



COMMENTARY

The bright and dark side of I-O psychologists and volunteer work

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Tippins et al. (in press 2023) highlight the importance of volunteering among industrial-organizational (I-O) psychologists, aligning with the policies of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP), which promote volunteering among its members (Rogelberg et al., 2022). We have thus been encouraged by Tippin's thought-provoking focal paper to share our activities as volunteers in nonprofit organizations. We describe challenges and sometimes criticize the volunteering process; however, we also make suggestions to improve the I-O psychologists' volunteer activities thus creating a win-win situation for both volunteers and the nonprofit organizations. In this article, we present three different prisms of volunteer work in nonprofit organizations, namely, volunteering (a) as a calling, (b) to promote business interests, and (c) as a commitment of academic researchers to give back to the subjects of their research and to society.

Volunteering as a calling: Edna Rabenu

In 2015, I joined a new local association called “Mothers with Meaning” (MWM). MWM aims to inspire women to become active socially through study, empowerment, and action according to Israeli and Jewish values (<https://mwm.org.il/>). MWM is conducted in the form of communities throughout the country and today includes about 1000 women. Joining MWM suited me in terms of meaning as it represents my values and integrates with my desire to positively influence society.

In consonance with the MWM's DNA, its volunteers are given much autonomy, thus assisting them to realize their initiatives alongside the fulfillment of the associations' objectives. Indeed, MWM is a paradise for organizational behavior experts like me, enabling me to realize my strengths, skills, and knowledge. For example, it was important to me (and my community) that studying appears in the association's core values.

MWM allows me to experiment and learn from the field, for example, how to operate in an association without a predetermined hierarchical structure and how to volunteer in a community with shared leadership. Moreover, MWM expanded my network and led to collaborations relevant to my work, such as serving as a guest lecturer at classes and conferences.

From my perspective, I contribute to MWM in several ways:

- *Lecturing and building content material.* For example, on “Family Day,” I conducted a workshop for the volunteers that included generating a deck of cards produced specifically for that occasion.
- *Strategic consulting.* I offer informal consultation to my fellow volunteers and the organization regarding courses of action and modes of operation. As an active participant in

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the association and one of the founders of a local community (Hadera), I recognize needs from the inside. Moreover, as a consultant and faculty member in organizational behavior, I understand processes and observe them reflectively. My process literacy—which enables psychological security and the ability to harness people embroidered with a vision—helped establish a thriving and growing community. In addition, my association with the organization since its establishment gives me the advantage of a historical perspective.

Challenges

I discern two main challenges for someone like me as a volunteer I-O psychologist. The first is how best to collaborate with the paid consultant; for example, how not to interfere or be too critical. Underlying this dilemma is the important ethical issue of relationships with officials in the organization.

The second challenge is how to balance my two identifications, as a professional and as a voluntary participant. On the one hand, I must strive for the highest organizational standards; on the other hand, I should understand my place as an ordinary participant in the affairs of the organization.

Suggestions

From my volunteer experience, I have two main suggestions to direct to SIOP.

Guidance

Provide guidance to nonprofit associations and other concerns utilizing volunteers, specifically on how to empower the volunteers and create a culture of autonomy within their ranks (Rabenu, 2021, p.141; Pink, 2009). Examples include:

- *Tasks*: Enable autonomy to choose tasks such as guiding workshops or assisting with strategic decision making. This policy promotes the notion that the contributions of academic volunteers are valued and allows I-O psychologists to initiate and develop professionally in meaningful areas while promoting recognition and appreciation by the organizations they serve.
- *Technique*: Enable freedom regarding ways to conduct the volunteering tasks (e.g., conducting a voluntary workshop: will it include group discussions, a reflective part, etc.?).
- *Team*: Enable autonomy to choose with whom to volunteer (e.g., who will open a training system with me or join me in leading a community?).
- *Time*: Enable volunteers to choose when to volunteer and take time out because of family or work constraints. Such an approach can prevent volunteers from burning out and quitting.
- *Place*: Enable virtual volunteering and collaboration, in addition to “on-site” involvement. This trend facilitates global volunteering, such as collaboration with twin communities abroad.

Code of ethics

Formulate a code of ethics for I-O volunteers that includes references to dilemmas facing both the organization and its volunteers. As indicated, a classic example is the relationship between a volunteer consultant and paid consultant in the same association: When should one wear the consultant’s “hat” while also serving as a full-fledged volunteer? Or within the field of ethics and copyright, when can materials developed by the volunteer professional be used outside the

framework of the organization where the volunteer professional is concurrently a salaried individual or freelancer? The code should be built together with the volunteers and can be part of a wider certification of volunteers in the profession of I-O psychologists and related professions.

Self-interested volunteers: Sari Ehrlich

Several years ago, I volunteered in a professional organization that provides a support network to professionals in the field of organizational behavior, including organizational consultants, management consultants, mentors and coaches, and career consultants. The organization has some 450 members, and its main goal is to promote the field and professions associated with industrial and organizational psychology in my country (Israel).

The organization initiated and operated many professional meetings, conferences, and lectures to which I was exposed while working as a salaried employee in a private company that offered financial consulting. When I left the company and opened my own business it was clear to me that as an independent businesswoman with few clients, it was necessary to volunteer in that organization—and that's what I did.

I was offered the chance to join a new committee established to encourage young professionals to join the association. For several months we discussed the issue and advanced suggestions. As an emerging consultant who entered the profession at an older age, I represented the need for assistance in the practical aspects of the profession—economics, business, marketing, and more—areas of the profession that I felt were not given enough attention.

I was involved completely in promoting a related event (in the association) involving long working hours while trying to balance that assignment with my activities as an independent freelance consultant. The event was very successful, but it did not prevent me from retiring from my volunteering status in the organization.

Thinking of the pros and cons of my volunteering “career,” I believe that my time in the organization enriched my understanding and skills in handling meetings, leading projects, and reading the political map. I also got to know some very experienced professionals.

Despite these achievements, I yet felt a measure of disappointment. I put in a lot of effort, but I did not feel I was appreciated either by the people with whom I worked or by the organization. It felt like it was obvious that I was a volunteer, and nobody saw that as something special.

One explanation for this feeling could be a gap in expectations that could have been treated by a simple process of matching expectations; for example, a conversation at the entering stage with someone from the organization might have sorted it out. Now, as an experienced group facilitator, I spend extensive time with participants matching expectations prior to their accepting volunteer positions. I describe the challenges they will face and emphasize that entry into a volunteer world can be a long process accompanied by much frustration before they can enjoy it.

Challenges

In general, it needs to be stressed that although the act of volunteering is considered altruistic, many individuals have hidden agendas and expect their volunteering efforts to fulfill various needs. Consequently, those who take on volunteers should exercise a degree of empathy and sensitivity to their new assistants.

Furthermore, because volunteering is not mandatory, nonprofit organizations, despite their limited resources, should seriously consider and plan how to keep their volunteers in the system. Certainly, volunteers should not be exploited. Notably, several factors influence and contribute to feelings of exploitation on the part of the volunteers:

- The volunteer's role suffers from a lack of clear definition and boundaries, which can be particularly confusing, especially for professionals with expertise in the field;

- An overwhelming number of tasks are imposed on the volunteer, creating excessive load and pressure; and
- A lack of recognition and appreciation, an unfortunate occurrence backed up by Brewis *et al.* (2010) who noted that “there are indications of shifting patterns in the nature and extent of volunteering and higher expectations from volunteers for appropriate support.”

My main challenge was dealing with other personal and professional commitments, especially while establishing my business.

My experience sharpened the question as to whether volunteering in prestigious, large, and important organizations suits privileged individuals who have reached the top of their professions (see: Hustinx *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, the question arises as to how we can attract young consultants and make sure that the volunteering experience will be worthwhile for them. Moreover, in Israel, the typical I-O psychologist who volunteers is usually a pensioner, established and financially secure, volunteering at their (familiar) place of work rather than in another organization. Can we expand the profile?

Suggestions

I suggest the following ideas to commit to SIOP’s call for a diversity of volunteers (Tippins *et al.*).

Publicity and awareness

1. Approach different and diverse communities and explore with them the opportunities to employ volunteer professionals from SIOP’s membership.
2. Prioritize connections with the weaker and excluded populations that will more likely need and appreciate the guidance of I-O professionals willing to volunteer their services. Moreover, increase collaboration with organizations and associations that give services to special populations.
3. Relevant publications exposing the options available to professional volunteers from SIOP should be published by SIOP in several languages beyond English, not only in the printed literature but also widely on a variety of digital platforms.
4. SIOP should offer its members special programs dealing with volunteering—its rewards and challenges—in the form of publications, conferences, and media exposure that, additionally, attend to cultural diversity and inclusion.
5. SIOP could gather data on all its members currently volunteering and invite them to support groups and peer-based meetings to share experiences, even to establish mentoring programs for new (and younger) volunteers from various backgrounds.
6. All the I-O volunteers should be recognized by SIOP, in particular, and their host organizations, through special awards, media items, and events that highlight their unique contributions to the nonprofit’s constituencies, in particular, and the community at large, and thus encourage new and younger volunteers to join the volunteering family.

Micro volunteering

To attract a new generation of I-O volunteer psychologists through SIOP, there should be recognition and adjustments made to the new trends in volunteering, specifically to the various flexible routes available. The options include virtual consulting, short-term projects, a “day of volunteering,” and volunteer teams whose members split specific tasks among their members to name but a few possibilities that can also be uniquely combined.

Internet platforms

In line with the fields of engineering and science, a dedicated Internet platform, acting as a helpline, will enable organizations the world over to connect and raise professional questions. Moreover, the website will connect associations seeking volunteers and serve as a medium for SIOP members to “donate” their professional expertise and share their volunteering experiences.

Volunteering as a researcher: giving back to the research subjects and to the public: Yahel Kurlander

Volunteering for the good of the public has been a part of my life. Because I chose an academic career, my volunteering has taken on a different tone, namely, volunteering as a researcher. I decided that because I benefit from researching migrant workers and other marginal workers, I should also give back to them.

Based on my field of academic interests, I volunteered for several nonprofit organizations and governmental institutions dealing with migrant workers’ rights. In these organizations and institutions, volunteer work manifests itself in various ways, such as participating in meetings, offering consultation to the organization’s staff, writing reports and position papers based on the research, guiding the organization’s research, and editing and assisting in its publication. Notably, the integration of the academic world and my volunteering activities in favor of the researched subjects also manifests itself in conducting and writing research that exposes worker and human rights violations (e.g., Kurlander & Cohen, 2022).

Volunteering of this kind presents a complex experience because the knowledge I possess as a researcher and the knowledge held by the relevant field organizations are, on the one hand, equal and complementary. But, on the other hand, we compete. As a researcher, I recognize the legitimacy, scope, and depth of the field organizations’ expertise, and they, in turn, should need to acknowledge the validity of my scientific credibility.

Challenges

Indeed, there are challenges facing volunteering as a researcher. For example, consider the field of sexual violence among female migrant agricultural workers. As a research consultant, I helped translate and distribute a code of conduct for preventing sexual harassment in the workplace in the local language of the migrants. Although encouraged by the organizations in which I volunteer, the code was not exempt from criticism regarding the lack of its effectiveness, considered to be “lip service” in dealing with the problem.

The second example concerned raising intensive awareness through the media, for instance, the *New York Times* article (Peltier, 2021) about the vulnerability of migrant workers in agriculture during missile attacks. A conflict arises because the media appreciates academic knowledge as more valuable than data acquired from field organizations. Cooperating with the media confirms this preference. Nevertheless, despite the competitive aspect of who supplies information to the media, academic “reporting” facilitates the objective of raising awareness of pressing social issues.

Suggestions

Giveback

SIOP should promote the perception that, as an integral part of academic work, academics are expected to give back to the community. To achieve this, research on volunteering should be recognized as part of “academic citizenship,” as are reviewing articles and participating in conferences. Such promotion implies that volunteering as a researcher is a task expected; moreover, giveback should be rewarded with academic credits such as excellence grants.

We should caution, however, that this demand should not be made, directly or indirectly, from early-career academics in the initial stages of their careers. In the power dynamics between junior and senior faculty members, volunteering can quickly turn “voluntary” to mandatory, thus turning an act of benevolence into exploitation as, for instance, recorded among young faculty women in academia by Rabenu *et al.* (2023).

Knowledge banks

SIOP should help to promote a database of expert knowledge accessible to organizations, especially not for profit. I advise two ways of doing that:

- A. Creating an index (digital or printed) that serves as a directory of academics specialized in their fields, distributed among organizations and media outlets. The index would include information about areas of interest, expertise, and, most importantly, the experts’ preferred methods of communication and declarations regarding preferred volunteering opportunities.
- B. In a similar vein, SIOP could establish communication channels with experts through academic institutions. A central hub would receive inquiries from organizations, and SIOP would gather appropriate academics interested in a particular subject to cooperate in advancing matters in hand for the benefit of society.

Another thought

In this response, we presented three faces of I-O psychologists volunteering as (a) a calling, (b) a way to promote business interests, and (c) a commitment of academic researchers to give back to the subjects of their research and to society. Unfortunately, the comment is too short to include additional modes of I-O psychologists volunteering such as promoting licensing or assisting nonprofit organizations to achieve standardization in the fields in which they have expertise (e.g., compliance with the ISO 45003 standard dealing with psychological health and safety at work, until receiving certification).

Summary

To summarize, volunteer consultants are sometimes confused and challenged by issues that they do not encounter in their paid work. We believe that SIOP can become a lighthouse to encourage and assist these volunteer consultants. Moreover, SIOP can offer nonprofit associations, as well as volunteer I-O psychologists, the training, tools, and experiences to master their respective volunteer paths leading to win–win situations for all sides.

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