Volunteer workers: on the margin of the industrial relations system?

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Abstract

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Introduction

The scope of enquiry in industrial relations has broadened over the last 50 years from blue-collar occupations in extractive and production industries, and also included a broader range of issues. Nonetheless, the central focus has always been workers receiving wages or salaries. A substantial proportion of economic activity – the work performed by volunteers – has remained, therefore, outside the scope of industrial relations. This is a serious omission, because volunteers share most of the characteristics of employees, interact with, and influence the working conditions of paid employees, and are integral to the operation of many organisations – not least trade unions and employer associations.

This paper represents a first attempt at raising some of the industrial relations and HRM issues created by a volunteer work force. We begin by describing the volunteer labour force and, in the second half of the paper, raise some issues as they affect industrial relations.

Volunteers in Australia

The size and nature of volunteer work in Australia

The management of voluntary organisations and the delivery of their programs and services are reliant upon the involvement and commitment of a large number of volunteers and a smaller, but increasing, number of paid staff. The Sydney 2000 Olympics, which had a volunteer work force of 47,000, drew attention to the role of volunteers. These high-profile volunteers are only a tiny proportion of the total volunteer labour force.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, volunteer work makes an important contribution to national life as well as meeting community needs. At the "same time it develops and reinforces social networks and cohesion." (ABS, 1995. Cat. No. 4441.0, p. 1). Volunteers contribute their time to a broad range of organisations in communities throughout Australia. Sport, recreation, hobby, welfare, health, education, youth, emergency services, religious, arts, culture, environmental, professional, business and union organisations are amongst the many fields in which

organisational volunteering takes place.

The characteristics of volunteers themselves also vary a great deal. Rates of volunteering are different between age groups, sex, birthplace, occupation, labour force status, and geographical region. Volunteers perform a broad range of activities for community organisations which include, but are not limited to, management and committee work, fund raising, transport, officiating, coaching or teaching, repairs and maintenance, and food service and preparation.

Defining volunteering

At face value volunteering is a simple enough notion the giving of one's time for the benefit of others. However, it is a difficult concept to define in clear and unambiguous terms. Cnaan, Handy & Wadsworth (1996) suggest that many would-be survey respondents, when confronted with the question of whether they have ever volunteered, experience a dilemma because they were unsure as to whether the work they were doing falls within the meaning of the term. Cnaan et al. (1996) argued that it was critical to "delineate the boundaries of the term volunteer" (p. 380) and thus focus its meaning rather than allow the term to remain "a catch-all for a wide range of non salaried activities" (p.365). Arai (1997) argued that for "theory and practice to continue to be relevant, we must continue to redefine the concept of volunteering and the frameworks we use to understand this unique form of human action." (p. 19).

Volunteering Australia defines a volunteer as a person who chooses to contribute their time, skills and experience, for no payment (other than reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses), to benefit the community.² However, this definition does not take into account whether volunteering is formal (e.g. an official position within an organisation), informal within an organisation (e.g. lending a hand) or informal and outside of an organisation (helping a friend or neighbour). Arai (1997, p. 20) suggested that "volunteers are defined as people who engage in formal volunteering activities (i.e. within associations) as opposed to individuals activities of an informal nature (e.g. helping a friend)". For its 1995

survey of volunteer work, the ABS defined a volunteer as "someone who willingly gave unpaid help in the form of time, service or skills, through an organisation or group". (ABS, 1995. Cat. No. 4441.0 p. 31).

An important aspect of volunteering is freedom of choice or willingness to give help. People who feel obligated or coerced to volunteer may not be as willing to contribute their time, skills or experience as someone who freely chooses to volunteer. Cnaan, et al. (1996) have identified four key dimensions of volunteering (see Table 1). Within organisational settings, volunteers may vary in terms of the amount of free choice they feel that have exercised in volunteering and whether they expect to be reimbursed for out-of-pocket expenses. Depending upon their relationship to other members in an organisation, the intended beneficiaries of their volunteer work may be oneself, close friends or family, whereas other volunteers may not have such a direct connection to an organisation.

Volunteering in the Australian community

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in the 12 months ended June 1995, 2.64 million Australians, representing approximately 19% of the Australian population aged 15 years and over, contributed some form of voluntary work through an organisation or group. (ABS, 1995. Cat. No. 4441.0). The majority of volunteers were found in sport/recreation/hobby organisations (828,200 or 31.4%), welfare/community organisations (748,700 or 29.7%), education/training/youth development organisations (668,000 or 25.3%) and religious organisations (466,100 or 17.7%). The ABS survey reported that about one-third of volunteers (34%) worked for more than one organisation.

The rate of volunteering was highest for persons aged 35-44 (27.4%) and lowest for 15-24 year olds (11.2%). Males (16.7%) were less likely to volunteer for organisations than were females (21.3%). Persons born in Australia (20.9%) or born outside Australia in main English speaking countries (20.0%) volunteered at twice the rate of persons born outside Australia in other countries (9.2%). Unemployed persons (14.5%) had lower rates of volunteering than those not in the labour force (17.0%) and those who were employed full- or part-time (20.6%). Rates of volunteering varied by geographic from a low of 12.2% in Sydney to a high of 32.7% in the area of South Australia outside Adelaide.

Hours of voluntary work

The impact of volunteer work on the economy and the labour market is potentially quite substantial. In contrast to work organisations, the hours that volunteers work are largely unregulated and frequently no records are kept within voluntary organisations. According to the ABS, the median number of hours worked by volunteers in the 12 months to June 1995 was 75 (ABS Cat. No. 4441.0). With a median of 60 hours, the sport/recreation/hobby and arts/culture sectors had the highest median number of hours worked over a 12-month period. The law/justice/political sector recorded the lowest median (27 hours). Because volunteers could work in more than one field, the overall median (75 hours) is higher than the median for a particular field.

Table 1
Dimensions and categories of volunteering

Dimension	Categories
Free choice	free will (ability to
	voluntarily choose) relatively uncoerced
	obligation to volunteer
Remuneration	none at all
	none expected
	expenses reimbursed
	stipend/low pay
Structure	formal
	informal
Intended beneficiaries	others/strangers
	friends/relatives
	oneself

Source: Cnaan et al. (1996). Defining Who Is a Volunteer: Conceptual and Empirical Considerations. Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 25(3): 364-383.

Using the sport and recreation sector as an example, it is possible to examine the impact of volunteer work. Sport Industry Australia (www.sportforall.com.au, 25 October, 2000) estimated that the total value of the work of the 828,200 volunteers reported by the ABS was \$1.6 billion for the 1995-96 financial year. A study by DASETT (1989) estimated that approximately 1.45 million volunteers provided 165.5 million hours of service in the delivery of sport and recreation over a 12month period. DASETT estimated the economic value of the volunteer labour at \$2 billion annually, which equated to an average saving of \$330 on sport and recreation expenditure per Australian household. In contrast to the 1.45 million volunteers, the 1996 census counted 217,000 people who had their main job associated with sport and recreation activities. Of those, 82,000 persons had sport and recreation occupations and 135,000 persons worked in other occupations within the sport and recreation sector (ABS, 1997. Cat. No. 4156.0, 1997).

Types of volunteer work

Much of the work that is undertaken by volunteers bears some resemblance to paid work. Similarly, volunteers are often required to be multi-skilled, to work in a number of roles within one organisation and across two or more voluntary organisations. According to the ABS (1995.Cat No. 4441.0) volunteers are predominantly involved in fundraising (46.5%) and management or committee work (40.8%). More than one in five volunteers are involved in preparing and serving food (29.1%), teaching/instruction (26.5%), day to day organising/ coordinating/ supervising (24.3%), administration/clerical work (22.8%), transporting

people/ goods (20.5%), and providing information

(20.3%).

Issues and concerns related to volunteer work

Volunteers often incur personal expenses in the conduct of their volunteer work. In a workplace, employees would normally expect to be reimbursed for personal expenses incurred in the conduct of their work. Almost three quarters of volunteers (72.6%) who had incurred an expense either did not know that they were entitled to be reimbursed, had never asked for reimbursement or did not know whether reimbursement was available (ABS, 1995. Cat. No. 4441.0).

Aside from reimbursement for expenses, almost twothirds of volunteer workers (64.2%) had no concerns about their volunteer work (ABS Cat. No. 4441.0, 1995). Of the one-third of volunteers that expressed concerns, the most prominent concerns were lack of support (11.6%), legal responsibility (10.5%), the amount of time required (10.4%), and travel/ distance/ location (7.3%).

Volunteers and employment systems

The management of voluntary organisations is becoming increasingly complex due to a range of influences including the demands of members, government policy initiatives, contractual obligations, and incursions from the legal system (Cuskelly & Auld, 1999). Volunteers can find it difficult to cope with the demands of successfully managing voluntary organisations, particularly those that are under increasing pressure to be more professional in their approach to service delivery and more accountable to a widening circle of stakeholders. Voluntary organisations are increasingly reliant on paid staff to realise strategically important goals and to manage their day-to-day operations. As staff are employed, relationships between volunteers and paid employees become critical to the success of voluntary organisations. However, it has long been argued that volunteers do not integrate into organisational systems as completely as do employees (Simon, 1957). The relationship between volunteers and employees can break down as the two parties have different expectations of one another and of their own relationships with the voluntary organisation.

Although volunteers have no contract of employment, and thus remain outside the traditional industrial relations system, many of the problems that arise in traditional industrial relations systems affect the management of volunteers and the volunteers themselves. Beyond this, many volunteers interact with the industrial relations system, or even play a key role in it. Many industrial relations organisations are staffed by volunteers, or even run by volunteers. Because volunteers work alongside paid staff they may directly or indirectly influence the working conditions of those employees.

Volunteers as "employees"

It is widely observed that employees have many motivations for working (e.g. Fox, 1971; Whyte, 1961). Pay is a primary motivation for many people but the other rewards from working play a role in the

decision to work for some people and, certainly, play a major role in determining which jobs people prefer. If we leave aside the issue of pay, the motivations of volunteers and regular employees are much the same and include companionship, status, job satisfaction, structuring the week, and various perquisites etc.

Volunteers, however, have more scope to vary their hours of work in that they perform at their own pleasure rather than that of the employer. Further, with pay not being an issue, their bargaining power may be enhanced. Whether this is the case or not depends on the supply of volunteers. Where there are more people volunteering than are required, the organisation's leaders can be more selective with respect to the conditions and privileges available to volunteers. On the other hand, where few are willing to volunteer the organisation may be forced to provide better conditions and be more flexible about hours.

Employees in conventional jobs usually derive some satisfaction from their work other than the pay packet. This "psychic income" is greater in some jobs than in others, and is more important to some people than others (Handy, 1985). In the case of volunteers, this psychic income is usually the motivation for volunteering. It is also more important for some volunteers than it is for others.

The relations that apply between the non-monetary aspects of employment and motivation thus become starker in the context of a volunteer labour force. Because of its importance in the volunteering context, changes in psychic income can act as a powerful motivator or demotivator. Thus an improvement in the condition of volunteers may increase their commitment. Conversely, a perceived deterioration in conditions may lead to a reduced level of commitment, or even a withdrawal of effort or resignation. Volunteers' expectations will be determined by their experiences elsewhere, for example in other volunteer organisations, but also by their experiences of paid employment. These questions of "relativity" will also apply within organisations. For example, if certain volunteers are given privileges which others are not, this may demotivate the latter. This became an issue at the recent Olympics when volunteers perceived that some rewards and incentives were distributed inequitably. All volunteers were provided with uniforms to be worn when on duty at the Games. However, a small proportion of the volunteers did not receive a watch as part of their uniform package. As a consequence, some volunteers felt that they were deprived of something they felt was an entitlement for volunteering for the Games.

HRM of volunteers

The problems of finding volunteers, motivating and training them are not dissimilar to the problems of recruiting, motivating and training employees. In small organisations, volunteers are usually found by word of mouth; from parents, from clients or by their immediate

friends and acquaintances. Their friends and relatives, in one sense, vet these volunteers, and the volunteers usually have a clear idea of what

their role will be. This informal recruitment is similar to that used in extended internal labour markets (Mainwaring, 1984) and often provides a good fit between the role and the person appointed to it. In larger organisations, where there is a corps of volunteers, the leaders of the organisation may not know many of the people who volunteer (although these informal networks will often be very important). The problem for the officers responsible for recruitment is how to determine which volunteers are suitable. This problem becomes even more difficult when the supply of volunteers is somewhat limited. It then becomes the counterpart of the problem a manager faces when none of the applicants for an advertised position match the profile of the desired employee. Do they take a risk with a less than suitable person? Do they take them on but adjust the role to match their capabilities? Or do they make do without filling the vacancy?

On the face of it, volunteers are motivated; they have chosen voluntarily to make themselves available. It is not necessarily the case, however, that they are motivated to do the same tasks as other volunteers, nor in the same way. Just as paid employees may perceive their jobs differently, or display clear task preference, it is the same with volunteers. The task of managing volunteers is thus more difficult than managing paid employees. The manager has to rely almost entirely on persuasion, and moral commitment. There are few threats which a manager can bring to bear on volunteers who are unproductive, or who persist with inappropriate forms of behaviour.

If the organisation is to get the best work from volunteers the volunteers may need to be trained, yet few volunteers receive any formal training. In organisations that have large numbers of volunteers, it is often important that the volunteers all perform in the same way, maintain the same standards, observe the same protocols and provide a comparable service to clients. This is not easy to achieve. Few organisations that employ volunteers can afford to provide a systematic training programme. Many such organisations are run by volunteers, and there is no agreed standard of performance. Further, many volunteers do not want to undergo training; they want to get on with the job.

It goes without saying that where volunteers are important for the success of an organisation, retaining the corps of volunteers is crucial. This is particularly the case where the level of skill or organisation-specific knowledge is high. The managers of volunteers do however face a more difficult problem than other managers do. Unless the labour market is very tight, a manager in a commercial operation can rely on economic factors to prevent a mass exodus by the labour force. Salary, superannuation, various perquisites, and inertia all conspire to keep the labour force in the firm. The manager of volunteers has few of these advantages. The volunteer labour force can quit without economic hardship. In fact they might improve their financial position since volunteering often imposes financial costs. The volunteer leader has to rely on commitment, altruism, and other attractions of the volunteer job

as well as inertia to keep volunteers.

An organisation with a volunteer labour force which endeavours to provide a high quality service to its clients needs to manage its performance. This means the performance of the volunteers must be evaluated and adjusted if necessary. Volunteers may not accept this. From their point of view, they are giving their time and labour voluntarily and if this is seen as not good enough then they may prefer to spend their time elsewhere. Thus, a manager of volunteers has to be even more sensitive to the feelings of the volunteers than a manager of paid staff.

Volunteers do not have a union. Nonetheless, in common with workers in non-unionised workplaces, informal unions, or union activity, might arise. Where there are shared grievances there might be forms of collective action taken to improve volunteers' conditions. For example, volunteers concerned about unsafe working conditions might withdraw their labour until the problem is rectified. The capacity for collective action will depend on the same factors that govern collective action in commercial or government workplaces. Similarly the capacity of volunteers to take action will be governed by similar factors. Volunteers who are seriously unhappy with their conditions may exercise their "exit" ((Freeman and Medoff, 1984) option rather than remain and endeavour to improve condition. On the other hand, if they believe that conditions can be improved, and have sufficient cohesion, they may attempt to achieve change while remaining in the organisation. Restrictions on output, and the work-torule are strategies available to volunteers, as is the mass resignation. A traditional strike is not impossible. Where collective action is difficult to achieve, individual resistance may manifest itself in the form of turnover, absenteeism or minor forms of rule-breaking. Because volunteers can choose exit behaviour without economic costs, extreme forms of resistance such as sabotage are likely to be rare.

While many volunteers are enthusiastic, it does not necessarily follow that they will perform well. The most enthusiastic may be motivated to volunteer by very individualistic aims – aims which are incongruent with the aims of the organisation or the needs of the client. The volunteer may be concerned with their own status, a desire to exercise power (which may be denied in other facets of their life) or to exclude a particular type of client. In cases such as these, or where the volunteer does not achieve an acceptable level of competence, the manager of volunteers is in an analogous position to an employer who has an unsatisfactory worker. If a volunteer is dismissed, there is no redress available from an industrial tribunal (although action could be taken under anti-discrimination legislation if discrimination on prohibited grounds could be proved). Nonetheless, the manager will be conscious of the effect on clients and the potential pool of volunteers. While a manager of volunteers may follow the accepted industrial procedure of warnings and a chance to improve, it is unlikely that, having done so, the effect on clients or

potential volunteers will be different. In practice, some managers are reluctant to dismiss poorly performing volunteers – the "horrible tuckshop

person who has been there for years" only survives because the managers responsible are reluctant to confront her and her behaviour.

OHS

Occupational health and safety is undoubtedly the area where the differences between volunteers and paid employees are the least. Volunteers are as likely to have accidents, or cause injury to fellow workers "on the job" as any other worker. Their risk may even be higher if they have received less training than paid employees have. In most states, the relevant legislation excludes volunteers because they are not employed under a contract of service. The Queensland legislation defines workers in such a way that volunteers would meet the definition of "a worker" (Workplace Health and Safety Act 1995 (Qld) s.11) but this confers no special protection beyond that of any other person present at the workplace. Volunteers are covered by workplace health and safety legislation in that the statutory duty of care obliges employers, and others in charge of a workplace (e.g. contractors) to provide workplaces that are safe from injury or illness for people coming onto the workplace (e.g. Occupational Health and Safety Act 1983 (NSW) s.16)). Volunteers are also covered by the common law duty of care which obliges a person to take reasonable care to protect another from foreseeeable

Volunteers are not covered by compulsory workers' compensation systems. However, public or private insurance is available. The Queensland workers' compensation legislation excludes volunteers from its definition of "a worker" (e.g. WorkCover Queensland Act 1996 (Qld) s.12.(1)). The same legislation has a subdivision which provides for statutory organisations and voluntary bodies to take out insurance With WorkCover Queensland for their volunteers (Div.3,Subdiv.1). This cover provides compensation that is similar in most respects to compensation as a worker. Despite this, it appears that insurance is mainly offered to voluntary fire brigades, ambulance services, and counterdisaster organisations. Many voluntary organisations do not take out insurance.

Volunteers v paid staff

Most volunteers work in organisations that have paid staff. In voluntary organisations, the number of paid staff may be quite small and focussed on particular segments of the operation, such as accounting and administration. In non-voluntary organisations, it is the volunteers who will be in a minority. Most likely, they will be limited to a few minor functions. For example, in a hospital where most of the work is done by professional staff and by other paid employees, volunteers perform marginal functions such as shopping for patients or distributing reading materials. The interactions between volunteers and paid employees will be minimal in some organisations but substantial in others. Nonetheless, there are potential areas of conflict between volunteers and paid staff. Some of these will be the normal conflicts that occur in a workplace between

employees or between employees and employers. Others will arise from the different motivations and different employment contracts of volunteers and paid staff.

Employees that have to work with volunteers encounter a more complex set of relationships at work than would otherwise be the case. For one thing, they face the fundamental difficulty that they may be compared to the volunteers whose motivation for working is quite different. For the paid employees, the job may be primarily a means of supporting themselves and any dependants. While they may identify with the aims of the organisation, they may not do so to the same extent of the volunteers. They may be alienated by various aspects of the unique working environment. The zeal of some volunteers may exacerbate this. As we discuss below, these problems can be particularly severe when the organisation is run by volunteers. Employees sometimes complain about the unrealistic demands placed upon them by members of voluntary boards.

The tensions become greater when there is an insufficiently clear demarcation between the tasks to be done by volunteers and those to be done by paid staff. Paid staff can be resentful if they feel that they "have to be volunteers too" and exceed the boundaries of their job description or work extended hours without overtime pay. Volunteers, on the other hand, are sometimes resentful when paid staff place demands on them to complete tasks, especially when a task is perceived as a functional responsibility of an employee. Tension between volunteers and paid staff may be exacerbated where the skill level of volunteers is not as high as that of the paid employees. Generally, paid employees feel that volunteers cannot always be relied upon to complete tasks or meet deadlines.

Many organisations that rely on volunteers have limited funding. This produces a pressure to keep wages lower. Beyond this, though, management sometimes takes the attitude that because the work is important and most of the labour is provided free by volunteers, the paid staff should be prepared to work under comparable conditions. Those who manage volunteers in poorly funded organisations, particularly charities, are often not well paid in comparison with other managers and they expect the other staff to work for even less. The pressure on wages is brought about, in part, because the management regard the paid staff as another type of volunteer. They may work in the voluntary organisation because they are committed to its aims, but there is a limit to how much they can sacrifice for the organisation. If they are in a low paid occupation, anything less than the market rate for the job would fail to meet their living expenses.

Volunteers as managers

Volunteers manage many voluntary organisations. It is inevitable that the competence of the voluntary managers will be variable. Some of these people will also be managers in industry or the public sector. Those

individuals will bring those skills to the voluntary work. They may also follow the accepted HRM procedures from their paid work.

The difficulty for employees and for other volunteers is that many voluntary managers will have no relevant management experience of any kind. Even where the volunteer managers do have experience in other sectors, they may choose to behave differently in the voluntary sector where they may believe that different values should apply, or where they do not feel constrained by the system of formal regulation of the industrial relations system.

Whatever the competence or performance of the voluntary managers, the differing status and responsibility of the managers, the paid employees and the other volunteers introduce a high level of complexity into the relationships. Even where the managers are professional staff, they and other employees are often directly responsible to voluntary board or committee members. Pearce (1993:177) contends that this can produce "tension ... between volunteer and employee co-workers" which tends to undermine the legitimacy of the others' efforts because of the differing relationships to the organisation.

Conclusion

Despite the substantial size of the voluntary sector in Australia, it rarely features in discussions of employment. This paper has attempted to demonstrate that there are a considerable number of employment issues that confront participants in the sector. Moreover, the sector is not isolated from what is the normal purview of industrial relations. Volunteers interact with paid staff and, in many cases, are the directors or managers of voluntary organisations.

Analysing the management of volunteer organisations can provide guidance for other managers, and analysing the experience of volunteers provides useful insights into the behaviour of workers in general. While this paper has indicated that managing volunteers is very similar to managing paid staff, the volunteer is usually in a superior bargaining position. Consequently the manager of volunteers has to be particularly sensitive to the feelings of the volunteers.

Volunteers work for free, therefore psychic income and symbolic rewards are very important. The manager of volunteers who ignores these does so at their peril. Pay is much less important in motivating employees than many conventional understandings suggest (Handy, 1985; Wootton, 1962). Managers of paid employees need to pay more attention to these aspects, rather than treating employees as economic rationalists. If managers treated their paid employees as if they were volunteers, we could have an improved set of relationships at work.

Notes

- 1 We wish to thank Loretta du Plevitz and Kaye Broadbent for advice and comments on the paper.
- 2 This excludes military volunteers (e.g., the Army Reserve) who receive wages for their service and whose conduct is regulated by military law. It also excludes work within families.

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