



Volunteering during a pandemic

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Edited by Cameron Smith

April 2021

Abstract

People Know How experienced a large influx of volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article explores why this may have occurred and what charitable organisations can do to best retain these new volunteers. It also examines how the pandemic has changed who is willing and able to volunteer, and how volunteering can be a tool to promote wellbeing and mitigate impacts of isolation caused by the pandemic. People have found solace in volunteering which has helped them to retain and rebuild a sense of community, disrupted by the pandemic. This article considers how volunteering has changed during the pandemic and employs the evidence around why people volunteer and what they get out of it, to make suggestions to People Know How and other organisations for how best to utilise the large numbers of people willing to volunteer during the pandemic. This is so that this surge in desire to help can be maximised and preserved, even as the threat of the pandemic in Scotland subsides.

Keywords

Volunteering, COVID-19, social isolation

Key points

- There has been a spike in the number of people volunteering during the pandemic, which presents an opportunity, but also novel challenges for charitable organisations to provide meaningful volunteering roles and thus retain volunteers.
- New kinds of people are volunteering due to everyone having more time and the creation of new avenues of volunteering, presenting new demographics who could become regular volunteers in the future.
- The strain on mental health caused by lockdown and social isolation can be mitigated by volunteering and the sense of community it promotes.

Introduction

Faced with a global crisis, people in Scotland stepped up and volunteered to help. Volunteer Scotland reported that volunteering rates dramatically increased during the first lockdown from a baseline of 48% of adults prior to the pandemic to a high of 74% during the first lockdown (Linning, 2020). While the same article predicts that this will decrease after the pandemic, it still predicts the rate to settle at 59% of Scottish adults; an increase of 11%. However, the author argues that this is by no means guaranteed and that organisations need to work hard to maximise this figure. The potential increase in volunteers presents "once in a lifetime opportunities, but they need to be seized" (p. 20). This article investigates how we can seize these opportunities, what it is about the pandemic that caused this spike, and what we can learn from the experiences of volunteers during COVID-19. It also suggests how we can ensure that the increased level of volunteering is maximised and preserved for the remainder of - and following - the pandemic.

The spike and shifts in volunteering during COVID-19

To Meier & Stutzer (2008), the willingness of people to volunteer during the pandemic would not have been a surprise: "The act of helping others gives enjoyment per se. People receive a 'warm glow' from contributing time to the provision of a public good. Independently of the outcome, the knowledge of contributing to a good cause is internally self-rewarding" (p.41).

Given people's strong desire to contribute to the good of the public, it is perhaps unsurprising that with lockdown freeing up more time, many wanted to use it to help. At the time of writing this article the first dose of the vaccine is being rolled out, and people are still volunteering en masse and those who recognise and seek to tap into the reservoir of public good-will come from all corners. For example, The Sun have been working with the NHS on a recruitment drive for COVID volunteers, with the newspaper reporting that

50,000 readers signed up within 18 days to join The Sun's own 'Jabs Army', acting as vaccination stewards (Ridley, 2021). People Know How has also experienced a large increase in people seeking to volunteer with them. They had over 200 new enquiries during the first lockdown period, taking on around 150 new volunteers in various roles. With the increased demand for their services and projects during the pandemic, People Know How want to understand how COVID-19 has changed who and how people volunteer and how best they can support them.

This pandemic has caused not just a rise but a change in the types of volunteering people is engaging with. In particular volunteering in one's own community has risen, with people going shopping for someone who is too frail to do so themselves and befriending lonely people become a normal part of the pandemic. According to Linning (2020), 290,000 adults volunteered to befriend in 2018, keeping in contact with someone at risk of loneliness. During the pandemic, this number had increased almost eightfold to 2.2 million adults, far more than the overall rate of increase for volunteering. It seems that as people become more aware of the risks of loneliness during the lockdown, they are doing more to prevent it. Volunteering in the face of this crisis has become a way for the public to rally to help one another.

The new volunteers

As well as an increase in the number of volunteers, the pandemic has had an impact on who is applying to volunteer, as well as who is able to volunteer. Before the lockdown, the majority of those volunteering by visiting, buddying or befriending in Scotland were women, young people under the age of 24, and the over 60s (Linning, 2020). One possible reason for these age groups being more likely to become befrienders is that they may have more spare time; they are less likely to be in full-time employment and so can volunteer their time to help others. It could also be that these groups are aware of the effect of loneliness existing within their own groups, and may have

experienced it themselves (Campaign to End Loneliness, 2021).

When the pandemic struck, these two factors of increased spare time and awareness of the prevalence of loneliness began to include more people, perhaps accounting for the shift which occurred. During the 2020 lockdown, 80% of those aged 45-54 volunteered through befriending (keeping in touch with someone who is lonely), and every age group saw a spike in volunteering. That those in the middle age saw such a substantial leap implies something as to why people volunteered (Linning, 2020). It could be that when given time, due to being unable to work, people's instinct is to help. When experiencing the isolation of lockdown, people may have greater empathy for those at risk of loneliness and are motivated to help. Whatever the reason, the pandemic shows that the willingness of people to volunteer has been limited up until this point based on their circumstances. Furthermore, when given the opportunity, demographic factors such as age and gender don't count for as much. Not only more people, but more kinds of people, are willing to volunteer.

The rise of remote volunteering has highlighted another way people who have been unable to in the past, can volunteer. As services have been transitioned online, the number of people who are willing and able to volunteer their time and labour has increased. One potential reason for this is that remote volunteering provides an opportunity for those with disabilities or social anxiety to volunteer, as it involves fewer physical and social demands. As Lachance argues, "As [most] volunteer opportunities are specific for individuals without disabilities, [virtual volunteering] enables for individuals with disabilities to partake in [volunteering]. Thus, [virtual volunteering] does not discriminate against individuals with disabilities, but instead provides them with an accessible opportunity" (Lachance, 2020, p. 4) Here the author argues that the pandemic has revealed an area of growth for volunteering, one that can help to change who it is that volunteers. However, he does so with a problematic definition of volunteering. One which highlights the frustrations people

have faced while trying to volunteer during the lockdown.

Lachance defines volunteering as "a freely chosen leisure activity, volunteering is an integral activity for civic participation and the operations of organizations and events" (p.1). While the author likely meant the term 'leisure' in reference to the activity being one of volition and during one's own time, this could be construed as not recognising the effort that goes into volunteering, nor the altruistic motivations behind it. It may be more useful to view this not as a leisure activity that will be replaced when things go back to normal, but a genuine and potentially lasting desire to help. It is key that volunteers are valued in recognition of how integral they are to organisations projects. Support must be provided to retain volunteers after the immediacy of the pandemic has abated as services cannot be done without them.

A report by Talk/together argues that these new volunteers represent an opportunity to build infrastructure and services to connect people. Civil society and faith organisations can could work with colleges and the government to set up more schemes where volunteers support those who lack digital skills and confidence or have difficulties speaking, reading or writing in English. Such projects could use the time of some of the 4 million people who volunteered for the first time in 2020 and want to volunteer again (The Together Initiative, 2021, p. 117).

As the report also argues that the influx of people is something these projects can utilise effectively as it provides them with more people to befriend, train and support with more time to do it.

Utilising volunteers effectively during COVID-19

While there has been a spike in people applying to volunteer, it seems that not all have been able to find meaningful opportunities, and many of those who have managed to volunteer may have found it unsatisfying and disappointing. In England, 750,000 people volunteered two days after the NHS Volunteer

Responders opened recruitment, some three times more than the targeted 250,000 volunteers (NHS England, 2020). Perhaps as a result of such unexpectedly huge numbers applying to volunteer, some reported to The Guardian finding themselves under-utilised (Butler, 2020). The article claims that many were waiting on 'standby' to be allocated a role weeks after they had signed up without hearing anything, with even those who had been allocated tasks feeling under-utilised. Furthermore, the article quotes Paul Reddish, chief executive for Volunteering Matters, who argued that this was not a pressing issue. He is quoted as saying, "until the need is zero, we should not be worried about volunteers being under-utilized. We just need to get to the point where everybody has got food. It's not that volunteers aren't wanted or needed. The reality is that the number of people has outweighed the need." (Butler, 2020, para. 19). While there is a need to balance resource, this surge of interest in volunteering during the pandemic is a great opportunity to collaborate with members of the community willing to donate their time.

This is why People Know How have further developed their VIP Management team, to help with the needs of new volunteers and to ensure enquires are replied to in a timely manner. They understand that this eagerness is to be valued, and that volunteers should be supported.

"At People Know How our VIPs (volunteers, interns and placement students) are essential to everything we do, our projects couldn't run without them. We want our volunteers to get the most from their experience, and as such we are extremely flexible with our opportunities. We can offer volunteers for just an hour a week for 6 months, or for 1 or 2 days a week, longer term" (People Know How, 2021).

By calling them VIPs, People Know How demonstrates just how important these 'very important people' are. They view their 'VIPs' as both an integral part of their organisation as well as a project in its own right, dedicating a department to facilitating personal and career development for every single VIP to ensure they feel valued and get the most out of their

experiences. To supplement this, organisations need to employ novel ways of finding meaningful roles for volunteers so that they feel useful and remain willing. Volunteers also need to be supported and help to grow as it is their time they are willingly contributing. Creating a balanced relationship is only a positive for everyone involved.

A report by McGarvey et al. (2020) found that a common reason people provide for continuing to volunteer is a sense of contribution, with 45% saying that they continued due to the "difference they were making" (p.25). Conversely, volunteers were unlikely to continue if the organisation was unable to accommodate their needs and availability or due to feeling under-appreciated. Volunteers' satisfaction with the process and experiences working with organisations informs whether they will continue. Dismissing people's issues with the process or feelings of under-utilisation are detrimental to the goal of retaining high numbers of volunteers for the rest of the pandemic, and once the worst of the pandemic is over. Charities and organisations must find ways to utilise this valuable human resource in order to maintain the momentum of the present tide of good-will.

A sense of community

Part of preserving the will to volunteer is ensuring a positive environment by cultivating a sense of community, which is nurtured by teamwork and reflections on the positive impact of the support. As Meier & Stutzer (2004) argued, "In this case, meeting people and making friends, which increase the feeling of relatedness, is not extrinsically but intrinsically rewarding" (p. 6). This social interaction and sense of community is a key aspect of why people have enjoyed volunteering and continue to do so. This is echoed by what volunteers have said have been the positive aspects seen and felt during the pandemic (The Together Initiative, 2021).

For example, People Know How has created their own VIP community, working towards nurturing these connections and creating a

network that can support VIPs both during and after their time at the charity.

The report by The Together Initiative (2021) also found that people associated volunteering with connection with their neighbours and as a counter to the isolation caused by the lockdown. The report, which was based on surveys done by the organisation Talk/ together, found that volunteering increased a sense of local connectedness. It discussed how, in part, this was due to people having to volunteer locally due to restricted movement. It also cited that volunteering for some was the first time people had interacted with their neighbours. They argued that “volunteering enables thousands of civil society groups to carry out their work [and] helps build trust, turning strangers into friends and helping combat loneliness and isolation” (The Together Initiative, 2021, p.36). The article distinguishes between volunteering within an organisation or on their own, but comes to conclusion that both support a sense of community, which can help the mental health and sense of wellbeing of the volunteer.

Volunteering for the volunteer

This returns us to the issue of how we can ensure this increased level of volunteering continues. Charities and organisations should open a dialogue with volunteers in order to understand what people want to get out of volunteering and what will give them a positive experience so that they wish to continue. Rubenstein et al. (2020) suggests organisations devote resources especially to cultivating positive experience, and a sense of community and meaning underpinning volunteer support: “On-the-job, resources can include workplace social support, idiosyncratic skills, and convenient schedules or status. Off-the-job, resources can include enjoyable community activities” (p.4). The researcher argued that one of the reasons people continued volunteering was due to its tendency to replenish their ‘ego’; that is, their internal resources such as motivation. When provided with meaningful volunteer opportunities, people have their ego replenished which paid

work often depletes. People may continue to volunteer because it provides them with internal resources that improve their own wellbeing, fulfilment, and motivation, and because it helps them to build their own skills and sense of self. If volunteers are provided with meaningful roles, the motivation that this provides may encourage them to continue to volunteer.

People Know How’s Reconnect service is contributing to mitigating the social and digital exclusion being exacerbated by the pandemic with projects like Wellbeing & Digital and Computer Delivery. While People Know How had the means to provide 1,300 digital devices since April 2020 to enable people to stay connected during the pandemic (People Know How, 2021), organisations with fewer available means can follow the Wellbeing & Digital method of teaching digital skills which is an example of a project which can be easily moved online without too much cost or effort. So long as service users have digital access, volunteers can teach and support remotely.

Furthermore, remote volunteering has enabled charities to adapt to an increased need and demand for their services. Moving this support online, People Know How, has been able to adapt to the 60% increase in service users during the pandemic while ensuring the safety of both volunteers and services users. For example, their Positive Transitions service can now provide support, completely online. One-to-one and group support is now done through Microsoft Teams video calls. But it is not just running support sessions. They have also been able to run virtual art exhibitions and performances through by their online art and drama clubs for young people (Baldacchino, 2021). Remote volunteering is vital to provide services during a time of great need, which adhere to social distancing measures and ensure the safety of service users.

Meier & Stutzer (2004) highlighted that “people who volunteer frequently are more likely to report greater life satisfaction than non-volunteers” (p. 19). Volunteering can support volunteers just as much as those they help. Maintaining positive and socially rich

environments will retain volunteers negatively affected by the isolation of lockdown. As one volunteer reported in a blog for Mind Tools, "Volunteering during lockdown helped me stay sane and social. It gave me something to look forward to when every week felt the same and meant that I wasn't twiddling my thumbs every weekend!" (Gledhill, 2020, para. 13)

COVID-19 has revealed a key way in which volunteering can help fill society's need for social connectedness and our desire for community. What volunteers seem to value is a positive environment which facilitates meaningful tasks, which in turn gives mental health and wellbeing benefits for the volunteer.

There are strategies which organisations can implement to show volunteers that their support has meaning and thus increase volunteer retention and wellbeing, such as showing them what their role contributes towards. As Meier & Stutzer (2004) found, "67% of the interviewed volunteers stated that an important source of satisfaction was seeing the results of their work [support]." (p. 41). Organisations such as People Know How, which focus impact on local communities, should be able to retain volunteers better due to the immediacy and locality of their work. Wellbeing and Digital, People Know How's project which teaches service users digital skills, is based around one-to-one support means that the volunteer sees the positive impact of their support.

Perhaps this idea of tangible good is why volunteering has increased so much during the pandemic. The crisis may have been perceived by many as an opportunity to do meaningful work in their communities and directly witness the fruits of their labour. For example, when an elderly neighbour needs food, providing it to them is a service that does tangible good. This is perhaps amplified by the extra time people have on their hands, and the absence of both the sense of accomplishment and ego depletion which employment often embodies (e.g., Rubenstein et al., 2020), with the need to find that sense elsewhere and the extra internal resources to go out and find it. The sense of meaning volunteers get from seeing these benefits thus replenishing stocks

of internal resources even further, potentially creating a positive feedback effect with lasting implications for people's perceptions of volunteering.

This idea is echoed in the Talk/together report for The Together Initiative (2021), where they quote one volunteer speaking about how the tangibility of the act created a positive experience for them:

I came out and cooked something and helped the homeless people. And that's really working well. And I do go as a volunteer, and it really helped me to integrate, to meet people and listen to them. And sometimes, it helps me to think back. I could be crazy busy with work and with the family. But these kind of little chats with the homeless people made me come back to the ground" (The Together Initiative, 2021, p. 143)

In other words, volunteering can keep us connected with people and to a sense of reality in this strange and unreal time which affects us all.

Conclusion

The pandemic has perhaps changed how people perceive volunteering in that it gave them an opportunity to experience how tied volunteering is to a sense of community. When motivated by a global crisis and given time, the majority of people can and will help in some capacity. If organisations utilise volunteers correctly, the influx of new people willing to volunteer means that new demographics of people will have experienced their efforts not as a sacrifice of their time but as a gain. Therefore, the pandemic presents an opportunity, but also novel challenges for organisations to provide meaningful volunteering roles and thus retain volunteers.

Volunteering can be perceived as a form of activity that tackles the isolation caused by lockdown. Volunteers have spoken about how the strain on mental health caused by lockdown and social isolation was mitigated by the support they give. For example, informal and formal volunteers talked about their efforts,

giving them an opportunity to meet their neighbours for the first time. People Know How and charitable organisations should look to this influx as a force to help mitigate some of the damage done to communities as a result of social isolation. Providing meaningful roles for volunteers helps them feel useful and engaged, especially when the positive impact is visible and conveyed to them. Making it easier for volunteers to find meaningful roles and limiting the time they spend on waiting lists increases the chance of volunteers to have a positive experience. Volunteering remotely has been revealed as an invaluable tool going forward, enabling people to help even when unable to leave their homes. Many people are willing to contribute when they have the time, and when their applications result in meaningful roles. Remote volunteering, if implemented effectively, can aid in this process of finding meaningful roles for the increased number and variety of people willing to volunteer to ensure they have a positive experience and their perceptions of volunteering are changed for the better so that they wish to continue in the medium- and long-term.

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