



Volunteer Retention: How Psychological Contracts Play a Part in Your Success

By Tobi Johnson, MA, CVA, [Tobi Johnson & Associates](#) | [VolunteerPro](#)

As leaders of volunteers, when we think about improving volunteer retention rates and reducing turnover we often think first about the processes and paperwork involved. Is there a barrier that keeps people from returning? Is this too complex or bureaucratic? Are we scaring people away?

Alternately, some of us assume that volunteers are simply inconsistent and undedicated to following through. We wonder if there are any “quality” volunteers left in today’s world. And, we wonder where those unicorns can be found.

But I can assure you that there are plenty of dedicated volunteers contributing time, talent, and treasure to the organizations they love. In the US, [nearly one in three people volunteer their time](#), and [volunteers contribute financially to charity at twice the rate of non-volunteers](#). And, many nonprofits are entirely volunteer run, without any paid employee support.

So, what gives?

Over the past decade or so, [scholars have explored the idea of “psychological contracts”](#) and their impact on volunteer expectations, satisfaction, and retention. Most recently, a colleague (and co-author of our annual [Volunteer Management Progress Report Survey](#)), has been studying [the relationships between organizations and volunteers](#) and how those expectations are formed.

To sum up the key takeaway from the research to date -- If nonprofit employees can better understand the expectations volunteers believe the organization and its staff have made to them, and employees understand the promises employees believe volunteers have made to the organization -- and the more explicit and aligned they are -- the better off both sides will be.



How to Promote Better Volunteer Retention Through Psychological Contracts

While most organizations focus on the administrative side of volunteer “contracts” (e.g., application forms, waivers, volunteer agreements, memoranda of understanding, etc.), it’s really relationships and emotions that do the heavy lifting when it comes to encouraging and supporting volunteers.

Psychological contracts (PCs) are a good lens from which to examine these relationships.

A PC is more than simply expectations. It encompasses the mutual beliefs, feelings, and informal obligations between an employer and an employee or volunteer. It sets the dynamics for the relationship and is different from a formal written contract of employment or volunteer agreement which only outlines mutual duties and responsibilities.

What makes these difficult to navigate is that PCs include both the implicit “unwritten” and explicit “clearly expressed” promises.

For example, an explicit promise might be that an organization will supply five hours of expert training to volunteers. The volunteer expects it because the organization has communicated it in their recruitment and onboarding materials.

An implicit promise expected by employees might be that volunteers will be loyal to the organization, that they won’t speak poorly of their experience on social media, that they will be “respectful” (in other words follow all rules without question). Much of these are never spoken aloud but are nonetheless expected.

What's more, a psychological contract is based on what the individual and the organization each bring to the relationship, and it rests on the notion of reciprocity.

So, when one side doesn't fulfill the perceived obligations, that's when the trouble starts.



Psychological Contracts in a Pandemic

We can expect that volunteer retention will be an issue during the pandemic, due to shelter-in-place and social distancing orders, illness, and anxiety about disease transmission.

While much of this is out of our control, we can take steps to stem the tide of volunteer attrition by exploring and surfacing psychological contract issues.

A fulfilled psychological contract can lead to improved performance by the volunteer towards organizational goals. PC breach or violation can have the opposite effect. It can change the motivation to volunteer and lead to decreased performance or decreased activity.

What's more, PC breaches can create a vicious cycle. Staff members may be less willing to work with volunteers who they perceive to have breached their psychological contract. In turn, the volunteer will experience a breach as they experience lower levels of organizational support as it is withdrawn by the staff. Then, staff blame volunteer for not following through and are unwilling to assign work, leading to added PC breach and continued deficits in volunteer participation.

You get the drift.

During the current pandemic, below are a few potential expectations that may or may not be currently met. Which might apply to you and might be affecting volunteer participation and retention?

Volunteers Might Expect from Nonprofits ...

- A super safe & squeaky-clean workplace
- Flexible ways to help
- The ability to make their own decisions about risk
- Agency support with technology and how to use it
- A commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion
- A way to connect socially with fellow volunteers
- Understanding and empathy
- And more ...

Nonprofits Might Expect from Volunteers ...

- Flexibility about shifts and roles
- Compliance with safety rules and protocols
- Courage, honesty, patience, commitment, and creativity
- The ability to fumble through technology
- Two-way communications
- An open mind
- A can-do attitude
- The willingness to advocate on the organization's behalf
- Understanding and empathy
- And more ...

As you move toward a “new normal,” consider the current moment carefully.

What does your organization expect of volunteers? Have you made it clear in an understanding and compassionate way?

And, what do volunteers expect of your organization? Have you set up systems to surface these in the spirit of open transparency and trust?

If you take care to better understand the promises that each side thinks the other has made (whether spoken or assumed), you can begin to build bridges toward a more productive, compassionate, and sustainable workplace that keeps volunteers coming back for more.

About Tobi Johnson, MA, CVA

Tobi is the President of [Tobi Johnson & Associates](#), a training and consulting firm that helps nonprofit organizations transform their volunteer strategy and leverage the power of community to meet their missions. She is also the founder of [VolunteerPro](#), an online training hub that helps busy volunteer coordinators build reliable, time-saving systems to grow and scale their base of high-impact volunteers. Tobi has trained thousands of leaders of volunteers around the world in modern leadership practices that meet the needs of today’s volunteers. In 2019, she launched the [Time + Talent Podcast](#) where, each season, she and her co-host interview volunteer managers who share their most innovative ideas and approaches.

About VIS

[Volunteers Insurance Service Association, Inc. \(VIS\)](#) was established in 1972 for the purpose of providing insurance and risk management services for volunteer-based organizations. In addition to still providing these



www.visvolunteers.com

insurance services today on a nationwide scale, we have expanded to provide noninsurance resources for members to manage their risks and improve their operations. By transferring the volunteer risk exposure to our program, we can help you protect your organization. Contact us today at (800) 222-8920 for more information on our programs and services. [Join now!](#)