

Volunteers managing other volunteers - 'new form' or return to the roots of voluntary action

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Introduction

The voluntary and community sector is currently experiencing the most significant funding cuts for several generations. The impact on volunteer management is likely to be particularly significant given that many organisations do not have sufficient resources in this area; even before the onset of the recession, one in three voluntary sector organisations reported having no funding for supporting volunteers (Machin and Ellis Paine, 2008). This is taking place against a backdrop of a recent slight decline in national levels of volunteering (CLG, 2011).

Many organisations are subsequently exploring new ways in which volunteers can be involved and managed. One such way which is receiving increasing attention is the practice of volunteers managing other volunteers (for the purposes of this paper it will be referred to as VMV), in which volunteers undertake functions such as inducting, training and supervising other volunteers¹. While this is not new in small volunteer-led organisations, it represents a significant trend in larger, more formalised voluntary organisations.

While volunteer management has been the focus of considerable amounts of research in the past decade (see, for example, Stuart, 2009a for a summary) the focus has tended to be on that delivered by paid members of staff. The practice of VMV has largely been excluded from analysis and represents a significant gap in our understanding about the way in which volunteers are involved in organisations.

This paper will explore the depth and breadth of VMV throughout the voluntary and community sector and will present a typology to understand the diversity of the models being practised. This will help to frame our discussions on the implications of the introduction of VMV in larger, more formalised organisations. This paper draws on recent research undertaken by IVR including a large scale survey of managers of volunteers in England – *Valuing Volunteer Management* (Brewis et al, 2010) – and research with a number of large national organisations which have models of VMV in place. It builds upon insights contained in a 2009 paper by Stuart and a 2011 article for Voluntary Sector Review by Hill and Stevens.

The depth and breadth of VMV

Volunteers are already widely involved as managers of other volunteers. The *Valuing Volunteer Management* study found that 38 per cent of managers reported that they were in unpaid roles (Brewis et al, 2010). This is particularly prevalent throughout smaller organisations and volunteer led groups where this form of

¹ Volunteers have long been involved as managers of other volunteers, and indeed paid staff, as trustees. This group of individuals will not be examined in this paper, and the issues explored will be confined to volunteers in delivery-type roles.

management is frequently central to the identity of these groups, which thrive on informality and peer support (see, for example, Ockenden and Hutin, 2008; Zimmeck, 2001). The focus of this paper however is on larger, more formalised organisations. Fourteen per cent of VMVs are involved in organisations which have more than 50 paid staff (Brewis et al, 2010). While the practice has been long established in many organisations, anecdotal evidence suggests that amongst numerous others it is being actively promoted as a new way in which to involve volunteers. The precise motivations for this shift requires more research but evidence from our work with large organisations and the *Valuing Volunteer Management* study suggest that it is driven by both a need to develop a cost-effective form of volunteer management on the one hand, and a recognition of the value of creating meaningful and empowering opportunities for volunteers to take on management roles on the other. The following examples illustrate the different nature of these roles:

- Crisis, the national charity for single homeless people has a long history of volunteer involvement with over 10,000 volunteers (Stuart, 2009b). Most of these are involved in the week-long event at *Crisis Christmas* in which the 9,000 volunteers are managed by 'key volunteers' and shift leaders (also known as green badges). Green badges run the shifts and volunteer teams whilst Crisis staff adopt a more operational role in recruiting the volunteers.
- The National Trust has involved volunteers in managing and leading other volunteers over many years through programmes such as working holidays. However, they are now developing a programme to recruit volunteers to manage other volunteers in built and countryside properties. Their tasks will include recruiting and selecting new volunteers, co-ordinating training, planning rotas and organising social events. The National Trust ran a pilot programme in 2009 which was evaluated by the Institute for Volunteering Research.
- The Samaritans is the only large-scale volunteer-involving organisation to deliver the vast majority of its training entirely through its volunteers. This reflects their wider structure, in which volunteers frequently adopt management positions at the local level; branch Directors, Leaders and shift supervisors, Regional Trainers and Regional Representatives are all volunteer positions. The set-up is summarised well by the staff description of themselves as the 'civil servants' and the volunteers as 'MPs'.

To help us understand this diversity of involvement, the following typology has been adapted by Hill and Stevens (2011) from a model developed by Stuart in 2009.

A typology of involvement

This four-point typology is defined by the organisational setting.

At one end of the spectrum there are *volunteer-led and run organisations*, or what Meijs and Hoorn (2008) refer to as 'membership management' organisations. The focus of these organisations is on the members (the volunteers) rather than programme management. Here VMVs have responsibility for organisational leadership and management, which may involve the management of day-to-day activities, strategic planning and finances. As identified by Meijs and Hoorn (2008,

p.38) ‘membership management can be seen as a self steering team of mechanisms who make their own decisions on how to organise themselves’. These organisations often have aims related to campaigning and mutual support and are typically characterised by a small income, no paid staff and informal organisational structures.

We then have *staff-supported organisations* where volunteers have both strategic control over the organisation and overall responsibility for volunteer management. These organisations are often relatively small and have a limited number of paid staff who undertake some of the day-to-day operations of volunteer management such as coordinating rotas and organising training

Further along the spectrum are *volunteer-supported organisations* (Meijs and Westerlaken, 1994). Rather than members, the focus is on the operational tasks of the organisation and programme management. Here, strategic development of the volunteer programme is led by paid staff whilst volunteers are directly involved in the day-to-day management of other volunteers. This model is more likely to have workplace, top-down models of volunteer management in place with formal structures, processes and procedures for involving and organising volunteers (see Stuart and Ellis Paine, 2008).

Finally, there is the *volunteer-involving organisation* where responsibility for volunteer management is exclusively the domain of paid staff. Volunteers are involved in an operational role, delivering direct services either to beneficiaries or to the organisation. It is within these often large national organisations that much of the professionalisation and formalisation of volunteer management has taken place (Rochester et al, 2010).

Figure 1 summarises the different types of organisational settings and the respective VMV roles within them (although one organisation could potentially have more than one type of VMV involvement simultaneously – on discrete projects for example). It groups the four types of organisational setting into two broader categories – those that are primarily volunteer-led and those which are primarily staff-led.

Figure 1: Different models of voluntary volunteer management

	Type of organisation	Level of voluntary volunteer management
Primarily Volunteer-led	Volunteer-led and run	Strategic and operational control of volunteer management lies solely with volunteers
	Staff-supported organisations	Strategic decisions and overall responsibility for volunteer management lies with volunteers. Paid staff are involved in the day-to-day operations of volunteer management.

Primarily staff-led	Volunteer-supported organisations	Volunteers are involved in day-to-day volunteer management but strategic decisions and overall responsibilities lie with paid staff.
	Volunteer-involving organisations	Volunteers involved in operational and service delivery tasks. Little or no volunteer involvement in management or strategic decision-making around volunteer management

Emergent implications for volunteering

The professionalisation of volunteer management

Volunteer management has been undergoing a process of formalisation and professionalisation for many years. The introduction of more structured policies and procedures and the development of volunteer management as a profession has been well documented (see Howlett, 2010 and Rochester et al, 2010). Much of this has been imported from the 'workplace' model of human resources and includes practices such as volunteer interviews, written task descriptions for volunteers and supervision arrangements.

Evidence suggests that as the introduction of such management practices has increased within organisations, the experience of volunteers has also improved. *Helping Out*, the National Survey of Volunteering (2007) suggests that most volunteers are (broadly speaking) happy with the ways in which they are supported, or at least that they are a lot happier than they were ten years previously (Stuart and Ellis Paine, 2008). However, the last decade has also seen concerns raised about the over-formalisation of volunteer management, which can potentially stifle the much valued informality of volunteer settings (Howlett, 2010 and Stuart and Ellis Paine, 2008). It is not clear how the increased introduction of VMV in large volunteer-involving and volunteer-supported organisations will interact with these trends of formalisation and professionalisation. Potentially it may offer an antidote to what some see as an overly formalised and bureaucratic approach to volunteer management and help to recognise the value of existing systems such as peer support and learning (see Ockenden and Hutin, 2008; Zimmeck, 2001).

Questions may however be raised about the impact of VMV on the progress towards the take up of 'good practice' in volunteer management which has been achieved over the previous decade. The recent *Valuing Volunteer Management* study (Brewis et al, 2010) found that the prevalence of good practice was considerably lower amongst unpaid volunteer managers (VMVs) than for their paid counterparts. They were significantly less likely, for example, to have a written policy for volunteer involvement (51 per cent for VMVs compared to 83 per cent for paid staff). Partially this was related to the predominance of VMVs in smaller organisations but even in large, well-resourced organisations there was a discrepancy between paid and unpaid volunteer managers.

The added-value of volunteers

Even during times of comparative prosperity, volunteer management has remained under-resourced and under-valued (Machin and Ellis Paine, 2008). Against the backdrop of major funding cuts throughout the sector, it is inevitable that the development of VMV roles will result in questions being asked about 'job substitution' and replacement.

This issue of job substitution, where paid staff are replaced by unpaid volunteers, has caused substantial tension in the sector historically; most toxically when volunteers were seen as strike breakers in the 1920s and 1970s. The literature primarily focuses on the role of volunteering in the direct delivery of public services (see, for example, Sheard 1995; and Renshaw, 1975) and there is little evidence on job substitution specifically in relation to volunteer management practices. However, the findings from our research with one large national organisation suggest that many of the concerns and tensions over service delivery can be equally applicable to the introduction of VMVs. Indeed, in this example, paid staff responded somewhat paradoxically; welcoming the additional resources provided by VMVs on the one hand but not wishing to cede power and responsibility on the other. Volunteers were also found to be more resistant to VMV if they associated it purely with cost-cutting.

The tensions surrounding job substitution have led to the development of a joint Volunteers' Charter between Volunteering England and the TUC (Volunteering England and the TUC, 2009), which gives guidelines on the distinctiveness of paid and volunteer roles, arguing that *'the involvement of volunteers should complement and supplement the work of paid staff, and should not be used to displace paid staff or undercut their pay and conditions of service'* (ibid). This 'added-value' mantra is well established within volunteering good practice and echoes earlier calls from the Commission on the Future of Volunteering (Commission on the Future of Volunteering, 2008). Yet the current government agenda around volunteering reframes this debate with volunteer citizens being actively encouraged to take control and delivery of services which were previously the preserve of paid public sector staff (Cabinet Office, 2010; Daniels, 2011). Within this context the introduction of VMV has the potential to be associated with government policy and ideology, and such tensions need to be managed effectively if the introduction of VMV is to be successful.

The position and influence of volunteers

Giving volunteers the opportunity to manage other volunteers represents a significant change in their position and levels of responsibility as they effectively become line managers. This will be seen by many as a development opportunity and a way to gain new experience, but by others it may be interpreted as an unwelcome burden. Indeed, one in four (28 per cent) of current volunteers already feel that there is too much bureaucracy in their volunteering and nearly one in five (17 per cent) feel that it is too 'work-like' (Low et al, 2007). Where responsibility becomes a burden, the volunteer experience may suffer and the turnover of volunteers could increase. More complex roles in organisations can lead to greater demands being placed upon volunteers (Graff, 2003 in Gaskin, 2005).

This may be a challenge resolved through self-selection, with only those volunteers interested in additional responsibility putting themselves forwards. However, it does suggest that volunteers in these roles require additional support and management, either by other volunteers or by paid volunteer managers. This will depend on the nature of the role, but management of others can include challenging situations such as managing personal crises, or disciplining individuals. As with paid staff, some volunteers may find this naturally easier than others and a number of studies have identified specific competencies needed for the successful involvement of volunteers

in management and leadership roles (Lockeets and Boleman, 2008; Safrit et al, 2005). Drawing on research undertaken by IVR, Stuart (2009) described a range of attributes of VMVs as identified by the volunteers themselves; personality and attitude were observed as being particularly important. Some volunteers may come with an existing well-developed set of competencies and 'people skills' but others will require more comprehensive support and guidance.

By giving certain volunteers additional responsibility, new power dimensions between volunteers are likely to be created. This was perceived to be a potential problem amongst volunteers in organisations which practised VMV:

'This would make a two-tier system of volunteers which I feel would prove to be more divisive than helpful.'

'I believe that all volunteers should be on an equal footing. If one is supervised in any way the principle is lost.'

Much was also found, however, to be dependent on the individual situation; the personality and approach of the volunteer in the management position, or the wider approach and rationale of the organisation.

In addition to VMV altering relationships between volunteers, it may also affect the relationship between volunteer and the organisation they are involved with; in particular, the depth of their engagement within the organisation and the level of their influence in decision making. The typology presented earlier indicated that in those organisations that are primarily staff-led, VMVs are confined to practical and operational issues of volunteer management, and are not involved in strategic decision-making. Clearly the role will vary between organisations and there will be examples in which volunteers are genuinely empowered, but we may also be observing the involvement of volunteers as a mechanism to deliver pre-determined organisational objectives. Volunteers are involved in management but have no influence on the strategic direction of the volunteer programme or the organisation more widely. This may be part of a broader trend identified by IVR in which volunteers, especially those within more formalised settings, are increasingly being side-lined from positions of responsibility and excluded from decision-making opportunities. It is argued that paid staff are increasingly taking on these roles, with volunteers relegated to the delivery of outputs and seen as a means to an end (Ellis Paine, Ockenden and Stuart, 2009).

Conclusions

VMV offers opportunities for organisations to develop their capacity to involve and manage volunteers and for volunteers to develop their skills and the depth of their engagement with organisations. This paper, however, highlights a number of challenges which need to be considered if VMV is to be implemented more widely. If VMV is purely established for cost-saving purposes with an absence of involvement and consultation with volunteers, it has the potential to create divisions between paid staff and volunteers, and within groups of volunteers; volunteers should be involved in the process of setting up VMV from the outset. VMV also brings numerous managerial challenges. Increased responsibility needs to be carefully balanced

against over-formalisation and over-burdening of individuals and we need to recognise that there is a limit to what we can reasonably expect of volunteers.

The typology presented in this paper will hopefully start to frame the diversity of situations in which VMV can develop. But if VMV is to develop effectively then we need to know more about what works and what doesn't. We don't know enough about the impact of VMV on the volunteers that are being managed by other volunteers, or on the organisations that involve them. We lack evidence about how this sits in relation to wider trends of volunteers being marginalised from positions of influence, and whether this represents genuine or pseudo-empowerment. Finally we need to broaden the field in which this is explored. At present our existing knowledge base is primarily drawn from studies of individual volunteering programmes within individual organisations. A cross-organisational or sector-wide study of this practice would yield considerable information and aid the continued, effective development of an innovative form of volunteer management.

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