Identifying potential volunteers: introducing the convertibles

Abstract

This paper reports on a study which seeks to identify how to increase volunteer participation by converting non-volunteers to the benefits of volunteering. The project uses the concept of *volunteerability* – an individual's propensity to volunteer based on their willingness, capability and availability – to identify 'convertibles'. Convertibles are conceptualised as a group of individuals with a high propensity to volunteer but who do not currently do so. Data collected from an exploratory study based on 12 focus groups with current, non-active and non-volunteers seeks to identify what factors are indicative of individuals having a high level of volunteerability and what factors inhibit volunteer participation, with a view to enabling the development of interventions for organisations to improve volunteer recruitment and engagement.

Introduction

Volunteering faces a number of pressures in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Governments, peak bodies, volunteer-involving organisations and communities increasingly rely on volunteers to deliver a range of services, often to the most vulnerable including the aged, sick and the infirm. Volunteering is also identified as a major way to create social capital, enhance social inclusion and facilitate economic participation through re-entry into the paid workforce (Day & Devlin, 1998; Haski-Leventhal, 2009). But in the case of Australia, the setting for the current study, the most recent data shows a slight decline in volunteer participation among those who have volunteered in the past 12 months (GSS, 2014) If this trend continues, it will have significant ramifications. This paper reports on an Australian Research Council funded study which seeks to identify how to increase volunteer participation by converting non-volunteers to the benefits of volunteering.

Not surprisingly, most research on volunteering has examined people who volunteer and there is a paucity of research on non-volunteers globally (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2008). There are no studies in Australia that focus on non-volunteers. National statistics for Australia reveal that not only is volunteering associated with demographic factors such as poor health or unemployment (ABS, 2011) but that there is a much more complex story

behind these data. Previous research has identified that in order to volunteer, individuals need to have the right combination of willingness (e.g., attitudes, motives and values), ability and availability. This is collectively termed the individual's level of *volunteerability* (Meijs, Ten Hoorn & Brudney, 2006). Individuals with a high level of volunteerability are most likely to volunteer; however, this concept is yet to be empirically tested. Volunteerability, too, overcomes a range of barriers that prevent people from volunteering (Meijs, Ten Hoorn and Brudney, 2006), and understands that people volunteer more as their willingness, capability and availability increase (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991; Meijs et al., 2006). Factors such as education, friends, a family tradition of volunteering and overcoming social anxiety may increase volunteerability (Handy & Cnaan, 2007; Wilson, 2012).

We envisage volunteerability as being on a continuum with keen volunteers at one end and committed non-volunteers at the other end. Somewhere in between are a group of individuals who, with the right volunteer role, motives and opportunities, could be converted to the benefits of volunteering. We call these individuals the convertibles. The key issue for volunteer-involving organisations is how to attract these convertibles to their volunteer programs and to retain them. This paper seeks to examine in an exploratory fashion how the dimensions of volunteerability impact on individuals' propensity to volunteer.

Literature review

The importance of volunteering
Recognition is growing within academic and policy circles of the central importance of volunteering as a contributor to resilient, civil societies. The United Nations' State *of the World's Volunteerism* Report (United Nations Volunteers, 2011, p. 2) highlights the universal nature of volunteerism in that "it is an integral part of every society". A resilient and flexible volunteering sector is vital given that demand for volunteer services is likely to increase as populations age in western countries and volunteer services are relied upon to shoulder more of the care load (Volunteering Australia, 2012;). Yet currently only 31 per cent of Australians volunteer their time for an organisation (GSS, 2014), which is a drop of 5% since the previous national survey in 2010 (ABS, 2011).

Significantly, 'median hours volunteered', an important indicator of the health of volunteering in Australia, has been in long-term decline (FaHCSIA, 2008). Reasons for this are complex and include the demands of work-life balance that places limitations

on the time available for volunteering (Lockstone, Holmes, Deery & Jago, 2009). Competition for volunteer services is fierce, with volunteer-involving organisations needing to adapt as potential volunteers, become more discretionary about where they volunteer, for how long, and in what types of roles (Winterton, Warburton & Oppenheimer, 2013). Baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1961/1962) are often highlighted as a plentiful source of volunteers (Rochester, Ellis Paine & Howlett, 2009). In Australia, for example, approximately one-quarter of the population is predicted to be over 65 years of age by 2050, up from 13.5 per cent in 2012 (Australian Government, 2010). The most educated, affluent, and discerning generation to retire, they are likely to expect more from their retirement activities than previous generations. Nevertheless, declining pensions, increased retirement ages, and labour shortages in some sectors mean that volunteer organisations will need to compete with each other, continued paid work, other leisure options, and family commitments for volunteers' time (Finlay & Murray, 2005).

Janoski and Wilson (1995) tested support for different pathways to voluntarism dependent upon the type of voluntary participation. Pathways to volunteering in self-oriented organisations (occupational and professional) were found to come indirectly from familial roots and were made possible by income and education. In contrast, pathways to community-oriented volunteering (service, community and neighbourhood) were derived from family socialisation practices. Parker, Hamilton-Smith and Davidson (1993), found that middle class subjects in their Australian study engaged in volunteering as a form of serious leisure, as opposed to working class participants who more likely to undertake informal volunteering activities. The unemployed and other groups at risk of social exclusion (e.g. those with no qualifications, long-term illnesses) are generally underrepresented in terms of volunteer participation in national volunteering surveys (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007; Low, Butt, Ellis Payne & Davis Smith, 2007). This is a concern for government and policy makers who wish to encourage volunteering as a pathway to positive, inclusive outcomes for socially disadvantaged groups.

More broadly speaking, volunteering has been viewed as a key generator of social capital (Putnam, 2000). The concept has been associated with a number of collective benefits, including economic growth, improved crime rates, better education and higher turn out in elections. Aldridge, Halpern & Fitzpatrick (2002) argue that there is a clear case for government intervention in both maintaining and increasing social capital and in facilitating

its distribution more evenly. In saying that, as Holmes (2009, p. 266) notes, the "empirical evidence for volunteering contributing to social capital and thus increasing a sense of citizenship is mixed". The mechanisms of how volunteering translates into social capital are also unclear. This static profile of volunteers and non-volunteers, however, cannot predict or explain the full picture of factors affecting volunteer participation.

Barriers and constraints to volunteering

There is a paucity of international research on non-volunteers (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2008), and no studies on why people do not volunteer in Australia. The only Australian data on non-volunteers comes from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), which provides micro-level demographic data on factors behind non-participation such as poor health and unemployment (ABS, 2011). In addition, there are mezzo-level challenges facing volunteer involving organisations struggling to recruit volunteers because of lack of resources, networks and accessibility (Haski-Leventhal, Meijs & Hustinx, 2010). Extant academic literature further highlights that there are macro-level issues of social exclusion related to volunteering. People with less stocks of capital (financial, human and social) are less likely to volunteer and to receive the benefits that are tied to volunteering such as increased wellbeing (Haski-Leventhal, 2009). A great deal of research has been devoted to examining the social resources associated with volunteering in general (Brown & Ferris, 2007; Handy & Cnaan, 2007; Wilson & Musick, 1998).

Previous research has identified three main barriers to volunteering: lack of interest, lack of time and ill-health (Sundeen, Raskoff & Garcia, 2007). Overwhelmingly, lack of time has been cited as the main barrier to volunteering among individuals who may want to volunteer (Low et al, 2007, Musick & Wilson, 2008). This contrasts with 'having time to spare' as the second most cited motivation for new volunteers (Low et al., 2007). This barrier has received additional credence as it is most likely cited by people in full-time employment, with an American study finding that twice as many adults in employment wished to have more time to volunteer than unemployed or retired people (Kohut, 1997). Paid employment per se does not necessarily prevent an individual from volunteering as studies also show that people with part time jobs are more likely to be volunteers than those not in the labour force (ABS, 2007). In addition, people in full time occupations with more flexible time schedules are also more able to fit some volunteering into their lives (Musick & Wilson, 2008). Full time paid employment is not, however, the only factor which may reduce an individual's time available

to volunteer. Putnam (2000) lists the length of time spent commuting to and from work as a major barrier to involvement in community affairs. Data from the Netherlands found that the more time men (this did not appear to affect women's propensity to volunteer) spent socialising, on housework and childcare also reduced their available time for volunteering (DeHart & Dekker, 1999). Family commitments, obligations such as housework and other leisure activities all contribute towards this time squeeze (Musick & Wilson, 2008). Intriguingly, Edwards (2005) found in her study of museum volunteers that while one group reported that they were motivated to volunteer having the time available, a second group said that they had made the time available because they had wanted to volunteer for the organisation.

A third common barrier to volunteering is poor health and age with Australian data showing that respondents in good health are more likely to volunteer (ABS, 2011; Warburton et al., 1998). While older people are more likely to have more free time due to retirement from paid work they are also more likely to cite poor health as a reason for not volunteering (Lasby, 2004). A UK survey (Low et al., 2007) reported the other reasons for not volunteering as 'put off by the bureaucracy', 'worried about risk/liability' and 'Don't know how to find out about getting involved'. These last three barriers could be considered perceptual rather than actual, which could be overcome by organisations seeking to increase individuals' propensity to volunteer.

Non-volunteers can also have negative and inaccurate perceptions about volunteering. Younger and older non-volunteers both report having negative or limited perceptions of volunteering. Younger non-volunteers perceive volunteering as uncool and not relevant to them (Smith 1999). Older volunteers report a narrow awareness of the volunteer opportunities (Rochester & Hutchinson, 2003), with the options perceived as limited to social services or charity shop roles. Research participants also reported stereotypical images of volunteers as 'white, middle-aged, middle class females' and therefore not for them (Gaskin, 2003). Younger volunteers also reported that volunteer-involving organisations are not welcoming to new, younger volunteers. The problems of established cliques of volunteers within volunteer-involving organisations as a barrier has been identified in other research (Paull, 2009), along with the lack of flexibility many organisations exhibit towards their volunteers. It is clear that both perceptual and actual barriers need to be considered in any examination of how to increase an individual's propensity to volunteer.

Volunteerability

Researchers have theorised that an individual's propensity to volunteer is linked to their volunteerability (Meijs, Ten Hoorn & Brudney, 2006). Volunteerability consists of three dimensions: *Willingness*, *Capability* and *Availability*.

• *Willingness*: the will to volunteer is influenced by social norms, individual attitudes and values, psychological motives and by perceiving volunteering as rewarding and as feasible (in net-cost terms; see Handy *et al.*, 2000). It can be enhanced by different incentives, mainly by improving volunteers' reputation in society, providing intrinsic benefits and reducing free riders.

• *Capability*: a person may be capable of volunteering if she or he has the skills and knowledge required for volunteering in a specific role or organisation. Everyone is capable of volunteering in some role or another, in some organisation or another. However, training and guidance as well as access to volunteer organisations can be key elements in improving capability to volunteer.

• *Availability*: the greatest obstacle to volunteering is lack of time (Sundeen Raskoff & Garcia, 2007). In modern life, juggling between 'greedy institutions' (Coser, 1974), such as jobs, family, education, friends and leisure, leaves people with limited time to give. Many factors can reduce an individual's time available for volunteering including paid work, time spent commuting (Putnam, 2000), housework and childcare (DeHart & Dekker, 1999) and other family commitments (Musick & Wilson, 2008). Therefore, increasing volunteerability may be done by combining volunteering with one of these activities. Combining volunteering with one of these activities may increase volunteerability (Musick & Wilson, 2008). Additionally, people need to be emotionally available and able to commit themselves in order to volunteer.

While these three dimensions are interrelated and connected with each other, overwhelmingly, a lack of time has been cited as the main constraint to volunteering among individuals who want to volunteer (Holmes, 2008; Sundeen, Raskoff & Garcia, 2007; Wilson, 2012). It is also likely that factors such as motivation influence whether an individual is willing to make time to volunteer.

Previous research on volunteer participation has typically focused on volunteer only samples and can, therefore, offer limited insights on specific interventions to promote volunteering to non-volunteers. Models of volunteer participation have been criticised for including too narrow a range of explanatory variables, being constrained by disciplinary boundaries, having low predictive power and ignoring the organisational context in which volunteering takes place (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008; Lockstone, Jago & Deery, 2002). The social and policy context is also relevant. This paper seeks to address these limitations and reports on the exploratory stage of a project which aims to identify non-volunteers with the potential to be *converted* to volunteering. This will to enable the development of interventions for organisations to improve volunteer recruitment and engagement; and provides research-based guidelines for social policy.

Methods

In this paper, we report on an exploratory research project using a series of 12 focus groups conducted across Australia with current volunteers (volunteered in the previous 12 months), non-active volunteers (volunteered in the past 5 years but not in the past 12 months) and non-volunteers (not volunteered in the past 5 years). Focus groups were used as this is an exploratory study and they allow for the collection of detailed and descriptive data, providing flexibility if unanticipated issues emerge (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Focus groups work best with a homogenous group so each group was stratified by volunteer experience and age. We conducted an initial six focus groups with young people aged 18-34 years, given younger people are underrepresented in Australia's volunteer population (ABS, 2011), spread across current volunteers, non-active volunteers and non-volunteers. These were followed up with three focus groups each with 35-54 year olds and a further three with participants 55 years and over. The focus groups were conducted across four states in Australia to ensure national coverage in the data collection.

Each focus group took approximately 90 minutes to complete and had between four and ten participants with a total of 95 respondents. A professional market research company was used to assist with the recruitment of the more difficult to identify and access groups of non-volunteers and former volunteers. It is difficult to recruit these people to discuss a topic that may not have much current relevance to them. A focus group protocol was developed to

ensure consistency in the topics and questions covered. The questions were designed to uncover the key dimensions of volunteerability, that is willingness including attitudes and motivation towards volunteering, capability and availability (Meijs, Ten Hoorn & Brudney, 2006). Flashcards with images representing different examples of volunteer roles and organisations (for example, conservation volunteering – clearing bushland; minimal skills needed; casual one day volunteering) were used to stimulate discussion around what forms of volunteering would be of interest to participants and what factors would facilitate their involvement. Figure 1 shows an example of a flashcard used in the focus group discussions:

- Volunteering with elderly people-doing pottery
- Using existing craft skills
- Regular once a fortnight volunteering

Figure 1: Focus group flashcard (Image supplied by Volunteering Western Australia)

The focus groups were all moderated by two researchers. One researcher managed the discussion while the second took notes. In addition, each of the focus group discussions was recorded and transcribed to aid analysis. The focus group data were analysed using established qualitative research techniques employed previously by the research team (Holmes Smith, Lockstone-Binney & Baum, 2010) including immersion through repeated reading and the identification and coding of themes as informed by the literature, e.g., the dimensions of volunteerability (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Findings

The focus groups revealed data on all the dimensions of volunteerability. The findings are reported as they align with each of these dimensions.

Willingness

Generally, participants had misconceptions of what volunteering was about, for example, this participant thought that people only volunteered if they could not find anything else to do:

> "If you think about the kind of people that volunteer you kind of feel sorry for them, really, if you think about the older people who you think well they don't have much family around so they've got the time to volunteer or people who can't get work because of disabilities or something." (Female, non-volunteer, 18-34 years)

Although some of the older non-volunteers (aged 55 years plus) expressed admiration for people who volunteer. The older volunteers also had a broader knowledge of the different volunteer roles available including more than traditional charity shops but also extending to sports clubs. Overall, participants had rarely heard of many of the forms of volunteering which were presented in the flashcards, particularly newer forms such as online volunteering. Indeed, the flashcards used in the focus groups stimulated discussion around the different options for volunteering. Some expressed great interest in flexible forms of volunteering, particularly event volunteering. Online volunteering was seen as potentially interesting but lacked the social contact that many participants were looking for in a volunteer activity:

> "I suppose the drawback is that you're not actually communicating face-to-face…so if the important thing is connecting or networking, you don't have that." (Male, non-active volunteer, aged 34-55 years)

Previous volunteer experience had a significant impact on an individuals' subsequent willingness to volunteer, even if it had not progressed beyond an organisation failing to return their phone call. The likelihood of making the effort to phone another organisation was substantially reduced. Participants expected that being able to volunteer should be easy – after all they are giving up their time for free – and when it became too hard, they just stopped trying:

> "…they're like' oh no we want this'. They want this other check done, like they're just making it difficult so I haven't bothered doing it now. It got put into the too hard

basket because I was like why can't I just go in on a Saturday and meet with these people and surely I'm a decent enough person to do it?" (Female, non-active volunteer, aged 18-34 years)

Participants did not know how to find out information about volunteering and many participants commented on how useful it would be to have an online database of volunteer opportunities in Australia. This already exists and is called Go Volunteer (https://govolunteer.com.au/). Current and non-active volunteers reported negative experiences of volunteering from organisations never returning their telephone calls asking about volunteer opportunities to having their role reduced to less meaningful activities or failing to infiltrate a clique of existing volunteers.

Individuals reported that volunteering was often a transactional relationship. They volunteered in order to gain work experience or for reduced club fees. Some of the non-active volunteers had very specific roles that they wanted to volunteer for. If these roles were not available, then they were unwilling to volunteer in an alternative role. They wanted to offer their skills to an organisation, to develop bespoke volunteer roles, which used specific skills rather than fit in with an existing volunteer programme:

> "I found a lot of volunteer programmes are set to 'we need these volunteers' as opposed to 'I have some time to offer and some particular expertise'" (Female, non-active volunteer, 35-54 years)

Another factor which affected participants' willingness to volunteer was knowing someone who volunteered and being familiar with volunteering. Willingness is about an individual's values and attitudes towards volunteering as well as their motivation. Participants who knew someone who volunteered were more likely to have a positive attitude towards the activity, unless their friend, relative or colleague had reported a bad experience.

Capability

In terms of capability, for the younger participants, university volunteering provided a pathway into participation for many focus group members. There was mixed confidence among the participants about their abilities to be a volunteer. Some participants felt that they had skills to offer and were unable to find the roles that enabled them to use their skills. Others were deterred by the perceived knowledge and skills of existing volunteers. For

example, one non-volunteer commented about whether they could become a volunteer tour guide at a tourist attraction:

> "This person knows so much about the history of [the attraction] why don't they go and talk about it. Well I know nothing. I can't do that." (Female, non-volunteer, aged 18-34 years)

Employability was linked to volunteering for younger focus group participants and also for those who were new to the country. For example, one participant wanted to use volunteering as a means into paid employment. Employability was important to both students moving into the job market and for those wishing to progress in their careers. Studying at a university or working for an employer who had a favourable of volunteering and even promoted the activity had a positive impact on participants' capability to volunteer.

A major barrier was perceived as all the paperwork that was necessary for someone to start volunteering with an organisation. This barrier has already been mentioned as affecting individuals' willingness to volunteer but it is also related to capability. Not everyone had the ability to apply for a police clearance or working with children check and this was limited participants' capability to volunteer.

There was also an element of 'chicken and egg' about capability to volunteer. Current or non-active volunteers commented on how volunteering itself increased their capability to volunteer and facilitated further volunteering. The skills learnt through volunteering were both anticipated and unexpected:

> "…sometimes it's also through volunteering that you get skills or you realise that you're quite good at things." (Female, non-active volunteer, aged 55 years plus)

Availability

Availability was affected by a range of factors competing for individuals' time including family commitments, paid work, study, travel and leisure. Certain types of work were perceived as more constraining, such as shift work, with shifts changing regularly, preventing an individual from making a regular volunteer commitment. Family commitments were equally limiting. One non-volunteer commented that her husband's health was unpredictable and made it difficult for her to commit to any regular activity.

However, availability was also positively related to willingness. Current volunteers tended to be more willing overall and will make themselves available to volunteer that is they will prioritise volunteering over other activities:

> "I work only a 40 hour week but it takes me at least an hour to get to work and at least an hour back... So ultimately that equates to about 11 hours a day if work takes off so basically you have very little time outside of work to do much else. But regarding the volunteering, at least for me in terms of how do I fit it in, I think it's more a question of how do I fit everything else in because for me that is a priority." (Male, 18-34 years, current volunteer)

All participants reported that they were very busy people but non-volunteers and former volunteers were sceptical about having the time to volunteer.

More were available for one-off and episodic roles:

> "We've got heaps of people willing to just randomly put up their hand for two hours and help". (Male, current volunteer, aged 18-34 years)

The findings of this study showed that an individual's propensity to volunteer, volunteerability, was not equally divided between the three elements - willingness, capability and availability – although together they make up the whole of the individual's volunteerability. The data tentatively suggests that a higher level in one area can compensate for a reduced level in another. For example, a high level of capability could make an individual more willing to offer their services or an individual who had time available could be more willing to look for a volunteer activity to fill their time. Willingness appeared to be the most important dimension of volunteerability. Participants also talked about how the biggest challenge was making the decision to find out about volunteering and taking the first step:

> "Then if you want to do it, you've got to make the first step. You've got to bridge that gap, that's the hard thing to do, I think. That is the barrier." (Male, non-volunteer, aged 55 years plus)

Discussion and conclusion

The focus group participants had mixed views of volunteering based on their own personal knowledge and experience. Non-volunteers had particularly negative and stereotypical perceptions of volunteering, as has been identified in previous studies (Smith, 1999; Rochester & Hutchinson, 2003). They also had limited knowledge about the types of volunteering that are available and how to find out about these. Together these created powerful barriers to volunteering, which would require considerable effort to overcome.

Participants did also report some actual barriers, which echo the findings from previous studies (Sundeen, Raskoff & Garcia, 2007). For example, some participants had clear aspirations about the kind of volunteering they wanted to do. If this was not available, they were uninterested in other opportunities. Many participants, disappointedly reported that organisations had failed to get back to them or had changed their role without consulting with them. Poor volunteer management practice needs to shoulder some of the responsibility for why some individuals do not volunteer.

The focus groups were designed to explore the dimensions of volunteerability (Meijs, Ten Hoorn & Brudney, 2006). Willingness was affected by knowledge of volunteering, which could be gained from knowing someone who volunteered; previous experience of volunteering; knowing how to find out about volunteering opportunities; and the perceived benefits of volunteering for the individual volunteer. Capability was affected by the perceived skills that would be needed; the confidence of the individual in whether they have those skills; the paperwork that was required for new volunteers by organisations; and a positive attitude towards volunteering from a university or employer. Availability was affected by a range of competing activities for the participants' time including paid work, family, study and leisure activities but the limiting effect of these different factors was moderated by the participants' willingness to volunteer. A high level of willingness could overcome most availability barriers.

Who are the convertibles?
The focus groups are also the first stage in identifying the individuals who could be encouraged into volunteering. The most important of the three dimensions of volunteerability for facilitating volunteer participation is willingness. Focus group participants reported putting in substantial effort to overcome barriers of capability or availability if they were sufficiently motivated to volunteer. The volunteer role itself was particularly important. The participants had to feel passionately about the cause, the activity or the benefits to themselves

and the clients. These findings suggest that non-volunteers are unlikely to be persuaded to volunteer per se, but that organisations need to be able to target specific individuals who value the roles and activities that the organisation has to offer.

Qualitative research is particularly useful for developing theory. While this is tentative, as the findings are only based on 12 focus groups, the data suggest that there are generational differences, which the focus groups uncovered through their stratification based on age as well as volunteer participation. Three broad grouping emerged from the data, with characteristics which would suggest particular reasons for either participating or not participating in volunteering.

We named the youngest group, aged 18-34 years, the 'entitled generation'. Their responses in the focus group discussions showed that they expected to benefit from volunteering – it was a transactional relationship -. They also expected the volunteer role to fit into their lifestyles, perhaps through volunteering with their friends or on an occasional basis if they happened to have some free time. They were unwilling to change their lifestyle to volunteer.

We named the middle age group of 35-43 year olds, traditionally the most likely age group to volunteer in Australia (ABS, 2011), the 'guilty generation'. This group were familiar with what volunteering was, even if they were unaware of all the opportunities available. This group felt that they should volunteer and this led to feelings of guilt so they offered many excuses for why they did not participate.

The older generation – the 55 years plus babyboomers did not share the guilt of the middle cohort. These participants did not think that they should have to volunteer, rather the government should pay for all the services provided by volunteers. Babyboomers are often highlighted as a potential source of volunteers, as a large cohort approaching or in the early years of retirement (Rochester, Ellis Paine & Howlett, 2009), however in this study, this cohort were not positively predisposed towards volunteering.

These three groupings are specific to the Australian context in some ways. For example, the older group have grown up in a particular political context where they developed the expectation that the government should provide. However, it would be interesting to conduct comparative research in other cultures to see how these groupings vary within different political and social contexts.

This study has revealed important findings about volunteerability and the reasons why individuals do not volunteer. However, there are also limitations. This research is based on a series of focus groups, which were purposively sampled according to specific criteria. The findings are best suited to exploring a phenomenon in depth and developing theory rather than making generalisations to wider populations. This study has explored the phenomenon of volunteerability and suggested factors that have a negative impact on an individual's propensity to volunteer. These need to be tested in a wider study with a substantially larger sample that is representative of the Australian population.

Implications for practice

The findings from the focus groups offer some opportunities for volunteer involving organisations, peak bodies and governments to address barriers to volunteering. Willingness could be increased by providing potential groups of volunteers with knowledge about the different roles that are available. As knowing someone who volunteers was a factor in increasing an individual's willingness to volunteer, current volunteers could be asked to assist in recruitment by asking their friends and relatives to volunteer. Employers and universities that clearly valued volunteering was also linked to willingness so organisations seeking to recruit volunteers could partner with one of these for mutual benefit.

A key factor in an individual's capability to volunteer was having the confidence in their skills and knowledge. Perhaps this confidence could be facilitated through their employer or university, again building a partnership approach as with willingness. The volunteer involving organisation also needs to make it easy for the volunteer to volunteer, providing the necessary training to do a role, building up the role gradually and - at the start – assisting with any paperwork that needs to be completed.

Availability could be increased by providing flexible volunteer roles, including occasional and one-off roles. An organisation needs to think longer term about building up a relationship with new volunteers, perhaps engaging them in a one-off activity or event to begin with and then encouraging them to bounce back and return to the organisation. Participants also wanted to be able to involve their family and friends so group volunteer activities would help address this as well as work-organised volunteering.

The next stage of this project will involve a national survey to both current volunteers and non-volunteers to explore and test the dimensions of volunteerability across a representative sample of the Australian population.

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