

What factors impact volunteer recruitment and retention in nonprofit organizations?

Several strong sources of evidence indicate that communication, role development, and training are all positively associated with the intent to continue volunteering.

- Satisfaction is strongly correlated with the intention to continue volunteering. Organizations that prioritize communication, clearly defined volunteer roles, and orientation and in-service training appear to have volunteers who are more satisfied with their work.
- The most effective communication appears to still allow for volunteer autonomy and takes volunteer ideas and opinions into account. Offering social opportunities with other volunteers and managers is also positively associated with satisfaction.

Strong evidence indicates that leadership styles can have an impact on volunteer satisfaction, with transformational leadership being strongly associated with intention to stay.

- Transformational leadership, as well as servant leadership, appears to be particularly associated with increases in volunteer satisfaction and subsequently volunteers' intention to stay with an organization.

Technology platforms can be effective in increasing volunteer recruitment but may be less effective for volunteer retention.

- Managers who used technology platforms for volunteer recruitment report success in accessing either a wider net of potential volunteers or an already existing pool of active volunteers.
- Some organizations reported higher rates of no-shows or last-minute dropouts from volunteers that used an app-based platform to sign up. Volunteer managers also felt they still needed to perform in-person screening, especially in social service organizations.

Purpose of this summary

This document summarizes the state of available evidence regarding what factors impact nonprofit organizations' ability to recruit and retain volunteers. It aims to answer the following questions:

1. What practices can managers implement to improve volunteer recruitment and retention in their organization?
2. What are the gaps in the current research on volunteer recruitment and retention?

What is meant by “volunteer”?

A volunteer generally refers to an individual who willingly participates in chosen helping activities without an expectation of payment or other compensation.

What is meant by “transformational leadership”?

“Transformational leadership” was first introduced as a concept by James MacGregor Burns in 1978 and is defined as the “the process in which ‘leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morale and motivation.’”¹ Transformational leaders act as role models for their followers and encourage identification with an organizational vision, foster task ownership based on individual strengths and weaknesses, and enhance motivation, morale, and performance.

What is meant by “servant leadership”?

The term “servant leadership” was coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in an essay published in 1970. This concept encourages leaders to focus on the growth and well-being of their communities. Servant leaders share power with others, put others' needs first, and encourage others to develop and perform to their own highest ability.²

What does the evidence show?

Several strong sources of evidence indicate that communication, role development, and training are all positively associated with the intent to continue volunteering.

- Forner et al. (2024) conducted a meta-analysis of predictors of volunteer turnover, focusing on five main categories: characteristics of the volunteer job, characteristics of the volunteer organization, volunteer contributions, characteristics of the individual volunteer, and motivation and job attitudes. The final sample included 117 independent studies. **The variables that appeared to be the strongest predictors of turnover included communication, organizational support, job satisfaction, affective commitment³, leader-member exchange, engagement, and organizational commitment.**
 - Different demographics appear to have different key factors influencing their turnover. The engagement-turnover dynamic is not as strong with female volunteers, indicating that **engagement is more important for male volunteers to encourage them to continue volunteering, and female volunteers were more likely to stay even when they were not as engaged. Satisfaction appeared to be less influential in retention of older volunteers as compared to younger volunteers.**

¹ Robers, N. C. (1985). Transforming leadership: A process of collective action. *Human Relations*, 38(11), 1023–1046. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/001872678503801103>

² Center for Servant Leadership. (2025). *What is servant leadership?* <https://greenleaf.org/what-is-servant-leadership/>

³ An individual's emotional attachment and identification with an organization.

- The authors differentiated between the intention to stay and the intention to leave and found that many predictors had opposite, and of similar strength, correlations between the intentions to leave and stay. This means that a given predictor that was strongly and positively associated with the intention to stay likely was also strongly and negatively associated with the intention to leave. Other predictors had strong correlations with one but not the other. For example, connectedness (the strength of meaningful, trusted, and supportive relationships that bind individuals to others and their community) was related to intention to stay but not intention to leave; autonomy in work design was strongly related to intention to stay but not leave; and organizational support was only moderately associated with intention to stay but was strongly associated with intention to leave.
 - The authors noted that **most of the studies only reported on turnover intentions, and only three studies included correlations of predictors and actual turnover behavior.**
- Einhorn (2018) conducted a review of 81 articles that tested the effectiveness of volunteer management practices. Three of the studies used longitudinal methods (measuring the same group of people over time), and most others used cross-sectional methods (assessing what already exists in a group without changing any variables). Most relied on self-reported surveys and convenience samples (choosing participants based on ease of access) of volunteers. Generally, **the studies found moderate to strong correlations between volunteer satisfaction and intent to remain with the organizations** but weak correlations between satisfaction and hours volunteered.
 - More specifically, one study found that satisfaction with communication correlated positively with general satisfaction which then also correlated with intent to remain and recruiting other volunteers. One study found that organizations that provided liability insurance for their volunteers scored higher on measures of success in recruitment and retention. **Volunteers who reported that their jobs were clearly defined were generally more satisfied and volunteered for a longer period.** Similarly, volunteers who reported that their jobs were high quality were also more satisfied with their work. One model, used across two studies, proposed **five task characteristics to use when designing good volunteer jobs: variety, carrying out a complete process, autonomy, task significance⁴, and receiving feedback.** In these studies, all five characteristics predicted satisfaction; task significance predicted intent to remain; and skill variety and autonomy predicted quality of work.
 - Regarding recruitment, studies found that matching recruitment messages to potential volunteers' motives made them more likely to volunteer. Specifically, **potential recruits were more open to committing to an organization where they anticipated feeling pride in the work and being treated with respect.** One study found that potential volunteers who were told there was a high need *and* were promised recognition committed to volunteering at higher rates and for more hours than if they were told that there was a high need or were promised recognition on their own. Similarly, three studies found that **more volunteer recognition activities were associated with fewer issues recruiting or retaining volunteers.**
 - In terms of retention, **orientation and training of new volunteers is correlated with higher levels of retention, more hours volunteered, and longer duration of volunteering.** This is consistent with both pre-service and in-service training. **Positive perceptions of supervision, communication, and support by volunteers were linked with more hours volunteered and being more likely to continue volunteering.** However, most of the studies that measured these outcomes used subjective measures of

⁴ "Task significance" is defined by Hackman and Oldham (1976) as the degree to which a task has substantial impact on the lives or work of other people.

volunteer perceptions, making it difficult to know details about what the most positive management actions were. Peer relationships appear to be an important factor as well, since **volunteers who reported positive relationships with other volunteers were more likely to volunteer more hours, do better work, and continue to volunteer.**

- Alfes et al. (2017) conducted a review of the ability-motivation-opportunity (AMO) model and its use in volunteer management in nonprofit organizations. The AMO model proposes that an HR system that focuses on ability to fulfill role requirements and motivation to engage and that creates opportunities for contribution best serves an organization. Ability-enhancing practices include development, selection, training, and recruitment.
 - One study of 652 nonprofit volunteers in this category found that volunteers were more attached to their program or job than to the broader organization. This led the researchers to suggest that recruitment efforts match volunteers based on the characteristics of specific programs rather than the larger organizational mission. Another study found that **matching volunteers appropriately to assignments was positively related to volunteer retention**; however, there was a lack of formal HR guidelines for this process across nonprofits, leading to inconsistent selection processes.
 - **Twelve different studies concluded that volunteer training is positively related to commitment and retention of volunteers.** Volunteers who were motivated by the ability to learn something new from volunteering had higher levels of commitment when provided with regular learning and development opportunities as compared to volunteers with other motivations. Motivation-enhancing practices include those related to intrinsic motivation (“actions undertaken because they are inherently interesting and/or satisfying”) and extrinsic motivation (behaviors “that are performed to obtain a separable outcome”) (p. 16). Intrinsic motivation is hard to change through organizational practices, but **ensuring that a volunteer’s role matches with their motivations, such as fulfilling the need to help others, can lead to lower turnover intentions and higher levels of volunteering.**
 - One study also found that **intangible rewards related to volunteering (e.g., feelings of satisfaction, improving the community) were rated higher than more tangible rewards.** The types of tangible rewards that were rated as desirable for volunteers across studies were thank-you events, opportunities for social interaction, thank-you notes, and small snacks.
 - Opportunity-enhancing practices are ones that use common volunteer motivations to foster a stronger identification with their work and the organization. Three studies found that enriched jobs (which “contain high levels of skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback”) enable higher performance by allowing volunteers to use their skills and fulfill motivations (p. 22). **Volunteers with enriched jobs were also more satisfied with their work and had higher intentions to remain.** Four studies found that autonomy is positively related to the number of hours volunteered. One study indicated that the ability for volunteers to have a relationship with the beneficiaries of their work was strongly related to satisfaction and commitment.
- Trent et al. (2020) conducted a survey with 171 volunteers from two Midwest nonprofits to analyze the effects of the perception of voice (upward communication) and organizational communication (downward communication) on engagement and commitment. **Results indicated that volunteers who felt they had opportunities for upward communication and those who were satisfied with the overall downward communication experienced higher levels of engagement in their work.** The positive relationship between both directions of communication and volunteer engagement grew as the level of training increased, meaning that organizations that provided more training and that had effective communication saw greater volunteer

engagement than those that had effective communication but lacked training. It also appeared that engagement fully mediated the relationships between both communication types and organizational commitment. This indicated that **when volunteers are happy with their level of voice in the organization and the efficacy of the organization's communication, they are more likely to increase their own engagement and become more committed.**

Strong evidence indicates that leadership styles can have an impact on volunteer satisfaction, with transformational leadership being strongly associated with intention to stay.

- Benevene et al. (2024) conducted a systematic literature review of various leadership styles and their impacts on volunteer retention as a factor of the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model. The JD-R model claims that “job resources, such as supportive and inspiring leadership, enhance employee engagement by fulfilling their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness” (p. 590). The literature search found 13 papers that met inclusion criteria. Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory, which emphasizes a two-way relationship rooted in mutual respect, trust, and resource exchange, was prominent in several articles. Transformational leadership, servant leadership, and ethical leadership⁵ were each discussed in at least one article. Two studies found that the quality of the LMX relationship directly influenced volunteer intention to remain with their organization. **Transformational and servant leadership were both positively associated with intention to stay.** Two papers identified specific leadership characteristics that were associated with both effective and non-effective volunteer leadership. **Positive leadership characteristics included “efficiency, effective and regular communication, organizational skills, passion, dedication, supportiveness, and the facilitation of volunteer growth”** (p. 598). Poor leadership practices were outlined as “a lack of organization, poor communication, and insufficient support for volunteers” (p. 598). Ethical and servant leadership's impacts appear to affect job satisfaction, which in turn impacts volunteer intention to stay rather than impacting intention to stay directly. Regarding the age of volunteers, **younger volunteers' satisfaction appears to be strongly influenced by their leader's esteem and respect for their skills when deciding to continue volunteering, while older volunteers see overall job satisfaction as more important.**
- Almas et al. (2020) conducted a survey with 417 nonprofit volunteers to analyze the effects of transformational leadership on volunteer satisfaction, organizational commitment, role identity⁶, and intention to remain. The nonprofit organizations represented include ones focusing on health, education, environment, social welfare, psychological services, sports, and immigration. Results indicated that **transformational leadership significantly positively predicted a volunteer's intention to remain.** Transformational leadership's effect on intention to remain was partially mediated by satisfaction, meaning that **it's possible that volunteers working with transformational leaders are more satisfied and that satisfaction then impacts their intent to remain.** However, satisfaction did not appear to influence intent to remain on its own but instead appears to be associated with improving retention through organizational commitment and role identity. Ultimately, the volunteers with the higher role identities were the same ones who had higher intention to remain long term.

Technology platforms can be effective in increasing volunteer recruitment but may be less effective for volunteer retention.

- Chui and Chan (2019) conducted in-depth interviews with staff of eight nonprofits in Hong Kong

⁵ The ability to inspire ethical behavior through example and communication.

⁶ A volunteer's understanding of the meaning and expectations of the role they play in an organization.

to assess their experiences using an app-based volunteer matching platform. The interviews focused on the role of volunteers in the organizations, motivations for adopting the app, how technology changed their volunteer management practices, and its effects and difficulties. **All the respondents stated that the app allowed their organization to broaden and diversify their volunteer pool, particularly with the ability to recruit younger volunteers.** Volunteer managers were also able to match jobs with specific volunteer interests and skills more precisely, particularly positions that otherwise may have needed to be hired (e.g., photographers or editors). **Most of the respondents reported that the app decreased the administrative burden of volunteer management.** However, volunteer accountability was a particular struggle, as there was an **increase in no-shows and last-minute dropouts.** Respondents believe that this is due to the reduction in effort volunteers need to put in to sign up for a role and therefore they feel less of an investment in following through. It was also **difficult to gauge volunteer quality through the app, so most organizations still used their existing in-person screening process** before onboarding, especially for organizations serving vulnerable populations. Because volunteers have so many options now readily available in the app, **organizations found retaining new volunteers recruited through the app difficult.** Frontline staff and long-term volunteers were generally hesitant to adopt the new app. Long-term volunteers particularly did not generally like the shift from the traditionally tight-knit community among volunteers.

- Prats López et al. (2024) assessed the efficacy and acceptability of VeleHanden, a crowdsourcing platform used by Dutch nonprofits in the cultural heritage sector who are mainly seeking to digitize historical sources. They interviewed 20 project managers who have been using the platform and analyzed data from VeleHanden on 102 projects and 8,768 active volunteers. There was a dichotomy in how project managers saw volunteers' desire to use the platform. They felt some volunteers would not want to use the platform because they would prefer to come into a physical location and benefit from social interaction, while others would prefer the platform because it allows them to volunteer from their homes at times when the archive may not be open.
 - **The most positive aspect of recruitment through the platform, as mentioned by the project managers, was the pre-existing pool of interested and active volunteers who could be re-engaged.** In fact, pre-existing volunteers made up an average of 60% of any given project's active volunteers. These experienced volunteers were also generally more active than first-time volunteers, as, **on average, 62% of project entries (a measure of participation rates) were submitted by pre-existing volunteers. Organizations with more than one project were able to retain about 15% of their volunteers from one project to the next,** but organizations with many projects were able to retain a higher percentage.
 - On the platform, each project has a dedicated forum that allows volunteers to ask questions or share information. Project managers saw this as the most important aspect of keeping volunteers engaged. When looking at response time, about half of the posts were answered within an hour, 13% were answered more than a day later, and 3% of posts were not answered within a week. **There was a negative correlation between response times in the forum and the number of entries for a project in a given week.** This could be due to volunteers needing to wait for an answer to a question to continue completing entries or because volunteers felt demotivated by the lack of engagement by project managers.
 - VeleHanden has a built-in reward points system that allows volunteers to earn a certain number of points per activity completed and shows leaderboards of volunteers with the highest number of points. Volunteers can also choose to cash in some of their points for a tangible reward, such as a book. **Analysis found that 75% of all points earned remained unused, indicating that either the tangible rewards were not a motivating factor, or that achieving a higher position on the leaderboard (reputation) was more of a motivator than receiving a tangible reward.**

What are the implications for practice and research?

“A focus on enhancing volunteer satisfaction can not only retain existing volunteers but also attract new ones.”

(Benevene, 2024)

Organizations should focus on developing clear volunteer roles, providing training, building strong relationships with their volunteers, and incorporating elements of transformational leadership into volunteer experiences.

- Understandably, job satisfaction appears to be a major indicator of intent to continue volunteering. Effective communication in both directions, consistent opportunities for training and development, strong role development and effective skill matching, and positive peer interactions have all been linked with increased satisfaction.
- Adopting elements of transformational leadership, such as encouraging volunteers to take greater ownership of their work and identifying a volunteer's strengths and weaknesses, could help increase rates of volunteer retention. There is evidence on the effectiveness of servant leadership as well, but the research base is not as strong as the evidence for transformational leadership.
- Web- and app-based outreach platforms have been successful in connecting organizations to a broad pool of available volunteers and increasing volunteer sign-ups. However, organizations reported higher rates of volunteer turnover and no-shows, indicating that retention through these platforms may require more focused attention.

There is a need for research that uses more rigorous methods and collects longitudinal data.

- There is a lack of studies that use methods such as randomized controlled trials to test different methods of recruitment and retention. Most of the data presented in the included articles comes from personal recollections or perceptions of organizational practices, which prevents associations between particular management methods and outcomes.
- Most studies used either intentions to remain or leave as a proxy for turnover rates. This prevents organizations from understanding what factors may contribute to actual turnover.
- Volunteer retention appears to be more heavily researched, so future articles should attempt to collect data on the entire volunteer cycle.

How did we identify evidence for this summary?

Included Studies

The Switchboard evidence database includes the following types of studies, categorized by the strength of their evidence:

Strong Evidence

Meta-analyses: systematic analyses of sets of existing evaluations of similar programs

Systematic reviews: syntheses of the best available evidence on specific research questions that use narrative synthesis focused on evaluations of the impacts of at least one specific policy, program, or intervention

Moderate Evidence

Published individual **impact evaluations** using randomized controlled trials (RCTs/C-RCTs), natural experiments, quasi-experimental techniques such as difference-in-difference (DID), instrumental variables (IV), regression discontinuity design (RDD), and propensity score matching (PSM) or other forms of synthetic matching, as well as fixed effects techniques with interaction terms

Suggestive Evidence

Published studies using methods including non-systematic literature review, uncontrolled before and after tests, post-test only, interrupted time series (ITS), cross-sectional regressions, longitudinal panels, cohort and case-controls, and purely qualitative techniques

Excluded Studies

The Switchboard evidence database excludes case studies, unpublished suggestive research, opinion papers, descriptive studies, and unpublished literature reviews.

Search Protocol

Studies included in the database focused on high-income or upper middle-income countries, including but not limited to the United States. Studies included must have been published since 2012. To identify evidence, we searched the following websites and databases using the following population, methodology, and target outcome terms:

Websites and Databases	Population Terms	Methodology Terms	Target Outcome Terms
Campbell Collaboration Cochrane Collaboration Mathematica Policy Research Urban Institute Migration Policy Institute CINAHL ASSIA	Nonprofit OR NGO OR “nongovernmental organization” OR	evaluation OR impact OR program OR intervention	“volunteer recruitment” OR “volunteer retention” OR “volunteer engagement”

Social Services Abstracts Social Work Abstracts PsycInfo ERIC	CBO OR "community based organization" OR ECBO OR "ethnic community based organization" OR "non profit organization" OR non-profit OR "not for profit organization"	OR policy OR project OR train* OR therapy OR treatment OR counseling OR workshop OR review OR meta-analysis OR synthesis	OR "volunteer management"
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For databases or websites that permitted only basic searches, free-text terms and limited term combinations were selected out of the lists above, and all resultant studies were reviewed for relevance. Conversely, for databases or websites with advanced search capability, we made use of relevant available filters. All terms were searched in the title and abstract fields only to exclude studies that made only passing mention of the topic under consideration.

After initial screening, Switchboard evidence mapping is prioritized as follows: Priority is given to meta-analyses and systematic reviews, followed by individual impact evaluations when no meta-analyses or systematic reviews are available. Evaluations that are rated as impact evidence are considered before those rated as suggestive, with the latter only being included for outcomes where no evidence is available from the former.

Studies Included

Database and website searching identified 246 studies. After removing duplicates, 210 studies were then screened. Of these, 184 were determined to be irrelevant to this search. Twenty-six full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Eighteen full-text articles were excluded due to not meeting one or more of the inclusion criteria pertaining to resettlement country, year of publication, population, methodology, or target problem. Eight studies were eligible for inclusion. They are listed below, with hyperlinks to the abstracts or full text (when available).

Meta-Analyses and Systematic Reviews

Benevene, P., Buonomo, I., Pansini, M., & D'Anna, F. (2024). Leadership and volunteers' experiences in nonprofit organizations: A systematic literature review. *TPM: Testing, Psychometrics, Methodology in Applied Psychology*, 31(4), 589–606. [Full Text](#).

Einolf, C. (2018). Evidence-based volunteer management: A review of the literature. *Voluntary Sector Review*, 9(2), 153–176. [Abstract](#).

Forner, V. W., Holtrop, D., Boezeman, E. J., Slemp, G. R., Kotek, M., Kragt, D., Askovic, M., & Johnson, A. (2024). Predictors of turnover amongst volunteers: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 45(3), 434–458. [Full Text](#).

Impact Evaluations

None.

Suggestive Studies

Alfes, K., Antunes, B., & Shantz, A. D. (2017). The management of volunteers – What can human resources do? A review and research agenda. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 28(1), 62–97. [Abstract](#).

Almas, S., Chacón-Fuertes, F., & Pérez-Muñoz, A. (2020). Direct and indirect effects of transformational leadership on volunteers' intention to remain at non-profit organizations. *Psychosocial Intervention*, 29(3), 125–132. [Full Text](#).

Chui, C. H., & Chan, C. H. (2019). The role of technology in reconfiguring volunteer management in nonprofits in Hong Kong: Benefits and discontents. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 30(1), 89–111. [Abstract](#).

Prats López, M., Rijpma, A., De Moor, T., & Reijerink, J. (2024). Behind the crowdsourcing platform: Assessing volunteer recruitment and engagement instruments. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 53(5), 1381–1409. [Full Text](#).

Trent, S. B., Allen, J. A., & Prange, K. A. (2020). Communicating our way to engaged volunteers: A mediated process model of volunteer communication, engagement, and commitment. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 48(7), 2174–2190. [Abstract](#).

Supplemental Resources

The following studies did not meet the criteria to be included in the evidence summary but may provide additional context, guidance, or understanding of the topic.

Ainsworth, J. (2020). Feelings of ownership and volunteering: Examining psychological ownership as a volunteering motivation for nonprofit service organizations. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 52. [Abstract](#).

Benevene, P., Buonomo, I., & West, M. (2020). The relationship between leadership behaviors and volunteer commitment: The role of volunteer satisfaction. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 1–14. [Full Text](#).

Brudney, J. L. (2016). Designing and managing volunteer programs. In D. O. Renz & R. D. Herman (Eds.), *The Jossey & Bass handbook of nonprofit leadership and management* (4th ed., pp. 688–733). John Wiley & Sons. [Abstract](#).

Curran, R., Taheri, B., MacIntosh, R., & O'Gorman, K. (2016). Nonprofit brand heritage: Its ability to influence volunteer retention, engagement, and satisfaction. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 45(6), 1234–1257. [Abstract](#).

Golensky, M., & Hager, M. (2020). *Strategic leadership and management in nonprofit organizations: Theory and practice*. Oxford University Press. [Abstract](#).

Hackman, J. R., & Oldham, G. R. (1976). Motivation through the design of work: Test of a theory. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 16 (2), 250–279. [Abstract](#).

Miao, Q., Huang, J., & Yin, H. (2025). Emotions matter: Understanding the relationship between drivers of volunteering and participation. *Journal of Social Science Research*, 51(3), 678–692. [Abstract](#).

Piatak, J. S., & Carman, J. G. (2023). Unpacking the volunteer experience: The influence of volunteer management on retention and the promotion of the organization. *Journal of Public and Nonprofit Affairs*, 9(3), 278–296. [Full Text](#).

Sveen, S., Anthun, K. S., & Tingvold, L. (2024). Recruitment of volunteers with immigrant backgrounds: The impact of structural and individual aspects. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary & Nonprofit Organizations*, 35(5), 866–877. [Full Text](#).

Traeger, C., & Alfes, K. (2019). High-performance human resource practices and volunteer engagement: The role of empowerment and organizational identification. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 30(5), 1022–1035. [Abstract](#).