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Volunteering and remuneration: can they co-exist?

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Volunteering and remuneration:

Can they co-exist?

Tony Baxter-Tomkins and Michelle Wallace

Abstract:

Volunteering has an undisputable tenet: it is unpaid. However, is this concept dated given what is required of today's emergency service volunteers? This paper argues from empirical evidence that the issue is far from clear cut. Admittedly, there are two poles in the debate about volunteers and remuneration but there is also a continuum between these positions that may justify a re-definition of remuneration in certain circumstances.

Title: Volunteering and remuneration: Can they co-exist?

Keywords: Volunteers; Emergency Services; Re-imbusement.

Category of paper: Research paper.

Purpose of the research paper: This research focuses on recruitment and retention of volunteers within the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) and the NSW State Emergency Service (SES) and their views about whether they believe they should be paid for the work they do.

Methodology: Conversational interview technique. This is consistent with an unstructured interview process and was controlled to ensure the interviewer's research interests were achieved.

Findings: Many volunteers believed the real costs incurred by their action should be recompensed.

Value of the paper: Our findings add to contemporary knowledge about emergency services volunteers.

Number of pages: 13

Section Headings:

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Volunteering and remuneration: Can they co-exist?

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Abstract

Volunteering has an undisputable tenet: it is unpaid. However, is this concept dated given what is required of today's emergency service volunteers? The accepted view of volunteering is that, other than the re-imbursment of out-of-pocket expenses incurred during the course of their voluntary action, no other form of remuneration is acceptable or should be offered to emergency service volunteers. Any other payment would negate the voluntary nature of the action; the person would cease to be a volunteer, and so would be considered a paid employee. The intrinsic rewards of volunteering are considered sufficient.

This paper argues from empirical evidence that the issue is far from clear cut. Admittedly, there are two poles in the debate about volunteers and remuneration but there is also a continuum between these positions that may justify a re-definition of remuneration in certain circumstances. During our wider study of emergency service volunteers from the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) and the New South Wales State Emergency Service (SES) we asked a question around issues of remuneration. We found that a little over a third of emergency services volunteers did not support remuneration under any circumstances. The majority supported a form of payment under certain circumstances and these are discussed in this paper.

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Volunteering and remuneration: Can they co-exist?

Introduction

It is an accepted view that the intrinsic rewards volunteers receive, with the exception of the reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses, are sufficient to sustain voluntary action. Any other form of payment would re-define the activity altering the relationship into that of a paid employee thus contradicting the voluntary nature of the activity.

What constitutes a voluntary action remains difficult to define. The question about appropriate remuneration is even more problematic. One of the British definitions of voluntary action is that it is an unpaid activity by an individual on behalf of a group or organisation for the benefit of others or the environment (Kitchen, S., Michaelson, J., Wood, N., and John, P.2006, p. 6). The New Zealand Federation of Voluntary Welfare Organisation's definition is more simplistic; a volunteer is a person who freely chooses to perform work without payment or coercion (McGill 1996, p. 13).

There are a number of Australian definitions of volunteering and they all address the issue of payment. Cordingley, (2000, pp. 79-80) for example, asserts that if volunteers received any form of remuneration they would cease to be volunteers and become paid workers because an essential change to the very concept of volunteering would occur. Another, (Australian Multicultural Foundation and Volunteering Australia 2007, p. 14) claim volunteering is undertaken without payment and Noble and Rogers, (1998, p. 7) say volunteering is carried out without a financial reward. This paper supports the concept of volunteering as being an unpaid action and that remuneration would be incongruent at the most simplistic level of the accepted definition however it also argues for a wider, more critical delineation of what actually represents remuneration.

The research reported here focuses on recruitment and retention issues within the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) and the NSW State Emergency Service (SES) volunteer ranks and the findings are selected from a wider study on the commitment, work identity and lived experiences of these volunteers. One of the research questions in this study sought the volunteers' views and opinions about whether they believe they should be paid for the work they do.

Methodology

The volunteer population sample consisted of 72 emergency service volunteers equally representative of both the NSW RFS and the NSW SES. Equal numbers of volunteers were interviewed from both urban and rural settings. A naturalistic, conversational interview technique was used. This methodology is consistent with an unstructured interview process and was controlled to ensure the interviewer's research interests were achieved (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, Alexander 1997, p. 65).

During the conversation all volunteers were asked the same list of questions but not necessarily in the same order. The data collected was processed systematically; it was arranged in accordance with the main themes which addressed the study questions or propositions and coded accordingly. The conversation analysis required coding in such a way that keywords, concepts

and themes were able to be identified through the process of '(T)ypologising', the grouping of ideas that formed similar themes and characteristics (Minichiello et al. 1997, p. 266). Following the analysis NUD*IST software was used to assist in the data processing and retrieval process. The subject matter presented here and those of the wider study are a compilation of these themes.

The demographics of the emergency service population interviewed revealed that, although predominately male, women were over-represented in leadership positions. To illustrate, of those interviewed only 12.5% were female however, of these, 33% held leadership positions and 11% were trainers. Half of these women (55.5%) had been members for longer than 5 years. Comparing this with the male population interviewed, 6.3% held leadership positions, 38% were trainers and 77.7% of them had been members for longer than 5 years.

The findings reported in this paper are a component of a wider study on the commitment, work identity and lived experiences of emergency service volunteers. Our wider research questions involved emergency service volunteer recruitment, the role of emergency services identity and affiliation in the commitment of volunteers and the maintenance of commitment given the dangerous and often stressful nature of this type of voluntary work. Our findings add to contemporary knowledge about emergency services volunteers and provide some recommendations for improved recruitment and retention practices.

The research question relating to remuneration, the focus of this paper, asked whether the volunteers thought they should be paid for their efforts in a similar way to retained firefighters and would being paid a retainer improve recruitment and retention. It became clear from the results of this research that remuneration was a 'hot topic' for the interviewees. Although a number of volunteers rejected outright the idea of remuneration, an analysis of the major emergent themes revealed that remuneration was a concern requiring consideration under certain conditions and guidelines.

Volunteering as unpaid work

To understand the meanings a volunteer may assign to voluntary action it is necessary to encapsulate the concept of paid work. Paid work is defined by the often referred to hierarchy of needs which argues that paid employment is able to satisfy many of our needs. Money will provide the basic psychological and safety needs and assist provide the higher levels of fulfillment. Money therefore is argued as a prime motivator to work. However, if this was true in all cases, the argument is made that little voluntary action would take place.

The hierarchy of needs refer to Maslow's 'D' (deficiency) and 'B' (becoming) motivation status in people (Cloninger 1996, p. 439). These motivations, explained as the psychological needs of food, water and sleep, for example are placed at the lowest level of the hierarchy. These are followed by needs for safety, belongingness and love and esteem needs, all of which are located within the D realm of the hierarchy. The fifth need, self-actualisation, is located within the B realm of personal development. The third, fourth and fifth developmental stages, those of belongingness, esteem and self actualisation, explain voluntary action and the rewards received by volunteers. This simplistic notion must however be understood as fluid; a process which ebbs and flows as circumstances change.

The fulfillment of each stage varies in accordance with the idiosyncratic nature of the individual. Some people need to work in a challenging position; some enjoy supervising employees or have a need to be involved in determining the organisational goals and the ways of achieving those goals. Others do not seek responsibility at work but require satisfaction through recognition, responsibility and achievement in other pursuits; other forms of activity such as voluntary action. Some of these needs include the opportunity to interact with others. This need is addressed through belonging to groups and, among other things, includes an affiliation with group norms, the group culture and values (Pasmore 1984).

Identity considerations for emergency service volunteers

Work, in all of its guises, provides a sense of who we are and what it means to be a person in today's society. It identifies our position in the social structure, particularly within our circle of friends and colleagues. Work has for centuries been the linchpin which prescribed a person's relationship within the community, their status and identity. These features came with a pre-defined social placement and role. It also represented a male's ability to provide for his family, it was therefore part of the masculine identity. In today's economic climate and the changes to structured employment through the deskilling of jobs, redundancy, the increasing feminisation of workplaces and the propensity for part-time work develop feelings of lost or unfulfilled identity (Fulop and Linstead 2003).

Voluntary action provides the higher satisfactions necessary to alleviate the identity question 'Who am I?' enabling the person to become more fully psychologically developed. Voluntary emergency service work, in this context, is distinct from paid employment as it provides the intrinsic motivations for action which, in turn, provides a sense of identity with one's group and culture. It provides meaningful social interaction, involvement in the action, decision making and a diversity of activities. It also provides both the individual volunteer and the community of practice positive recognition from the community which raises self-esteem and feelings of worthiness.

Some extrinsic and intrinsic rewards derived from unpaid work

Money, an extrinsic reward, motivates some people under certain circumstances to work; however, for this to be the case, money must be important to the employee. It must be perceived as being a direct reward for work performance, the employee must have high lower-level needs and the amount must be considered significant to the employee (Robbins, Millett, Cacioppe and Waters-Marsh 2001). Remuneration however is not a panacea for the motivation to work and this is exemplified by the voluntary action. Cognitive evaluation theory is an exponent in the belief that when significant extrinsic rewards are provided to people who are highly interested in the role they are performing, the reward actually decreases the intrinsic motivation of that person. The theory advocates that high levels of intrinsic motivation are resistant to extrinsic rewards which has implications in the explanation of the voluntary action (Robbins, Millett, Cacioppe and Waters-Marsh 2001).

Moran, Britton and Correy (1992) illustrate some of the intrinsic rewards volunteers considered motivationally significant. They were helping others, concern for others and, to learn skills. Moreover, other intrinsic rewards are also positive factors for remaining a volunteer. McLennan,

King and Jamieson (2004) report on the findings of three surveys of volunteer firefighter's reasons for volunteering. The main reasons for joining were a sense of community, social interaction and mateship, interest, satisfaction and to gain new skills. Cox (2000) supports these motivational intrinsic rewards but reflects that scholarship under-value the standard responses such as to give something back or to help others. She reports that one assumption is that these responses are socially sanctioned and other, more self-interested reasons may exist. Swan (1995) believes that emergency service volunteers provide their services in order to meet their particular motivational and psychological needs.

Volunteering as work undertaken without payment (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006; Bittman and Thompson 2000; Cordingley 2000; Ironmonger 2000; Noble and Rogers 1998; Onyx and Leonard 2000; Oppenheimer and Warburton 2000; Vellekoop-Baldock 2000) remains a central tenet within the emergency services, or does it?

Findings

The suggestion about being paid or not for the voluntary work undertaken by emergency service volunteers resulted in some conclusions that are worthy of serious consideration. The responses were unanticipated by the authors because a categorical rejection of the concept was expected – however, not so. The majority of the volunteers firmly believed in voluntary action up to a point; however after that point was reached, a different set of conclusions emerged. An example of a typical argument is presented below:

...there should be something there to protect people's income while they're working. Say you go away for a week; there should be something there that you still get paid by your employer instead of taking annual leave or whatever else. ... 'Cause I can't afford to pack up for 4 days and not get paid for it. Government employees get paid, but anyone else working for private enterprise they're losing money. There should be something put in place to help these people. They should be paid, some re-imburement put in place. There should be a tax incentive or something put in place (male SES volunteer, rural location).

An opposing theme was the belief in the principle of giving one's time freely in the service of others. These volunteers, regardless of circumstances reject any notion of payment. They cited the accepted notion of volunteering; it should be undertaken without payment and to do otherwise would negate the voluntary action. A typical example demonstrates this point of view:

No I don't think that I want to be paid because I'm here just because I want to be. I just don't want to be here for the pay. If I started to be paid I'd probably not put the interest into it as much as I do now but, it's just something we joke about. Like you know, every now and then we get new things and we say "did you get a pay rise" but it's just something you find - you're just here to help people out, you're not here for pay (male RFS volunteer, rural location).

It became clear that those who opposed payment did so with passion. Of the 72 volunteers in this study, 39% disagreed with the suggestion that any form of payment was justified.

Volunteers or casual employees?

Although not all emergency service volunteers agree that payment is justified, the major theme which emerged was the firm belief that some form of payment is justified. The type of payment expressed had a number of guises and ranged from money, tax concessions, an honorarium, or an emergency service volunteer superannuation scheme. In many cases it was believed that if volunteers were paid, the practice would result in an increase in 'volunteering'.

Following is a sample of the theme that becomes apparent about their support for remuneration. The feelings expressed indicated far-reaching implications:

We've talked amongst ourselves, people been away at fires, and there should be something made available through a tax cut or something like that, you know, you are a volunteer, there's got to be some sort of way that they could come up and, some guys have been away for three and four weeks you know and they haven't been able to see their kids or anything like that and they go home and they, if they haven't got a good boss or even if they're their own boss, their business has suffered by them not being there. So I think something has got to be done. Because I can see in the future the younger people might start to look at it and say no, no. If there's some incentive there, if you do go away we will be reimbursed or something, there's got to be a way around it (male RFS volunteer, rural location).

This volunteer believes that future generations of RFS volunteers will not be as civic minded about giving their time unless some form of incentive is forthcoming. Given the mounting fiscal restraints being experienced by employees, employers and self employed people, the costs incurred by most volunteers are considerable and rising each year.

I don't think you can get paid for what you really do. The way I look at it, why can't they set up a superannuation policy fund? Instead of paying while you're sitting out on the road, paying you outright, paying double time anyway, the government would get the money back anyway, so this way it would be simple, a super fund (male SES volunteer, urban location).

One of the variations of the themes being expressed about remuneration can be summed up by the above comment; the payment of a wage is not being discussed here. He is however suggesting that some form of recognition and recompense is warranted and he believes that this should be through a State controlled Superannuation system for emergency service volunteers. He alludes to a fixed rate of superannuation being applied rather than any notions of a fixed amount for time spent 'on the job'.

The protection of a volunteer's wages whilst acting in their voluntary capacity, most particularly when away from home for extended periods is a concern for many volunteers. Most volunteers who are employed by the private sector are not paid when away volunteering. Further-more, unless the State declares the incident a disaster, when employment is safeguarded, a volunteer could lose her or his job if excessive amounts of time are taken. It must be stated here however that a number of employers do pay their employees when they are away from work volunteering for the emergency services but this is not the norm. Given the increase in the numbers of declared disasters over recent years an opportunity exists for further research. Are these declarations being made, for example, in an attempt to preserve jobs and/or are they being declared as a result of an

insurance lobby to reduce insurance payouts? Whatever the case, a strong argument exists that lost wages should be reimbursed by the State.

I do yes (believe volunteers should be paid) ah when we're called out of area especially. Our local, our local stuff no, because that's why we're doing it... (male RFS volunteer, rural location).

This volunteer is expressing a common belief; he is saying that when asked to leave his local area and fight fires for an extended period of time away from his family, community and his employment, as a volunteer he should be paid. This argument has merit, consider that serving on jury duty or as a reservist, for example, involves payment. Another familiar aspect of his argument was that he would not want payment whilst working within his own community. 'Our local stuff' was seen as true volunteering, helping one's own, one's community, however going away to assist another community was considered working for the State.

As can be appreciated, there is a strong line of reasoning for the argument that volunteers are significantly 'out-of-pocket', particularly if they are deployed out of their own area for extended periods of time serving the wider community.

In order to better understand the data, a more refined examination of the responses about payment was carried out. Initial responses demonstrated that 55% of the respondents believed that they should be paid, 39% believed they should not be paid and 6% were unsure. Following up on the initial responses a more probing discussion took place during which a clearer nuanced picture emerged. When the above responses were considered in more detail it became apparent that the issue was more complex because many volunteers qualified their opinions. The responses were re-examined in light of this. Taking into considerations the qualified answers the results now showed that only 22% of the interviewed population was in favour of being paid, 36% were in favour of being paid under certain circumstances, 36% said definitely no to being paid and 6% were unsure.

The refined results now revealed that 58% of the sample population believed they should be paid, that a payment was legitimate and it should not impact upon their claim to being volunteers. A closer analysis of these data discovered that a much stronger case was being put for payment under certain circumstances. When asked to leave their place of work to respond to an emergency within the immediate area, that is, within their own community, 36% of those who advocate for payment rejected the idea. However, when asked to travel away from their community for an extended period, which varies from a three or four day tour to a number of weeks, such as the NSW Christmas Fires in 2001/2002, payment was considered necessary. The reasoning is clear, volunteers who forgo their annual leave entitlement or simply lose their wages during the time they are away are asking for their lost wages to be reimbursed. This same argument applies to taking annual leave because; although the volunteers have not lost wages they have lost the opportunity to take their family away on holiday and the money with which to do so. Self employed people had similar concerns about ensuring an adequate living was made and the effect extended periods of time away had on their income and businesses.

Tax concessions and donations

It would appear that volunteering for the NSW emergency services is more problematic than would otherwise be thought. The provision stating that volunteers are only entitled to reimbursement of actual expenses incurred during the voluntary action requires a re-definition of what constitutes an expense. A claim is being made here that lost wages, lost custom and lost annual leave are actual volunteer expenses. As things stand at the moment these significant losses to the individual and the volunteers' families must be considered as collateral damage but, and the authors strongly emphasise this, this is not un-acknowledged by the emergency service organisations.

The Australian Taxation Office stipulates that any monies received by a volunteer in the course of their voluntary action must be declared as income. This ruling, taken literally, is not in dispute by the majority of volunteers interviewed, or the authors, however the volunteers are not referring to a financial inducement or suggesting to profit from their efforts, they are arguing their case for 'expenses incurred' whilst serving in the interests of their communities and country.

By comparison, an Australian Government report (University of Technology Sydney 2005, p. 31) asserts that 36% of Australians who gave a donation to charity claimed it as a tax concession in the financial year 2003-04; a sum amounting to an estimated \$1.64 billion. The amount of this 'voluntary contribution' was, in reality, offset by all taxpayers.

Crompton and McAneney (2008, p. 45) report on the distribution by States and Territories of the national average annual loss incurred by disasters. Their data shows, in 2006 values, an annual insured loss of \$930 million, almost half of which was incurred in NSW. Ironmonger, (2000, p. 68-70) estimating the value of volunteers' contribution in 1997, placed an hourly unit of \$17.10 for their effort. During 2006, emergency service volunteers, who represent only 1% of the population aged over 18 years, gave 26 million hours of service (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, p. 7). Valuing these hours at Ironmonger's \$17.10 per hour equates to \$444.6 million; the approximate estimation made by Compton and McAneney's (2008) of insured costs for NSW. It doesn't however compensate for the uninsured costs incurred as a result of disasters.

It is evident therefore; the value to the Australian economy provided by emergency service volunteers alone could not be paid for by Government under existing conditions. However, if a donation of money is claimed as a tax deduction, providing a tax concession or other form of reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses for the voluntary hours worked, the loss of income or the lost custom by employers and self employed emergency service volunteers is certainly worthy of further study and consideration.

Conclusion

This research found that the question of remuneration in one form or another is of significant importance to 58% of the emergency service volunteers interviewed. The remuneration spoken of however does not specifically refer to the payment of a salary but to the re-imbursement of claimed out-of-pocket expenses such as lost wages particularly when away from their local communities for extended periods.

The undeniable tenet that volunteers should not profit from their actions is not in dispute. What is in dispute is the classification of out-of-pocket expenses. The entitlements available to emergency service volunteers require serious reconsideration when confronted by the opinions of emergency service volunteers who took part in this research. Our results show that some form of re-imbursment must be considered under certain circumstances. The percentage of volunteers interviewed for this work that categorically refused to consider any form of remuneration was 36%. The percentage of those interviewed who believe that emergency service volunteers should be re-imbursed for loss of income under certain conditions was 58%. Only 6% of the interviewees were unsure or undecided.

Of those volunteers who felt that some form of re-imbursment was appropriate, most believed that it should only take effect when and if they were deployed out of area. An out of area response is when emergency service volunteers are deployed in a location other than their immediate community. These responses may take the form of traveling interstate and often take the form of traveling large distances intrastate. These deployments may be for days or weeks.

The argument being made by the volunteers, and in this paper, is that lost wages in the service of the public amounts to an 'expense incurred' and as such should be considered liable for re-imbursment. The form and amount of re-imbursment however remains an issue for further consideration. If it can be agreed that lost wages, income and annual holidays are expenses incurred by the emergency service volunteer in the service of her or his fellow Australians then the established tenet about volunteering being an unpaid activity will not be tarnished.

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