and von Schnurbein, 2013). Such a criterion is evident in the "Investing in Volunteers" award. Indicator 8 calls for organisations to take account of "the varying support and supervision needs of volunteers" (Quality Standard). Practice 1 specifically calls for volunteers to be made aware of the "support/supervision the organisation offers" and for a clear point of contact to be in place (Quality Standard). Practice 2 highlights the need for a variety of supervision and support to be available (Quality Standard). To exemplify, People Know How offers a diverse array of supervision and support to volunteers, making all individuals aware at the induction stage. Of course, the charity offers various specific points of contact. There is not only a dedicated VIP Coordinator, but role-specific coordinators as well (who all operate an "open door" policy).

Support includes a diary system, where volunteers can log information about their sessions and flag up anything to coordinators. It also includes

regular email check ins and regularly organised face-to-face meetings (or delivered remotely when in lockdown). Furthermore, every volunteer has a "Support and Supervision Plan" in which both the VIP Coordinator and rolespecific coordinators have different meetings with volunteers every few weeks. VIP Coordinator focus on "Skills, Goals and Motivations" whilst rolespecific coordinators provide support and supervision relevant to individuals' responsibilities as a volunteer.

Best practice literature also identifies the "recognition" of volunteers' contributions as central to effective management (Studer and von Schnurbein, 2013). The "Investing in Volunteers" award criteria echoes this almost directly, with Indicator 9 stressing "the need to give volunteers recognition" and Practice 1 calling for "appreciation" to be displayed and communication regularly (Quality Standard). This is something People Know How seeks to do consistently. The charity regularly publishes news stories about the successes of volunteers congratulating and thanking them. For example, a news piece was recently published thanking People Know How's European Solidarity Corps volunteers, Sara, Naia and Jakob, for their "wonderful help" in adapting service for COVID-19 (Willis, 2020). The charity also marked Volunteers' Week 2020 by producing a video featuring volunteers, providing them with an opportunity to share what they enjoyed about volunteering. Another video was also made by staff specifically to thank and congratulate volunteers (Baldacchino, 2020).

Finally, best practice calls for a focus on volunteers' motivations and the encouragement of reflection. This ties into Indicator 8, the practices for which include clear and regular support sessions which act as "check-ins" and continually review volunteers' goals. People Know How's "People Pledge" summed this up in that what volunteers' want to get out of the service is just as important (People Pledge, 2019). However, it is the charity's "A Plan" which illustrates the operationalisation of this criterion most effectively. Every volunteer will develop an "A Plan" alongside the VIP Coordinator, which asks the volunteer what their mission is, what skills they want to develop, what impact they want to have and how this can be achieved through action points.

Volunteer Scotland (2013a) defines supporting volunteers as "... an informal process which identifies the encouragement and help that a volunteer can expect". They provide useful guidance on supporting volunteers which includes for example: getting to know volunteers; valuing the contributions of volunteers; holding informal social events; having liability insurance; providing references; having a volunteer handbook; providing training and having an induction. This guidance is also evidently what informs their Award scheme, as can be illustrated by the above analysis. Also illustrated by the analysis of Studer and von Schnurbein's 11 best practices and People Know How's work, is that Volunteer Scotland's guidance is already being rigorously implemented by the charity.

Overall, it is clear that the best practices are as outlined in the academic literature and envisioned in Volunteer Scotland's guidance. People Know How is a fitting case study to exemplify how this guidance can be implemented,

especially when cross-referenced with the indicators and practices of Volunteer Scotland's "Investing in Volunteers" Award.

Measuring perceived organisational support

A common theme in reviewed literature was also regarding volunteers' perceptions of the organisation within which they volunteer. Whilst an operationalisation of volunteer support per se has not emerged, perceived organisational support has proved a useful construct (e.g. Farmer and Fedor 1999, Walker et al., 2016). Perceived organisational support (POS) "...refers to employees perception concerning the extent to which the organization values their contribution and cares about their well-being" (Eisenberger, [no date]). POS has been found to have important consequences for employee performance and well-being (Eisenberger, [no date]). The construct has been considered within the context of volunteers. Farmer and Fedor (1999) found, for example, that perceptions of being supported by their organisation can increase participation in various events and reduced withdrawal or turnover intentions.

Clearly, how volunteers feel in their roles is important to "Investing in Volunteers", as aforementioned in the above analysis of the best practices (Quality Standard). Again, People Know How exemplifies the effective gauging of "POS" by its creation of a clear and regular feedback loop. Be this in the form of diary systems, checkins or a support plan, the charity offers regular opportunities for volunteers to give feedback.

Section 2 – Impact of volunteering

The discussion so far has considered how an organisation may best support their volunteers, what kind of volunteer management model facilitates this and how that support may be measured. It now turns toward the subjects of impact and impact measurement.

Harlock's (2013) literature review into the impact of third sector organisations concludes, like the volunteer management literature, that the domain is in a fledgling stage and fraught with conceptual incongruity. That is to say, there is no universally accepted definition of impact nor an incontrovertible means of measuring it. Against this backdrop, Ogain et al. (2012) note that three quarters of UK organisations in their survey were using impact measurement which shows just how widespread consideration of impact is (cited in Harlock, 2013).

Wider "impact"

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) defines impact as the "wider overall difference that an organisation makes" (NCVO 2013, cited in Harlock, 2013). Harlock explains that the NCVO considers impact to concern the 'bigger' differences the organisation makes rather than day-to-day monitoring or reporting of outcomes. Most notably, the article argues that an outcome is not the same as an impact.

This is an important part in providing a thriving and supportive environment for volunteers; for them to feel part of the wider vision and goals of the organisaiton. The "Investing in Volunteers" award certainly implicitly recognises by putting volunteers' voices at the centre of organisations and promoting the agency of volunteers within organisations. Indeed, in Indicator 9; Practice 2, the scheme calls for volunteers to have an opportunity "to make known their views about the organisation's work, including its policies and procedures, and to participate in decision making" (Quality Standard).

For example, at People Know How, volunteers are introduced to the wider mission and vision of the charity from the induction and encouraged to reflect on what that means for them. This translates into each individual VIP's A-Plan. In this sense, the A-Plan is essentially the intersection between People Know How's mission, vision and values and volunteer's goals and vision.

Practical "outcomes"

In contrast, Volunteer Scotland defines impact as "... the change that happens as a result of an activity or project" (Volunteer Scotland, 2013b). This arguably defines it more as an outcome than an impact, by NCVO's definition.

Indeed, "Investing in Volunteers" also calls for volunteers to have a diverse array of roles within the charity which have a direct impact and contribution to the day-to-day achieving of outcomes (Quality Standard). Indeed, Indicator 4; Practice 3 looks for "a variety of tasks" to be made available in order to meet "the needs and aims of the organisation" (Quality Standard).

The impact on volunteers

Since the topic of the impact on

volunteering on volunteers is potentially substantial, this will be contained to the key concepts of volunteer satisfaction and mental health/ wellbeing.

In 2014, Konrath carried out a literature review which explored the relationship between giving time and money, and psychological wellbeing. It was noted that a well-established body of evidence exists that suggests a positive relationship between volunteering and mental health. The article summarises the effect of giving and helping, concluding that "in fact, there seems to be a positive feedback loop such that happiness begets giving and giving begets happiness and so on" (Konrath 2014, p. 399).

Volunteer satisfaction is arguably one of the most important impacts volunteering has on a volunteer; its importance being rooted in concern for a volunteers' subjective experience. Einolf (2018) note that volunteer satisfaction is the second most common dependent variable in the volunteer centred literature reviewed, which goes someway to demonstrate its significance as a construct. Einolf (2018) further reports that there is no universally accepted means of measuring volunteer satisfaction, although multiples indices do exist. Two notable and independent examples are Galindo-Kuhn & Guzley's (2002) Volunteer Satisfaction Index (VSI) and Vecina et al.'s (2009) Volunteer Satisfaction Index (VSI).

Galindo-Kuhn & Guzley's (2002) Volunteer Satisfaction Index (VSI) includes five subscales which were revealed through factor analysis: volunteer job satisfaction, organisational support, participation efficacy, empowerment, and group integration. Vecina et al.'s (2009) Volunteer Satisfaction Index (VSI) includes three subscales, also identified through factor analysis: satisfaction with the management of the organisation; satisfaction with the tasks; and satisfaction of motivations. It can be seen from these subscales that measuring volunteer satisfaction considers a range of variables.

In terms of ensuring "volunteer satisfaction" - particularly against these variables, informed by academic literature - "Investing in Volunteers" calls for volunteers to be "asked for feedback about their role" (Quality Standard). Indicator 8 focusses on giving volunteers space to consider what they can and cannot do; volunteers should be able to express if they want to adapt their role (Quality Standard). Indeed, at People Know How, this would come again in the form of the well-developed feedback loop (in the shape of the Support and Supervision Plan, A-Plan as well as diary system and email check-ins).

Overall, ensuring volunteer satisfaction is clearly central to an effective volunteer management model. It is also central to the "Investing in Volunteers" award and has been successfully operationalised by People Know How in its feedback loop.

Limitations

A key theme throughout notes that the academic literature surrounding volunteer management is generally underdeveloped (Locke et al, 2004; Studer and von Schnurbein, 2013; Brudney and Meijs, 2014, cited in Einolf, 2018).

This research briefing relies heavily on a handful of literature reviews, one by Studer and von Schnurbein (2013), one by Konrath (2014), one by Harlock (2013) and the other by Einolf (2018). The strength of this approach is that it provides the most holistic oversight in the least space, providing a ready snapshot of the literature's recent state of play. The reviews have all been carried out within the last ten years and may therefore be considered to represent an up-to-date snapshot of the landscape. A disadvantage of this approach is that it does not lend itself to detailed, conscientious evaluation and risks inaccuracies.

Whilst this briefing has assumed that actions which support volunteers are a subset of volunteer management practices, there is certainly a great deal of space for more research into the impacts of various volunteer management practices on volunteers. There is a lack of research into volunteer management practices with any great specificity (Studer and von Schnurbein, 2013). This means that the research tells us what practices may support volunteers but very little how to do so practically. This is similarly the case in the discussions about impact where the research seems not to lend itself towards simple, consistent, empirically supported tools which practitioners can use to guide policy and decision making.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research briefing was to sketch out ways in which organisations can support their volunteers through empirically driven behaviours, practices and policies. Studer and von Schnurbein's (2013) best practices provided the bulk of these policies and behaviours, from clearly defining volunteers' roles to encouraging a supportive environment. After a year in the post for People Know How's dedicated VIP Coordinator, the charity was used as a successful example of how to implement such best practices. As part of its Strategic Plan, the charity is also looking to achieve the "Investing in Volunteers" award which has been used as further evidence for what is best practice (Quality Standard). It has become clear that the best practice from the academic literature can be easily cross-referenced with the "Investing in Volunteers" indicators. This suggests that the above 11 practices can be taken as a starting point for any organisation seeking to develop its volunteer management model. Further, People Know How can provide clear and often easily translatable examples of how to operationalise this best practice.

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