



May 2006

CURRENT ISSUES INFORMATION SHEET 2006/3

Bounce-Back of Episodic Volunteers: What makes episodic volunteers return?

According to recent research, episodic environmental volunteers differ from traditional volunteers suggesting that alternative retention strategies and approaches may be necessary in order to facilitate volunteer 'bounce-back' or return to the organisation. As statistics indicate the growing popularity of episodic volunteering, this research addresses a timely and relevant issue for volunteer involving organisations. When considering the vital contribution volunteers make to nonprofit and government organisations, the ability of an organisation to retain its volunteer force becomes paramount.

CPNS Working Paper No 32 - **Bounce-Back of Episodic Volunteers: What makes episodic volunteers return?** - reports the findings of an exploratory research project into episodic volunteer views and experiences and is one of the first studies of episodic volunteers in Australia. This research investigated whether the critical success factors for sustaining traditional volunteers are applicable and appropriate for "bouncing-back" episodic volunteers for future volunteering tasks.

The study's purpose was to discover:

1. What are the critical success factors for bouncing back episodic volunteers?
2. How do these factors compare to the retention factors of traditional volunteers?

This qualitative study sought to gain insight into episodic volunteer views and experiences in a local government community environmental organisation within a major capital city council. In-depth interviews utilising a semi-structured approach were conducted with five episodic volunteers as well as a focus group with five group leaders. Data from this research can be used to inform the conceptual development of hypotheses that can be quantitatively investigated in future studies.

Episodic Volunteer
A volunteer who prefers short term volunteering assignments or task specific volunteering projects opportunities

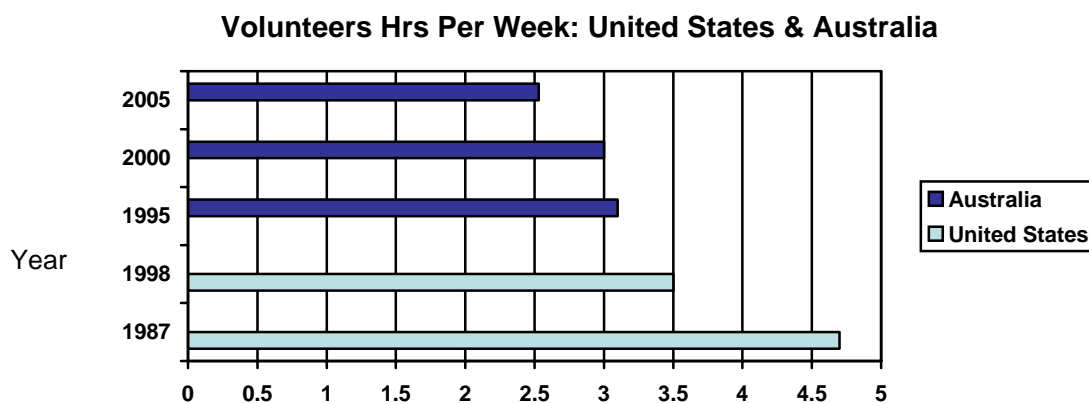
Bounce-back
Re-engagement, or return, of an episodic volunteer to an organisation

Significant findings of the study include:

- Episodic volunteers stated two primary reasons for bouncing back: 1) they were personally asked and; 2) they perceived making a tangible difference to a physical area, i.e. they were both motivated and rewarded by their work/contribution.
- The high degree of satisfaction episodic volunteers experienced in making a tangible difference appeared to have a greater impact on bounce-back than organisational factors of recognition and appreciation.
- Both episodic volunteers and group leaders reported that making people feel welcome was vital in ensuring that episodic volunteers bounced-back. In particular, episodic volunteers felt that being appreciated by their group leader and other members of the group for their efforts made it easy for them to come back at a later time.
- The amount of training an episodic volunteer received had an insignificant impact on bounce-back.

- Male episodic volunteers (particularly those from professional backgrounds who are currently working) have a preference and a tendency for working alone. They prefer to get in and get the job done and are not overly concerned with social aspects such as sharing morning tea.
- Episodic volunteers can be difficult to identify based on Macduff's (2005) framework because they oscillate along a continuum between long and short term volunteering in a manner more closely aligned with Hustinx and Lammertyn's (2003) oscillation between collective and reflexive volunteering styles. For this reason, group leaders who are knowledgeable about their volunteers have difficulty identifying episodic volunteers and episodic volunteers do not identify with the definition of 'episodic'. They consider themselves as committed as traditional long term volunteers but do not have the time to give on a regular basis. They give what they can, when they can.

The working paper discusses the methodology and findings of the research in detail and extensively reviews the literature relating to the phenomenon of episodic volunteer bounce-back. The paper suggests that while episodic volunteering is not a new phenomenon, it appears to be an increasing trend in volunteering. The paper examines volunteering statistics from the US where there is a definite move towards episodic volunteering, and Australian statistics where the results are mixed. The following graph highlights the suggested trend of increasing numbers of volunteers working fewer hours.



The paper also examines selected US, UK and Australian literature on retention of traditional volunteers suggesting that volunteer retention is the result of four factors (motivational, organisational, demographic and psychological). It highlights a gap in the literature suggesting that, in general, whilst the notion of episodic volunteering frequently raises its head in the literature, little is known empirically about the episodic volunteer; and, in particular, retention studies have been limited to traditional volunteers with no empirical studies encompassing episodic volunteer retention.

The findings of this research indicate that episodic volunteers differ from traditional volunteers and that many of the traditional retention strategies and practices do not feature prominently in bouncing-back episodic environmental volunteers. They also suggest that we have only just begun to understand the episodic volunteer and further volunteering studies are necessary if we are to gain a greater understanding of episodic volunteer needs and tendencies and ultimately benefit from the skills and experience they bring to volunteer involving organisations. If Australia follows the US trend of volunteers giving less time per week, then it is vital that our volunteer involving organisations truly understand episodic volunteers and create programs and opportunities that allow for the blending of traditional and episodic volunteers.

References

- Hustinx, L. and Lammertyn, F. (2003) Collective and Reflective Styles of Volunteering: A Sociological Modernization Perspective, *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 167-187.
- Macduff, N. (2005) Societal Changes and Rise of the Episodic Volunteer, *Emerging Areas of Volunteering*, Arnova Occasional Paper Series, vol. 1, no. 2. Indianapolis