

# Digital Design Considerations for Volunteer Recruitment: Making the Implicit Promises of Volunteering More Explicit

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## ABSTRACT

Non-profit organisations may find it difficult to demonstrate to potential volunteers what is required in their voluntary role—resulting in a mismatch between expectations and reality for volunteers. This mismatch could be perceived as a psychological contract breach. We interviewed 18 volunteers and 7 coordinators about their experiences and expectations in order to understand how the experience of volunteers can better be captured and communicated. Further, we wished to consider how future digital platforms might capture important elements of the volunteer experience to better support recruitment, retention and recognition. We present our findings and discuss digital platform implications around the four implicit ‘promises’ of volunteering: the social promise, the opportunity promise, the value promise and the organisational citizenship promise. We add to literature exploring the voluntary sector by assessing the feasibility of digital interventions to support various aspects of volunteer and coordinator roles.

## CCS CONCEPTS

- Applied computing ~ Psychology
- Human-centered computing ~ Human computer interaction (HCI)
- Social and professional topics ~ Employment issues

## KEYWORDS

Volunteer; Psychological Contract; Digital.

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## 1 Introduction

Volunteering is an altruistic activity where a person provides labour for no financial gain. Putnam (2000) has argued that volunteering builds social capital and can strengthen civil society by generating trust and facilitating the effective organisation of people and collective action. Volunteering also delivers benefits to the volunteer [56]. Society can also experience secondary benefits from the personal changes experienced by the volunteer. Volunteers have lower mortality rates [3, 10], socialise more [39], form better emotional attachments [69], achieve a stronger personal sense of accomplishment [70], and are less likely to be involved in criminal activity in adulthood [44, 59]. Volunteering can also improve occupational achievement [67], which in turn facilitates entry into paid work. For older adults, volunteering can moderate a loss of purpose following the loss of major role identities, such as the wage earner or parent [20]. In short, volunteering offers benefits to the volunteer, to the recipients of the unpaid work and to society more generally. Yet the recruitment and management and longer term support of volunteers is not always handled well [64].

Cnaan & Cascio (1998) noted a prevalent assumption that volunteers are simply unpaid workers, this despite the fact that wages are only one differentiator between a volunteer and professional workforce. They describe a range of differentiators, including hours of work, workplace dependency, affiliation to multiple organisations, legal liabilities and performance management. More recently, Alfes, Antunes, & Shantz [2017] echo this, arguing that “the differences between volunteers and paid staff make it unlikely that HR practices designed and implemented in a paid context can be readily transferred to volunteers” (p.63). Their review of the literature describes the recruitment and management practices associated with volunteering, and recognises that one of the key issues at stake here is a better understanding of the motivations of the volunteer together with new HR practices that could marry these motivations to specific volunteer opportunities.

Digital systems offer new opportunities to match volunteers to opportunities and can help ensure that the goals and expectations of the volunteers are fully aligned with the needs of the host organisation [51]. However, this potential goes unrealised in much of the sector. Most volunteering organisations still follow

standard human-resource management (HRM) approaches for the recruitment and selection of volunteers [55] and digital support is typically restricted to relatively static web pages that act to ‘channel’ potential volunteers into rather crudely specified categories of unpaid work (e.g. ‘work with young people’; ‘help older adults’). This is particularly surprising, when some of the largest global changes to volunteering are digitally driven, specifically around the rise of digital platforms for short-term or crisis volunteering, that could drive changes across the sector [35].

In short, our understanding of the recruitment, management and co-ordination of volunteers remains overly reliant on traditional HR models [64] and our ability to harness digital systems in support of volunteering is underdeveloped [35]. Our overall goal in this paper is to understand how digital innovations might better align the needs of both volunteers and volunteer coordinators. This work is part of a larger project conducted in collaboration with charities and public service organisations, where we seek to design a raft of new digital support systems for volunteering. Here, we describe the start of the process, where we seek to understand more about the experiences of volunteers and volunteer coordinators and their underlying ‘psychological contract’.

## 1.1 Background

### 1.1.1 *The Decision to Volunteer*

Formal models of volunteer recruitment exist that typically recognise a values – motivations – opportunities (VMO) framework to describe the key factors that underpin the decision to volunteer [2]. Put simply, a volunteer is attracted to the values of an organisation, the fit to personal goals (e.g. career progression or social networking) and the opportunities for learning and mastery. We know that having many social connections and multiple organisational memberships increases the chances of volunteering [68]. People with more social ties are more likely to volunteer [38], in part because most people learn about volunteering opportunities through personal invitations [36] and also because, if someone knows a volunteer, they are also far more likely to transmit their enthusiasm for volunteering [46]. What this means, in practice, is that volunteers are often drawn into organisations with the best intentions but not necessarily with the best understanding of what the actual experience of volunteering is on the ground, which can have a marked effect on the retention and day to day motivations of the volunteer within an organisation [28].

### 1.1.2 *The Expectations of the Volunteer*

People volunteer for many different reasons, but all have expectations about what they will gain from the process. In the traditional work literature, such expectations are described in terms of a *psychological contract* (PC)- based on social exchange theory, that forms a crucial part of the Employee-Organization Relationship [1, 6]. This contract is defined in terms of the *beliefs* people have about the kinds of reciprocal exchanges that might occur between an employee and employer [14]. In other words, the psychological contract is a set of expectations about what the

employee and employer offer each other. This is supported by appropriate ‘onboarding’ (the process of introducing a new employee into his or her new job) which can make the transition as smooth, seamless, and rapid as possible. The ‘onboarding’ processes for paid staff is vital to employee satisfaction, yet recent work suggests that organisations are not very good at this [11]. These expectations can strongly shape behaviour within the workplace.

We know less about how the PC operates in non-traditional settings and our understanding of the PC for volunteering is limited. It could be argued that the ‘transactional’ elements of the PC (including fair working conditions and rewards) are less important for the volunteer than for the employee, but other PC elements, including recognition for work done and a sense of belonging within the organisation, might be deemed crucial. The few papers that have explored the kinds of PC present for volunteers recognise that the expectations of paid staff and volunteers or administrators can be very different. For example, Taylor, Darcy, Hoye, & Cuskelly (2006) investigated volunteering in community sport clubs. They noted that the volunteers were primarily concerned with doing rewarding work in a pleasant social environment, but were also glad of the social rewards (such as club dinners). However, these same volunteers sometimes felt pressure to commit more time than they had available. In contrast, the club administrators were more concerned about health and safety legislation, wanted to ensure that the volunteers adhered to professional and regulatory standards and were concerned about recruitment and training. Psychological contract breach (PCB)- when employees perceive that their employer has not met their obligations - can result in detrimental behaviours [22]. Walker et al. [2016] explored PCB in a survey of over 700 Australian volunteers, concluding that it was the single most powerful predictor of the decision to leave an organisation. This link between a PC breach and high turnover was also reported by Griep, Vantilborgh, Baillien, & Pepermans (2016), who showed that a PC breach led to low motivation and ‘feelings of violation’.

In this study, we are interested potential PC breaches from the perspective of both volunteer and volunteer coordinator. Specifically, we wish to understand how volunteer motivations and expectations map onto actual experiences of volunteering and the needs of the host organisation. We then propose to use this information to understand how digital resources could be improved.

## 1.2 Digital support in the non-profit sector

In a review of the relatively sparse literature on management support for volunteering, Studer & von Schnurbein (2013) noted the domination of highly traditional work practices, yet this landscape is beginning to change with the introduction of a number of digital innovations. Mazlan et al. (2017) comment on the growing number of platforms designed to explicitly recruit and manage volunteers (for examples see Better Impact, VolunteerMatters, and Do-It). These platforms are underutilised in the non-profit sector, in part because the host organisations

often lack the technological capacity to exploit the Web. Lee & Bhattacharjee (2011) describe this in terms of an ‘organisational digital divide’ wherein non-profits will fail to see the strategic advantages of a digital resources and may lack the technical capabilities to deliver that offer. Voida, Harmon, & Al-Ani (2012) describe the gap as surprising, given that volunteer recruitment co-ordinators are primarily engaged in the kind of ‘bridge-building work’ that translates well into the digital world. Indeed, those working in the non-profit sector frequently describe themselves as ‘on the verge’ of a transformation where some digital platform will improve future practice, but never quite reach that point of transformation [24], not least because the technological ‘quick fixes’ on offer do not reflect the complexities of the volunteer role and organisational infrastructure.

In stark contrast, digital innovation for short-term volunteering, or the recruitment and supporting of volunteers in response to a crisis has blossomed [54]. These new forms of volunteering are highly digitally dependent and rely upon mobile platforms and social networks that allow recruitment and coordination at scale and offer crowd workers the opportunities to make their actions known to others [34]. Such platforms allow for rich and very early communication between volunteers, but they remain somewhat removed from the ‘traditional’ world of volunteering where the relationships between host organisation and volunteer are more complex [24]. Researchers argue that such short-term forms of volunteering should not strictly be considered alongside volunteering in the more traditional sense (e.g. Snyder & Omoto, 2008).

Traditional volunteer recruitment practices remain relatively untouched by digital innovation, in part because they clash with the needs of volunteer coordinators and do not provide the required communication structures that are needed to build and cement relationships between volunteers and recruiters [24, 62]. These ‘traditional’ practices are failing to provide new volunteer recruits with the information they need to make a proper judgement about the prospective volunteer experience, i.e. recruits are left with unrealistic expectations about their role in the host organisation. We explore these issues in a series of interviews with a broad range of volunteers and volunteer coordinators.

## 2 Method

We adopted a qualitative approach, conducting 18 semi-structured interviews with volunteers and 7 semi-interviews with volunteer coordinators. Data were collected between September 2016 and April 2017 in the UK.

### 2.1 Participants

We recruited 25 participants: 10 male, 15 female. Ages ranged from 22 – 63 (mean 39, S.D 12.2). Participants lived in the North East of England. Of the 25 participants, 18 had diverse experiences of volunteering, and 7 were volunteer coordinators with

experience of volunteer management. Table 1 summarises participant demographic information, as well as the type of organisation they were affiliated with. For anonymity, each organisation is classified according to the International Classification of Non-profit Organizations [49]. All participants’ names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

**Table 1: Participant demographic and role information**

Name	Sex	Age	Role	Organisation
Chloe	F	43	Volunteer	1.2 Sports
Aoife	F	22	Volunteer	4.1 Social Services
Connor	M	24	Volunteer	4.1 Social Services
Sarah	F	37	Volunteer	5.1 Environment
Emma	F	31	Volunteer	1.1 Culture and Arts
Rachel	F	29	Volunteer	7.1 Advocacy
Sean	M	45	Volunteer	1.2 Sports
Vivian	F	33	Volunteer	1.1 Culture and Arts
Jack	M	-	Volunteer	5.1 Environment
Rebecca	F	45	Volunteer	5.1 Environment
Lauren	F	63	Volunteer	5.1 Environment
James	M	35	Volunteer	4.1 Social Services
Adam	M	28	Volunteer	4.2 Emergency and Relief
Michael	M	32	Volunteer	5.1 Environment
Megan	F	29	Volunteer	4.2 Emergency and Relief
David	M	26	Volunteer	6.1 Economic, Social & Community Dev.
Aaron	M	24	Volunteer	1.1 Culture & Arts
Daniel	M	41	Volunteer	4.1 Social Services
Lisa	F	41	Coordinator	4.1 Social Services
Claire	F	62	Coordinator	3.1 Hospitals and Rehabilitation
Louise	F	60	Coordinator	7.1 Advocacy
Paul	M	58	Coordinator	7.1 Advocacy
Anya	F	46	Coordinator	1.1 Culture and Arts
Katie	F	43	Coordinator	5.1 Environment
Susie	F	39	Coordinator	6.1 Economic, Social and Community Dev.

### 2.2 Procedure

An interview guide was designed to explore the motivations and rewards of volunteering and other elements of the experience including the sense of whether expectations were met. The volunteer interview guide was broken into the following sections: 1) demographic information; 2) perspectives on volunteering 3) current and past volunteering activities; 4) future volunteering; 5) perceived barriers to volunteering; 6) attitudes of friends and family to volunteering; 7) motivations for volunteering; 8) satisfactory/dissatisfactory experiences of volunteering. The interviews with volunteer coordinators were structured around the stages a volunteer coordinator goes through when recruiting and training volunteers, to discover the challenges and opportunities they face- a strategy adopted in other volunteering research (see Rogers, Rogers, & Boyd, 2013).

### 2.2.1 Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and subject to thematic analysis [9]. The lead author developed an initial coding framework from the Employee-Organization Relationship and psychological contract literature. This facilitated the rereading of the assembled data in a more active way where these initial codes were revised and refined based on the participant data. This was an iterative process and involved categorising at the sentence to paragraph level, matching against the original coding framework and seeking out any additional or overarching themes [50]. To increase reliability, we followed the advice of Guest, MacQueen, & Namey (2012) by monitoring closely themes and codes throughout the process. We found this process had the advantage of endowing flexibility and was well suited to our dataset, which was relatively large and was shared between researchers to check agreement [23].

## 3 Results and Discussion

Our top-level thematic framework reflected four implicit 'promises' of the psychological contract: 1) the social promise (social network and community building); 2) the opportunity promise (improved mastery, new employment opportunities, personal development), 3) the value promise (more meaningful use of free time aligned with religious, political, social or ideological beliefs) and 4) the organisational promise (organisational citizenship, job satisfaction, reward and recognition). These are presented below. These categorisations were reached inductively, formed during data analysis, and representing the data's overarching themes. Each of these has implications for the ways in which digital platforms might better support volunteering and we address this under each of the four themes.

### 3.1 The Social Promise

Our work here reveals that the *offline* social dimension is central to the volunteer experience in two critical ways. Firstly, people are drawn into volunteering through their existing social contacts and these help shape the volunteers' expectations and lower the perceived barrier to involvement. Secondly, people explicitly seek out volunteering as a way to meet new people and increase their offline social network [41]. The social promise is a critical component of the PC for volunteers, and is much more influential here than in the traditional work context, where social obligations and expectations play a more modest role. In this section we explain how the social promise underpins both a social obligation and a social reward.

#### 3.1.1 The personal invitation

Volunteers often get recruited through some kind of personal, face-to-face invitation [36] which implies that those individuals with larger social networks are more likely to volunteer [27, 68]. Thus the status quo is perpetuated, resulting in a skewed social composition of volunteers- volunteers tend to be drawn from higher socio-economic groups (see NCVO, 2018). We found

personal, face-to-face invitations to be a vital recruitment method in our own sample:

*Daniel (V): "There was somebody working at the university at the time that said, 'Why don't you come down to the drop-in centre and meet some people?'"*

*Michael (V): "They said, 'Have you heard about this? We have got people who are doing various things.' I hadn't, so I looked that up and I saw there were various [volunteer] teams around [my work]."*

The personal invitation can be a persuasive recruitment method, in part because it can help overcome the kinds of social anxiety that people initially feel when they consider volunteering. Aoife's experience also reflects this point:

*Aoife (V): "I just sort of knew who they were and that's about it. Which was quite nice when I was starting out because it meant that I knew some people when I first started."*

In Aoife's case, the family connection gave her insight into the role of a volunteer and the confidence to get involved. For some volunteers, the 'social connection' or even the explicit ability to work alongside friends and family is the primary motivation, something recognised by our coordinators:

*Claire (VC): "We had two sisters who came in and one drove the minibus...so they picked people up and dropped people off. They said it was the only time of the week that they knew that they were going to get together and they'd be able to catch up, see each other, and do this volunteering together."*

*"We have family ties, we have romances that start, we have all sorts, right across the whole gambit."*

Coordinators are generally sensitive to the various social needs in to volunteering, noting examples of volunteers who like or dislike working together, and describing the ways that the volunteers themselves exploit personal contacts to recruit new members:

*Claire (VC): "So we've always got the door open, so as people come in, if we see a regular customer that is coming into the shop all of the time, then hopefully at the till somebody would be chatting to them and say, 'You seem to have some spare time, you pop in and out of here a lot, you like the shop, would you like to come in occasionally and help out?'"*

What is particularly surprising is that this social negotiation takes place at scale. This particular coordinator had 1499 volunteers on her books, matched to 148 different roles, numbers that are not unusual in the sector. Another coordinator (Anyia) said she had signed up 633 volunteers, many having been directed to a digital recruitment portal but often following some kind of personal approach when they asked for particular opportunities, or sought reassurance about the experience itself. A third coordinator, with

slightly fewer volunteers (approximately 400) also reinforced the importance of personal contact:

*Susie (VC): "I always encourage people to meet people in person, which is what I always used to do when I just covered the Northeast. Have a chat about what they can offer, what is on offer."*

The personal invitation can be difficult to manage and can sometimes backfire on the volunteers themselves, as 'friends' may enlist others with an enthusiasm that can be both misleading and overwhelming. Vivian, who worked on several art projects on a quid pro quo basis described how her friend's recruitment tone almost bordered on aggressive, whilst admitting that without being co-opted in such an assertive way she would not have begun volunteering at all. When asked why she began, Vivian responded with brevity: "peer pressure".

The casual approach can thus generate a personal obligation that makes it difficult to pull away from commitment. We see this same thing when Daniel describes the way expectations escalated after he had joined the organisation on the request of a friend, who subsequently left.

*Daniel (V): "Somebody said, 'Why don't you come down?' I...got on the trustee board, and then that person moved on. Then I said I would be happy to be Vice Chair, with no interest at all in becoming Chair. Then, in six months the Chair had gone, and the music stopped, and I was standing, you know? So, yes, I don't think I did actively look for them. They, kind of, came to me."*

The various roles Daniel fulfilled were not actively sought but almost pushed on him. In this way the informal social networks associated with volunteering worked to maximise human capital [66], but ultimately can become onerous and undermine the social promise of the psychological contract.

### 3.1.2 A new social network

People often choose volunteering as a means to increase their social network following a change in circumstance such as a bereavement or a relocation. Chloe for instance, had recently moved to the UK and wanted to volunteer as a way to meet people and through these interactions, improve her spoken English. As a mother, she also sought out opportunities that would fit around her two young children. Eventually after research, she discovered a volunteering opportunity at a Toddlers' Group that suited her perfectly.

*Chloe (V): "When we moved here, I tried to get in touch with people, because it was a completely new country for me; new people, new language, and I wanted to learn it. So I started to seek groups, like music groups and toddler groups, just to engage with parents, and doing something with my little son."*

Sarah described her new volunteer organisation in social terms, as offering a chance to belong to a new community and gain a new sense of 'home':

*Sarah (V): "Every time I go away, I come home, but I don't feel like I've come home until I come [to the area I volunteer in]. That's the thing. I do know so many people down here, and across different venues."*

Her account of volunteering was primarily a tale of the social network acquired as a result of volunteering, describing the 'social reward' as a form of reparation for unpaid work. She also took management support for social events to be a form of affirmation that the volunteers were valued by the organisation. Volunteers respond to such recognition and are more likely to leave if they don't receive any [18, 37]. In lieu of financial payment, some form of social reward can be meaningful.

*Sarah (V): "I think we are quite well looked after as volunteers with expenses and everything like that. Whenever we have a meeting every three months, we always go to the pub afterwards on expenses...you do feel like you're appreciated."*

Unfortunately, the social promise is not always delivered by the host organisation, who can be more focussed on the delivery of a service to the community and may fail to understand the key ways in which volunteer expectations differ from those in traditional forms of work. Eva describes her experience of moving from Italy to the UK to take up a position with a non-profit organisation set up to provide support for homeless people. When she arrived, she was dismayed to discover that she was placed in isolated accommodation:

*Eva (V): "I was the only young volunteer in the building so I was actually given a flat in the middle of this huge building."*

Eva's story was one of betrayal, she made a huge initial commitment but social promise was not delivered and, as with other elements of the psychological contract, it meant that she felt inclined to leave the organisation. It is particularly notable in our data that only a few of our volunteer co-ordinators talked explicitly about the social expectations of new recruits, this despite the fact that the importance of social support is well recognised in the volunteering literature (e.g. Ashcraft & Kedrowicz, 2002). Where we did see recognition of the social component, it was often in terms of accommodating existing friends who wished to volunteer together, something that actually presented a problem for our coordinators who then had more constraints on timetabling.

## Digital Design Implications of the Social Promise

We asked both coordinators and volunteers about the extent to which they had used digital means either to familiarise themselves with the experience of volunteering or to exploit the social contacts they made whilst volunteering. Surprisingly, whilst recruitment portals were used by several of the organisations, they did not provide adequate information for would-be volunteers or coordinators. Some were promised greater social utility in future portals:

*Anya (VC): "Okay, this is the way it was described to me. It'll be exactly like Match.com, I was told by the people who was selling this new way of doing things."*

But often the coordinators described a feeling of being overwhelmed by the sheer number of volunteer applications and would revert to the 'personal touch' to try to sift through them, recognising that all too often, volunteers were applying blind, without a real sense of what their future experience would be like. We found one exception, where recruiters had tried to segment the volunteer experience in terms of the kinds of commitment volunteers might be prepared to make. This had been tremendously successful in the recruitment sense, as described by Anya:

*"We've sub-sectored the roles into different areas so we have things like 'Just a Minute', 'An Hour or Two', 'Donate a Day', 'Regular Help' and it's gone bang, basically. The amount of people that are coming forward..."*

So we can see some kind of a shift here to communicate the volunteer experience on a digital platform. But for most organisations, digital recruitment meant a single recruitment portal with a standard online application form for all roles with little or no attempt to discriminate between more and less sensitive roles and very little 'matchmaking' in terms of the social elements sought by volunteers. Surprisingly, volunteer coordinators would often advocate a blanket restriction on the use of social media in recruitment, as they were worried about sensitive information being leaked. Best practice was found where organisations differentiated the roles very clearly and gave rich descriptions of tasks associated with each role – but even here there was no real innovation in digitising the social experience of volunteering and there were very few 'volunteer stories' offered online.

This overall picture is rather surprising, given the way that shared personal experiences have become common on digital platforms. Additionally, social media groups are now commonly used as means of communicating experiences and values across like-minded individuals, sometimes reducing social anxiety about new experiences, which we know can act to prevent volunteers (particularly younger volunteers) from approaching an organisation [25, 26]. Theocharis, Vitoratou, & Sajuria (2017) argued that social media has been rather neglected as a tool for volunteer recruitment and management and while some volunteer management systems, such as 'eRecruiter' can integrate social media accounts into profiles [4]. We found little evidence of this in our sample.

## **3.2 The Opportunity Promise**

Volunteers were candid about the gains they expected from their contributions. This is consistent with theories of volunteering based on personalized cost-benefit analysis and rational choice assumptions that say people will not contribute to others unless

they receive profit from exchange [52]. In this section, we draw upon some of the more 'transactional' elements of the psychological contract, to explain the different opportunities that volunteers sought in exchange for their labour.

### *3.2.1 New Skills*

Many of our participants thought of volunteering as a chance to learn and were mindful of the opportunities for increasing skills, knowledge and experience:

*Connor (V): "I mean the main benefit practically is the skills you get and it looks good on your CV."*

*Rachel (V): "They had dark rooms and editing facilities. So in order to learn and gain a few more skills in terms of photography and video making we joined them."*

From the volunteer coordinator perspective, certain kinds of training were a costly investment, particularly for groups trained with specialist equipment. Unfortunately, volunteers could not always be relied upon once they had gained their certificates:

*Katie (VC): "Yes there are issues around you training someone and then they disappear, what do you do, because you've put £400 into them on a chainsaw licence and they've now disappeared and don't come out anymore."*

*Claire (VC): "For some of the roles we do have a fair bit of recruitment training... So that is explained at interview, to say that, 'You know, we have to do an awful lot to train you up from a member of the public to being an active member of the team on the ward, so we would expect you to stay with us for a minimum of a year.'"*

Training investment is a difficult issue in volunteering and can lead to significant PC breaches (Walker et al., 2016) The provision of adequate training, career development and opportunities for promotion were all key expectations of volunteers and violations of such expectations were associated with intention to quit. This is an important consideration in a field where 'intention to quit' may simply mean no longer turning up. In other words, training and skill acquisition opportunities are arguably more important for volunteers than for paid workers, yet, having been trained, they can walk away from the organisation without notice and without fear of sanction.

### *3.2.2 Personal Development*

Our participants identified fewer tangible benefits tied to a greater sense of personal wellbeing, job satisfaction and the feeling of being needed. One of our interview participants was, after a personal crisis, encouraged to volunteer by an occupational therapist. Sarah described in powerful terms how the labour acted as a catalyst, causing a significant improvement in her mental health:

Sarah (V): *"It's given me a lot of confidence back. As you can probably imagine, having a huge breakdown really knocks your self-esteem. I've spent a lot of years just at home, not doing anything, not going out and not really connecting with anyone."*

Sarah then, attaches an intrinsic value to her volunteering, recognizing that it served to change her life considerably. Yet quite often, the intangible reward associated with volunteering was simply enjoyment. Out of the 18 volunteers we interviewed, un-prompted, 11 explicitly outlined the pleasure they took from their volunteer work as their most significant motivator. Many talked about feeling good that they were supporting an important cause. Others cited enjoyment of the work itself. Lauren for instance, vividly expressed passion for her work at a heritage site:

Lauren (V): *"[...] totally fell in love with it. I thought it was one of the best places I'd ever visited... Just absolutely walked in and thought, 'This is amazing.'"*

A relatively small slice of the employment literature recognises the intrinsic motivation associated with prosocial work and the relational architecture of jobs that bring their own reward [19], yet clearly this is an important consideration for volunteer management in the non-profit sector. Volunteers, particularly those who have made a significant initial commitment, have expectations about doing meaningful work, as well as around skills development. This is not always forthcoming:

Aoife (V): *"I was promised things that were not in place when I got there ... The hosting organisation was not quite ready to have volunteers... So I was working only three hours a day... My job was just to hand out food, have a chat with them and play various games, just basically to be there."*

Again we see that often, volunteers base their expectations about 'meaningful work' around promises that are often left implicit during the recruitment process, as the detailed information about job role and career progression are simply not there. As we noted earlier, some coordinators explicitly recognise that some of the more important and rewarding roles are not available to all applications, and yet this is not always made explicit on recruitment platforms.

### 3.2.3 Rewards

We found evidence of some systems in place to ensure that volunteers feel valued and appreciated. These included 'years of service' awards or celebrations:

Claire (VC): *"We always have the long service event [...] there is a presentation, we have a nice drinks reception, and then we have a lovely buffet afterwards. We've got 5, 10, 15, 20, 25 and now 30 years' service."*

Susie (VC): *"If you've been litter picking on your own along a stretch of track for a couple of hours and then you come back together with*

*the rest of the group [...] we all sit down and we all have some lunch. It's a nice chance to chat with other people."*

Much has been written about rewards and PC breaches in the traditional employment literature, where there is an expectation that rewards for contributions will be realised in full [48]. However, for volunteers, monetary rewards for prosocial behaviours are not typical and don't always work [43]. Instead, the expected rewards may be intangible and may differ dramatically from one individual to the next.

## Digital design implications of the opportunity promise

We found that gaining CV and other skills, personal development, recognition and the sheer enjoyment of volunteering were all motivators for our volunteers (consistent with Field & Johnson, 1993), but we found surprisingly little recognition from the coordinators that different volunteers sought different forms of recognition. There were no consistent recognition and reward schemes across our sample and not all of the schemes described were successful.

Kapsammer et al., (2017) have argued that existing digital systems don't properly support volunteers in their achievement of personal development goals. In the UK, formal reward systems exist to recognise 10 hours, 30 hours, 50 and 100 hours volunteered and of course digital platforms exist for time-banking, where time-credits are given for every hour people spend helping others. Such arrangements can work to embed and establish the norms of reciprocity and mutuality in a community [8]. There have also been some design discussions of gamification mechanisms and goal-oriented personal development support for volunteers [29]. We would argue that an effective platform should incorporate some kind of infrastructure that 'rewards' volunteers in a personalised fashion, recognising individual motives for volunteering.

### 3.3 The Value Promise

Many of our respondents cited a loose affinity to a specific cause as a key factor in their motivation to volunteer, choosing charities based on deeply held personal values and beliefs including, in James' case, religious faith:

James (V): *"He chatted about why I wanted to do it and just got a bit of a feel for me and why I wanted to do it. Because it's a faith-based organisation, your values do have to align with that. Which is fine with me, because I'm a Christian anyway."*

Adam, in contrast, understood his motivations arose from his uneasiness over tensions between his relatively privileged social position and his liberal idealism. He sought to redress the balance by making a positive contribution to others. Here we see the value of volunteering in creating feelings of self-worth.

*Adam (V): "I think maybe liberal guilt, I don't know. I have had quite a fortunate upbringing and always felt that it would be good to help out people who haven't. That sounds a bit patronising doesn't it?"*

Adam began his work at a food bank (an association that distributes food to those who have financial difficulty in purchasing it for themselves) after being alarmed by how government welfare cuts had affected the poorest in his local area. He assumed that other volunteers would feel a similar passion for helping lower income groups and a compassion for those who use food banks but was unhappily surprised when he found co-workers were, "a little bit oblivious to certain things". As well as being uninformed about the key issues affecting the group his organisation catered for, Adam also felt his colleagues were acutely insensitive to them:

*Adam (V): "When they were showing me around with a lot of these low-income working-class families coming in and then these guys are like, 'Here are the poor people. Here is the thing-y.' It is a bit embarrassing when you are walking around with them."*

In some circumstances, a deeply personal motivation can lead to a clash of values. For example, David regularly offered his services as a professional photographer, pro bono, for charitable organizations. However, David described how he was discouraged to help because he was approached on behalf of a charity by a professional PR company,

*David (V): "Yes, so you get a request from a big PR company asking you to do something, and they'd say, 'Do it for free,' and you'd be a bit funny, because they're a big PR company that's obviously being paid. They're obviously being paid a massive consultancy fee to get people to do things for free..."*

This is an interesting perspective as it reflects the unique position of volunteers who sit within the wider context of paid work. Their motivators, beliefs and values are not necessarily shared by others, either in paid employment within the same company, nor in the wider sector. This is a complex ethical issue. Lantos (2002) talks about the way that expectations of philanthropic corporate social responsibility (CSR) can be problematic, but the expectation that others would be motivated to support a 'good cause' is understandable in our volunteers. Those who give their time and effort freely develop expectations of similar behaviour from others – and this can lead to tensions within and outside of a non-profit organisation.

Finally, there are some kinds of personal motivation which can be problematic for volunteer coordinators. For example, the VC from the hospice described a policy of not recruiting anyone who had been recently bereaved:

*Claire (VC): "So we have something in our policy to say at least one year has to pass after a significant bereavement, because the research says that once you've been through the first Christmas, the first*

*holiday, the first birthday, and everything, that people might be a bit resilient."*

The coordinators had a duty of care to those potential volunteers, recognising their vulnerability in a state of grief. Yet this can lead to frustration in aspiring volunteers who are ruled ineligible to help and the talk of managing such frustration falls on the shoulders of volunteer coordinators.

### **Digital design implications of the value promise**

Passion is an interesting attribute in the workplace. Whilst it can help to build a sense of commitment and contentment, it can also lead to an obsessive preoccupation with specific outcomes that can be more personally destructive [60]. Unsurprisingly, then, there is a relatively thin HR literature that deals with passion in traditional employment, although the importance of personal passion for a cause in non-profits is recognised [47]. In the digital realm, some passions are harnessed to provide voluntary aid in crisis situations and the emotional appeal is well-recognised within financial contribution campaigns, but there is seldom an explicit discussion of passion as part of the psychological contract of a volunteer. We can gain some sense of why that is from our interviews – often the more meaningful work associated with a charity – say working with severely disadvantaged individuals or the bereaved – is not open to all. Again, we would argue that digital platforms that better capture the actual experiences of volunteers operating at different levels of the organisation would be useful.

In addition, value-based volunteering is often associated with work completed in one's own local area. Our interviews showed that the "community context" was an incredibly important motivator. It would thus be advantageous for a digital support tool to exploit this by making potential volunteers aware of opportunities in their immediate geographical location. In this, we again draw inspiration from the existing time bank platforms that harness the skills of a localised community, and from various civic computing platforms that democratise city planning (e.g. Le Dantec, Watkins, Clark, & Mynatt, 2015), citizen micro-journalism [17] or that support citizen-led identification of complex but localized problems [16]. These applications illustrate how the Internet can be used to increase the importance of locality and empower local communities [7]. In order to bridge the communication gap between potential volunteers and organisations, maps have been adopted as a basis for the design of mobile volunteering matching systems [12]. This kind of system allows people to view the volunteer opportunities in their area, but also allows organisations to view potential volunteer information and invite them to help.

### **3.4 The Organisational Promise**

The psychological contract is an important mediator in the relationship between the volunteer and the organisation [55, 57, 64], particularly in terms of management, responsibility and workload. This can be problematic when the work to be undertaken is unpaid, which is taken to imply increased flexibility



to the volunteer, but not necessary to the volunteer coordinator. Our volunteers talked about how much they appreciated the more 'relaxed' management practices of voluntary organizations, noting greater autonomy in the extent and type of work they would undertake. James for instance, cited flexibility as a key benefit of working for his organization:

*James (V): "I mean it's fairly flexible. People can get as involved in it as they want."*

Several of volunteers described the way they valued a more lenient management style than that found in paid employment and the change to exercise more autonomy over their everyday work practices:

*Adam (V): "They gave me a list of things to do. It was just, 'If you have got time do this.' It wasn't like, 'You have to do this now.' They gave me a list of things to do and if I had some free time I would just crack on with it."*

This relaxed, hands-off approach allows volunteers to take account of their own resources and capabilities in order to work at the right pace and at the right level. In addition, high levels of trust and autonomy is also more likely to make volunteers feel appreciated:

*Adam (V): "The guys who I deal with, the managers, they kept reiterating to me, 'I am really grateful for your help and you can do as little or as much as you want. Don't feel pressured into it.' They were really good about that."*

However, such flexibility can produce problems in the management of volunteers. Our volunteer coordinators described their management processes as well structured and appropriate for volunteers but understood that the exercise of managerial power was required for an effective organisation (Ashcraft & Kedrowicz, 2002) and were sceptical about allowing too much volunteer autonomy. Volunteer coordinators were also sceptical about the extent to which they could be flexible in practice, noting that they couldn't simply rely upon volunteers to be available at short notice.

*Louise (VC): "Say we ran the sessions like that and said, 'Oh, it's Monday, we've got 20 in the waiting room, could everybody please come in and help?' you know. Well, they'd just say no, because it's not my day. I do other things on that day, I have other commitments. Most volunteers are very, very busy."*

Some of the coordinators were also resigned to the fact that they had very limited means of exercising managerial control, saying that this was simply the nature of volunteering:

*Louise (VC): "They just don't turn up, or they leave without telling us. Well, they might turn up and never turn up again. That's all voluntary organisations, are the same. You never know, in the morning, who it's going to be that day."*

The volunteer who 'can't be sacked' but who chooses not to turn up was recognised as a problem, not just by the coordinators, but also by the more experienced volunteers, some of whom spoke candidly about colleagues who let the organisation down. One participant felt that the more relaxed mode of work created an atmosphere where people were not properly incentivised to make a meaningful contribution. Our participant, rather harshly suggests that some older workers should not be able to identify themselves as "volunteers" at all:

*Connor (V): "One thing we've looked at is moving from, you said volunteers, you would turn up old timers and they see volunteering as going and having a cup of tea and then leaving again, which isn't volunteering really."*

Again, we see tensions between the expectations of managers and co-workers and the expectations of the volunteers themselves. Connor's grievance was that the more relaxed organisational features of a charity can create lacklustre working practices and this can sometimes lead to problems between colleagues. Many volunteers recognised this tension in their own attitudes and behaviour. Thus, for example, Adam knew that taking time off unexpectedly would effectively be letting co-workers down:

*Adam (V): "If, for some reason, I can't make it in, the only pressure behind that is that I feel like I'm letting people down if I don't come in."*

Yet many in our sample argued that they felt less stressed than they would with formal work and said they would feel relatively relaxed about letting the organisation down. Sean for instance, described the experience of telephoning a supervisor in order to explain an absence:

*Sean (V): "With voluntary work if you can't come in you ring up and say, 'Sorry, I can't come in.' That is the end of it because you are a volunteer... I didn't feel as guilty as I would have done with paid work."*

So for many volunteers, the organisational promise of a more relaxed contract is important, yet many of the voluntary organisations are run on an almost professional basis and problems with attendance can be critical to their functioning.

## **Digital design implications of the organisational promise**

The term 'volunteer' currently suggests a form of employment contract and a longer-term commitment that is, in itself, problematic. Our participants were sometimes reluctant to call themselves volunteers, as they felt that they'd not done enough work to deserve the label or were reluctant to sign up to a contract promising future work and yet we heard of others who had 'worked' for an organisation for years. Thus, our first design reflection is to consider broader digital platforms that encourage different levels of engagement in civic participation and to ask

what kind of platform might easily bridge both short and long-term forms of volunteering.

Principi et al. (2016), in their study of older volunteers, found that many older people were put off volunteering because they lacked the resources to commit. They concluded that organisations should offer more tailored opportunities for volunteering and should better map the motivational needs of older adults to the volunteering opportunities available. Good communication between volunteers and coordinators is critical and it has been found to alleviate difficult management issues such as role changes and role uncertainty [30, 31]. Our volunteer coordinators recognised this, yet some of the communication systems were quite basic:

*Lisa (VC): "Sometimes it is the volunteer that doesn't turn up because they forget, because they are very busy. It is finding when they are free and when the person with learning disabilities is free and can take some time. Then, when you get it set up, invariably somebody forgets. We have started sending text message reminders to both."*

This kind of micro-coordination is evident in other volunteering research [61]. It is here that we begin to see how the adoption of digital tools to communicate with volunteers could significantly improve coordination, but there are significant barriers to progress in this space. Firstly, it is known that "*most nonprofits lack the resources or time to provide constant attention*" to digital systems (p.105, Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009), but secondly, there are issues of digital exclusion in volunteer management, associated with the diverse nature of the volunteer body. Simply put, some volunteers don't have access to a computer and have rather limited functionality on their mobile phones, which means that, for many organisations, any digital system would require a fairly simple method to transmit information to volunteers. Work by Volda [62] reminds us that whilst 'social computing technologies' are prevalent within voluntary organisations, they are not always used well.

## 4 Conclusions

We began by observing that the recruitment and management practices for volunteering aligns with traditional HR practices, but that such practices do not fully support the psychological contract underpinning volunteering. We asked whether improved digital platforms could be developed to better support the work of volunteers. We have presented the four 'promises' of volunteering and considered a number of digital platform recommendations that would better support these promises. We would also argue that our work has revealed implications for the design of voluntary work practices, in addition to the design of systems. In speaking to volunteers and coordinators, we heard about many difficult issues facing organisations- managing volunteer's time, dropout rates, training- some of which could not be addressed by a digital intervention alone.

In future work, we are now using these recommendations to inform the development of new digital resources, working with local councils and their volunteer teams to better understand the kinds of digital innovation for volunteers and coordinators that could yield better recruitment and retention, whilst maintaining good governance and clear expectations about their psychological contract. We also recognise that our findings relate more specifically to voluntary work within charitable organizations and public service organizations, and may be less transferrable to other contexts (e.g. volunteering within peer-led groups, or voluntary activist work- these kinds of volunteering present an opportunity to explore psychological contracts in new contexts.

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