

# NOT ‘JUST A VOLUNTEER’: EMBRACING CONCEPTS AND APPROACHES FROM THE PAID SECTOR

**Dr Andrew Pleffer**  
**Research and Policy Advisor**  
**Service Skills Australia**

## **FULL PAPER**

### **About Service Skills Australia**

Service Skills Australia is one of eleven Industry Skills Councils and exclusively represents the service industries. These fourteen industries—including community pharmacy, holiday parks and resorts, and outdoor recreation—are grouped into three aligned areas:

- Wholesale, Retail and Personal Services
- Tourism, Hospitality and Events
- Sport, Fitness and Recreation

Industry Skills Councils (ISCs) are national bodies providing advice on industry training and skills development needs to both government and industry. ISCs are independent, not-for-profit bodies, managed by industry representatives and funded by the Australian Government. As an ISC, our perspective on volunteering is one of workforce planning and workforce development.

To put this in context, the *Intergenerational Report* identifies the three components contributing to increased gross domestic product as being the size of the working-age **population**, the proportion of the working-age **participating** in the labour force and the **productive** output generated by the labour force (Commonwealth of Australia 2010, pp.3-14). While involvement with the population aspect of this model is outside our jurisdiction, Service Skills Australia (SSA) does deal very prominently with issues affecting those with or seeking connections to the workforce (paid and unpaid). SSA also strongly encourages practices and behaviours that benefit the national productivity agenda—such as up-skilling, re-skilling and lifelong learning through vocational education and training.

In short, workforce development is about building education and training into jobs and career pathways. This process incorporates:

- Producing training packages to be delivered by registered training organisations (RTOs)—both public and private colleges.
- Distributing funding for training programs on behalf of the Federal and State/Territory Governments.
- Implementing new projects and programs that seek to enhance the educational and workplace landscapes to benefit both workers and industry.
- And conducting research to inform our ongoing work and identify gaps in our existing knowledge for further inquiry.

## Introduction

The latest statistics on volunteering provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007a, p.40) indicate that sport and physical recreation organisations have the largest share of the nation's self-identified<sup>1</sup> volunteer numbers (1.7m or 32.8%), volunteering involvements (1.9m or 25.0%) and annual hours of voluntary work (187.2m or 26.5%).

Given that these organisations fall under the coverage of SSA, the issues that relate to and/or affect the volunteer workforce are of great interest and concern to our organisation. One such concern is that the research methodologies employed by Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) are not yet able to produce total labour force figures per industry that simultaneously account for:

1. paid workers
2. unpaid volunteers, and
3. those who participated as both a paid worker and an unpaid volunteer.

At present, the ABS data on volunteering is collected through two avenues—one question in the Census (which occurs every five years) as well as a set of questions from their General Social Survey (which occurs every five or six years).<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, figures on paid workers per industry are gathered from the Labour Force Survey component of the Monthly Population Survey (ABS 2010). Subsequently, due to the differing collection methodologies, these two sets of data cannot be cross-pollinated to produce statistics that reflect the proportion of a given industry's workforce that is occupied by unpaid (volunteer) workers. This is especially intriguing for the sport and recreation industries where 72.1% of organisations were reported as being fully staffed by volunteers (ABS 2007a, p.56).

Further to this concern regarding statistics is how the separation of workers and volunteers is reinforced by the disparate paradigms—and taxonomies—for engaging with and managing these two forms of labour. The practices and language used consistently by volunteer-utilising organisations (VUOs) demonstrates this dichotomy quite clearly whereby paid workers are presented with “human resources” and unpaid volunteers dealt from a different deck known as “volunteer management”. This culture of separation sends the message that volunteers are not considered to be part of the workforce; that they are an addition to be managed as a separate species of worker. Issues of inequality aside, whether or not a worker is on the payroll, the skills they require to carry out and fulfil the allotted duties of a given role would still need to be of the same quality. Therefore the capacity in which they supply their labour contribution should be irrelevant.

These concerns are also mirrored in other current projects being run by SSA where the dominant issues arising include governance, leadership and improved support for training volunteers.<sup>3</sup> Such issues, however, are not merely limited the sport and recreation industries.

---

<sup>1</sup> This document only incorporates data from the General Social Survey as it is: 1) more detailed; 2) considered to be more accurate (in that results are guaranteed to be self-reported), and; 3) the source of content for *4441.0 Voluntary Work, Australia*.

<sup>2</sup> See footnote 1.

<sup>3</sup> Please visit the ‘Volunteers’ page of the Service Skills Australia website for more details on these projects <http://www.serviceskills.com.au/volunteers>.

## Volunteers: A profile

If the biggest issue affecting the world today is climate change, then the biggest issue affecting volunteering is culture change. Through a literature survey on volunteer strategies and documents, it is readily apparent that a small stock-standard collection of phrases are regularly employed to discuss and praise volunteers—to the point where they become clichés. These include:

- Volunteers are the lifeblood of our community/organisation/sector/industry.
- Volunteers make an important/valuable/significant contribution to society.
- Volunteers play a central role.
- Without volunteers, our organisation would fail to function effectively.
- Volunteers are extremely valuable/very special people.

This is not to say that all occurrences of these phrases are disingenuous or insincere. Rather it is a case of hearing a consistent message being spread (phrases praising volunteers) yet seeing consistent opposition to this message through inaction (approaches taken towards involving volunteers). More directly, people undertaking formal *unpaid* work (volunteers) need to see and be subjected to practices and behaviours that reflect these sentiments; practices and behaviours that are more readily available to people undertaking formal *paid* work (employed staff). This list may often involve issues such as access to flexible arrangements (e.g. “virtual volunteering”), access to training and development opportunities (e.g. courses)<sup>4</sup> and alignment between skills sets and assigned tasks—not simply relegating volunteers to the mundane duties that nobody else wants to undertake.

Why is it then that those described as being extremely valuable, making important contributions and playing central roles are often unable to undergo further training and find themselves mismatched in volunteer positions? Suffice to say, if not-for-profit organisations do truly value those who volunteer their time and services, there should be some acknowledgement of these kinds of practices that affect people’s ability and capacity to contribute as a volunteer. Volunteer peak bodies like Volunteering Australia (VA) and the Centre for Volunteering (CV) are already calling for such to occur:

*“offer volunteer staff the opportunity for professional development”* (VA 2005, p.2)

*“Volunteers can be of enormous value to your organisation if you get the match right.”* (VA 2006, p.1)

*“the issue is not a simplistic one of supply and demand... Rather the issue is the more complex one of matching sectoral and organisational need to volunteer aspirations. This may require NFP organisational change, to improve management practices and capability, and to endeavour to improve job satisfaction opportunities within available volunteer roles. It may also require investment in volunteer education, particularly preparation for volunteering and to ensure that volunteers’ expectations are properly managed.”* (CV 2010, 31)

---

<sup>4</sup> Regarding the type of training often undertaken in relation to the workforce, the ABS identifies three categories: formal learning (i.e. activities that lead to a qualification); non-formal learning (i.e. structured activities that do not lead to a qualification), and; informal learning (i.e. unstructured activities outside of educational institutions such as on-the-job training) (ABS 2007b, p.29).

To put these issues into greater context, it is important to reflect upon the pressures that impact Australians who participate in the workforce—both those who perform paid work and those who perform unpaid work. Anecdotally, SSA is aware of an emerging hierarchy of commitments and activities and has subsequently developed the following hypothesis of internal categorisation and prioritisation that appears to form:

1. Family and caring (e.g. parental, relationship, extended family, other)
2. Paid workforce
3. Social (e.g. friendships, sport and exercise, entertainment)
4. Education (e.g. formal, non-formal, informal)
5. Volunteering

Although more work is still required in order to develop and confirm this proposed model, these categories are a starting point for illustrating the competing obligations of modern life and where volunteering may likely factor into the broader scheme of these activities. Indeed, the above ordering is no doubt subject to differences stemming from factors such as gender, age, employment status and educational attainment. However, for volunteering to take place in a sustainable fashion, it will ideally have minimal impact on the comparatively higher-order elements of any given individual. Similar concerns arise regarding organisations building in education and training that is relevant to one’s volunteer activities. In order for education and training to be appealing, useful and worthwhile, it too will need to have minimal impact on other aspects of one’s spectrum of commitments.

Further to the pressures that impact workforce participants, additional context regarding the need for culture change can also be identified through examining the motivations and expectations people have for volunteering. Once again, the eight categories offered below (Table 1) have been compiled from common motivations and expectations uncovered through a literature survey of volunteer strategies and statistical documents.

**Table 1: Finding motivations and expectations of volunteers**

<b>Fun</b>	Being active and energetic, finding an outlet for enthusiasm, making new friends, social contact.
<b>Family</b>	Supporting a family member’s activities or an issue arising from their experiences.
<b>Faith</b>	Contributions stemming from religious beliefs and community connections.
<b>Fulfilment</b>	Personal satisfaction, belief for a cause, making a difference, building self-confidence.
<b>Feeling included</b>	Contributing to an organisation, giving something back to the community, feeling needed and useful.
<b>Fair treatment</b>	Wanting to help others and being a team member in that process.
<b>Focusing skills</b>	Sharing talents, abilities and experiences in a targeted fashion, keeping skills relevant, getting closer to the activity of an organisation.
<b>Further development</b>	Learning new skills, gaining training, exploring career opportunities.

Though the balance of these elements will be different with each individual, it is interesting to note that the higher-order factors competing for time and attention with volunteering (i.e. family and caring, paid workforce, social and education) can also be the very aspects that serve to motivate people into volunteering. So the key to managing our human resources—

that is both paid employees and unpaid volunteers—is taking a ‘whole person’ approach to the individuals we have at our disposal. This begins with a process of finding out one’s motivations and expectations before probing for an understanding of the competing pressures of everyday life. In other words, it’s a ‘work-life balance’ issue—especially in regional areas where volunteer rates and involvements typically increase (ABS 2007a, p.45).

Part of the problem with the way the workforce interacts with and involves volunteers is that the term “volunteer” itself is often misconstrued as a workforce status—that is to say that being a volunteer is akin to being either employed, unemployed or not in labour force (including stay-at-home parents, students and retirees). This is, however, flawed logic as volunteering is not an activity that necessarily prevents us from falling into these categories. For example, there are volunteer rates available for the employed (36.6%), the unemployed (26.4%) and those not in the labour force (29.7%) (ABS 2007a, p.20).

Investigating other prominent pressures on the workforce (Table 2), sport and physical recreation organisations post some of the largest volunteering figures for parents in couple families with children under 15 years of age (ibid, pp.50-51). This is further reinforced by statistics showing that the dominant age group for sport and physical recreation volunteers is between 35 and 49 years, as well as the current median ages of new parents—30.7 for mothers and 33.1 for fathers (ABS 2007a, p.47; 2009a, p.27). Additional figures suggest that this pattern of volunteering is well established in sport and physical recreation as 71.0% of current volunteers report that their parents also performed voluntary work (ABS 2009b, p.29).

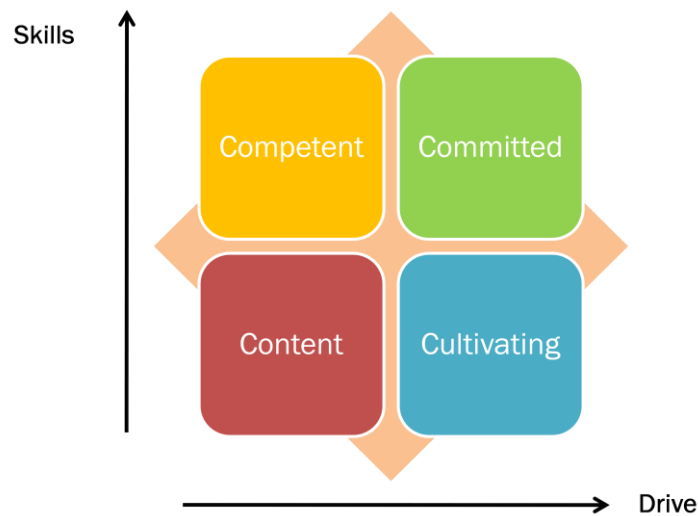
**Table 2: Probing for context of volunteering**

Pressure	Context	Reasoning
Family	Parents	Involvement in children’s afternoon and/or weekend sporting activities.
Work	Pathways	Up-skilling/re-skilling towards a desired job or career—practicing and developing skills for a current or intended context.
Social	Participation	Contributing to the community.
Education	Progression	Personal and/or professional development.

The point to be made here is that no volunteer is ‘just a volunteer’. Following on from this, the next step is to consider the context in which individuals could be best placed (in an organisation) and best matched to a volunteer position based on their motivations, expectations and external commitments. The following model (Figure 1) illustrates SSA’s hypothesis of segmenting the volunteer cohort by the skill level they currently possess and wield (in relation to their volunteer duties) versus the drive they demonstrate to learn, develop and further contribute to their volunteering. The result is four proposed cohorts:

1. Those who are on the low side of the skill spectrum and are less driven to progress as a volunteer have been described as **content** and better suited to less intensive roles. In addition to expecting *fair treatment*, motivations may stem from *fun* and *feeling included* and may be related back to a work-life context of *participation*. However, it is also likely that this cohort may be volunteering out of obligation (i.e. *parents*).
2. Volunteers who are keen to learn and grow through their unpaid activities and are on the lower end of the skill spectrum have been described as people with a focus on **cultivating** skills and experiences. Most likely to be students and mature-age people interested in up-skilling, this cohort is governed by *pathways* and *progression*, with

**Figure 1: Contextualising volunteers via segmentation (hypothesis)**



motivations of *further development* and *focusing skills*.

3. People who clearly demonstrate a high level of skill in relation to their volunteering activities yet lack the drive to continue learning or take on more responsibility have been described as **competent**. Common motivations of this cohort will likely include *fulfilment* and *feeling included*, with an emphasis on a felt need to apply their skills and ‘give back’ to others (i.e. *participation*).
4. Finally, individuals who possess skills at the higher end of the spectrum and are dedicated to their volunteering, organisation and/or community have been described as **committed**. These volunteers may be ideal for board and/management positions as the basis for their volunteering will likely stem from a larger number of motivating and contextual factors (in comparison to the other cohorts).

### **Paid versus Unpaid**

Further to misunderstandings of the term “volunteer” is a recurring issue that people who supply unpaid labour of some kind do not necessarily identify or report themselves as a volunteer. While this issue does raise some methodological concerns for collecting accurate data on volunteering—especially through self-reported measures—it also serves to draw attention to other aspects of volunteering that assist in distilling and articulating what this activity truly represents.

Firstly, volunteering is an action that stems from a generosity of spirit and a desire to help others—it is not a status. Volunteering is concerned with demonstrating a capacity to give by applying one’s skills to a cause. It is fed by a passion, one that can strongly contribute to sustained and continued periods of volunteerism. Finally, volunteering is always a two-way street—it is a reciprocal relationship whereby benefits to the volunteer are likely to be intrinsically linked to their motivations for volunteering. This final point highlights that volunteering is not simply people helping another. More aptly, it is people helping *each* other.

In light of the comparisons and contrasts presented above, this paper now investigates:

1. What makes these two cohorts (paid and unpaid) different, and
2. In light of these differences, to what extent should they be treated differently?

**Table 3: Common differences between the paid and unpaid workforces**

<b>Employed</b>	<b>Volunteers</b>
Paid (with benefits)	Unpaid
Funding own livelihood	Contributing to the livelihoods of others
Confined to weekdays	Confined to weeknights and weekends
May volunteer outside of work hours	May work when not volunteering

Focussing on sport and recreation, some of the common differences are actually complimentary (Table 3). In other words, these characteristics are not mutually exclusive—rather they may well be describing one person who is operating in two different labour capacities and using the same skills on both occasions. Conversely, there are also many similarities that occur between these two working cohorts (Table 4).

**Table 4: Common similarities between the paid and unpaid workforces**

Existing commitments to activities and people outside of work
Some level of induction/orientation and continued management is required
The same quality of skills is needed in order to perform a set of specified tasks
Achievements should be recognised to some extent
Some degree of training will likely take place

Ultimately, paid and unpaid workers are not so dissimilar that it is necessary to enact such a pronounced difference in the way organisations treat, manage and train volunteers. Therefore, SSA is seeking to rectify this problem and positively affect culture change by encouraging the adoption of commonplace management practices from human resources (Table 5).

**Table 5: Relating to volunteer via embracing approaches from the paid sector**

<b>Respect</b>	Accord volunteers the same level of respect as employees. Design and describe job positions or roles while also allowing room for flexibility.
<b>Recruit</b>	Interview volunteers just as you would for someone you are paying—try to get the most appropriate people for the positions available.
<b>Run training</b>	Investigate skills gaps and existing skills that can be further developed and facilitate this process—particularly for those who are interesting in training.
<b>Review</b>	Leadership and management are vital—support and evaluate them during their tenure by keeping communication channels open.
<b>Reimburse</b>	For out-of-pocket expenses associated with carrying out their volunteer duties (e.g. travel, meals, special clothing/equipment, etc.)
<b>Retain</b>	Tailor-make a strategy that engages with people’s motivations for volunteering.
<b>Reciprocate<sup>5</sup></b>	Tailor-make a strategy that recognises/rewards in a manner that suits your volunteers.
<b>Refer</b>	Put in a good word for your volunteers (i.e. referee on résumé)—especially for young people where this is a likely motivation for volunteering during student years.

<sup>5</sup> For a range of ideas, see Volunteering Australia’s *101 Top Tips to Recognise Volunteers* (2009a): [http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/html/s02\\_article/article\\_view.asp?art\\_id=2573&nav\\_cat\\_id=171&nav\\_to\\_p\\_id=61](http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/html/s02_article/article_view.asp?art_id=2573&nav_cat_id=171&nav_to_p_id=61).

## Summary and conclusions

The culture of managing volunteers needs to change significantly and reflect more of the practices and behaviours that are commonplace in the commercial working environment. On some level, not-for-profit organisations need to be operated like functioning businesses and part of this should incorporate a typical human resources approach to those who volunteer their services free of charge. Moreover, it is apparent that paid employees and unpaid volunteers have many similarities in: 1) their motivations and expectations for their positions; 2) the provisions they require in order to fulfil those positions needs, as well as; 3) the quality of skills necessary in order to satisfactorily perform the duties of those positions.

The main difference between these two workforce cohorts that needs to be acknowledged is, of course, employees receive remuneration. In place of the absence of financial recognition or reward for one's commitment and performance in a volunteer role, those who utilise and co-ordinate volunteers must adapt their leadership approach and champion the cause of recognition or rewards that tap into one's motivations for volunteering. While the reciprocal nature of volunteering ensures that unpaid workers are provided with some inherent benefit at a base level, organisations that rely on and truly value the contributions of volunteers cannot afford to be complacent.

Volunteer-utilising organisations (VUOs) need to make a concerted effort to retain their unpaid workers and provide a functioning, co-operative and worthwhile experience for all parties involved (i.e. employees, volunteers and the community). Individual motivations and issues of work-life balance impact on volunteering roles, so genuine overtures need to be made towards embracing volunteers in a 'whole person' fashion. Volunteers cannot and should not be thought of as a completely separate status of worker. Instead, volunteers are more truly defined on an individual basis by a set of characteristics. Consequently, this paper proposes a four-step strategy to guide the process of unearthing these characteristics in people who volunteer and to assist in better integrating these people into the organisations for which they volunteer.

Keeping on topic with identifying and singling out characteristics in order to achieve a strong match between volunteers, their unpaid roles and their organisation, this process has been dubbed the FPCR (or "**f**inger**p**icker") strategy:

1. **Find** their motivations and expectations for volunteering.
  - What are their triggers for volunteering?
  - What do they anticipate for this experience?
2. **Probe** for competing pressures and more detailed context for their volunteering.
  - What else is going on in their everyday lives?
  - How may this affect their ability to volunteer?
3. **Consider** their levels of skills and drive in relation to their volunteer roles.
  - Where can they be best placed in your organisation at this point?
  - Where is there scope for them to continue to play a role in the future?
4. **Relate** to their situation via commonplace approaches from human resources.
  - What will make this volunteering experience function smoothly?
  - What will retain our volunteers and see them return for repeated involvement?

Upon taking this 'whole person' or 'work-life balance' approach towards understanding volunteers, SSA argues that—in comparison to the paid workforce—volunteers are equally in

need of focused job roles, decisive leadership and recognition of their efforts. Though many of the ideas in this paper have been conveyed before by numerous organisations, there is still much work that needs to be done.

SSA will continue to develop greater understanding of this pertinent issue by testing our theories and producing research reports that further explore the idiosyncrasies of the volunteer cohort and unravel the relationship between volunteerism and productivity. In doing so, SSA will be consulting with industry as well as establishing strong networks and co-operative partnerships with other organisational bodies involved with and dedicated to improving workplace culture for volunteers.

Finally, while much of this work overlaps with sections G, H and I of the *Volunteering Research Framework* (VA 2005b, pp.8-10), SSA invites others to extend this vision to another area of inquiry—volunteering in the workforce. More specifically, SSA is interested in investigating the following six items:

- quantifying volunteers by industry and subdivision
- contextualising voluntary contributions in relation to workforce participation and productivity
- recognising the quality of skills required for a role rather than focusing on the context of the worker providing the skills (i.e. paid or unpaid)
- championing the relevance of training and development for volunteers
- developing and testing research-based segmentation models, and
- discussing the effects of work-life balance.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to the countless stakeholders who have engaged in discussing these issues with Service Skills Australia throughout 2010.

## **REFERENCES**

Australian Bureau of Statistics, (2007a) *4441.0 – Voluntary Work, Australia, 2006*.

(2007b) “Explanatory Notes,” in *4229.0 – Adult Learning, Australia, 2006-07*, pp.28-36.

(2009a) *3301 – Births, Australia, 2008*.

(2009b) *4440.0.55.001 – Volunteers in Sport, Australia, 2006*.

(2010) *6202.0 – Labour Force, Australia, Jul 2010*.

Australian Sports Commission, (2000) *Volunteer Management Program: Volunteer management; A guide to good practice*.

Centre for Volunteering, The, (2010a) *The Supply and Demand of Volunteers in the Not-for-Profit sector of New South Wales*.

(2010b) *Recognising and Awarding Volunteers*  
([http://volunteering.com.au/working\\_with\\_volunteers/volunteer\\_management/recognising\\_volunteers.asp](http://volunteering.com.au/working_with_volunteers/volunteer_management/recognising_volunteers.asp))

Commonwealth of Australia (2010) *Intergenerational Report 2010: Australia to 2050; Future challenges*

Hillary Commission, (1997) *Running Sport: Recruiting and retaining volunteers*.

National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, (2004) *Passions, People and Appreciation: Making volunteering work for young people*.

Queensland Fitness, Sport and Recreation Skills Alliance, (2010) "The Focus is on Volunteers," in *Fitness, Sport and Recreation Industry Skills Report*, pp.21-23.

Service Skills Australia, (2010) *Getting on Track for Change: A workforce development strategy for the sport and recreation industry*.

Sport and Recreation New Zealand, (2006) *Finding and keeping volunteers: What the research tells us*.

Victoria Department of Planning and Community Development, (2009) *Victoria's Volunteering Strategy 2009*.

Volunteering Australia, (2005a) *Information Sheet: Model code of practice for organisations involving volunteer staff*.

(2005b) *Volunteering Research Framework*.

(2006) *Information Sheet: Tips for involving volunteers*.

(2008) *What every volunteer needs: A mix of information, training and education*.

(2009a) *101 Top Tips to Recognise Volunteers*.

(2009b) *National Survey of Volunteering Issues 2009*.

Western Australia Department of Sport and Recreation, (2004) *Clubs' Guide to Volunteer Management*.