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The role of knowledge sharing in volunteer learning and development

Abstract:

Despite the growing importance of volunteers to many organisations, there has been little research into how they share their knowledge and develop the skills they need. Moreover, the focus of existing research has been on short-term episodic volunteering. This article addresses these deficits by examining the significance of knowledge sharing to volunteer development and also the relative importance of individual processes. A case study approach is adopted which focusses on a major heritage site that is heavily reliant on a volunteer workforce. Development of volunteers is particularly relevant to the heritage sector where organisations need a sizeable, stable and well-trained volunteer workforce. We performed semi-structured interviews with six managers as well as conducting five focus groups with volunteers from diverse work areas in the National Trust. The Volunteer Development through Knowledge Sharing Model (VFKS) is proposed. This is the first conceptual model to summarise the processes in volunteer development. Processes are clustered into: informal learning, formal training, learning resources, and research by volunteers. Informal learning through tacit knowledge sharing is pre-eminent and knowledge created by volunteer research was highly significant for educating visitors. The characteristics of the volunteer workforce were found to affect all these processes. Implications for practitioners are also discussed.

Keywords: knowledge sharing; volunteer development; heritage sector; volunteers; learning.

Introduction

The benefits of learning and development, such as increased skills, knowledge, confidence, job satisfaction and employability have been widely recognised in the for-profit and public sectors (Pedler & Burgoyne, 2008). Learning and development opportunities for full time

staff are also associated with morale, motivation, retention and empowerment (Dvir, Eden, Avolio, & Shamir, 2002; Harrison 2012). Moreover, most organisations believe that the major outcome from development is improved performance (Burke & Hutchins, 2008).

According to Van den Hooff & De Ridder (2004), knowledge sharing is the process where individuals exchange their tacit and explicit knowledge and together create new knowledge. Knowledge sharing has been credited with enhanced organisational and individual employee performance as well as improving innovative capacity and organisational performance (Wiig, 2000; Gorelick & Tantawy-Monsou, 2005; Jyoti & Rani, 2017). Persuading employees to share their knowledge is essential to realise the benefits of knowledge management (Hislop, 2015), and there is broad recognition that knowledge sharing between paid employees is central to both individual development and organisational learning (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005; Law & Ngai, 2008).

During 2017/2018, 20.1 million people formally volunteered in the UK (NCVO, 2019). Indeed, since the 1990's the encouragement of volunteering has been a major concern for UK governments and there has been a particular focus on social capital and active citizenship (Holmes, 2009). Volunteering has also been viewed as a way of applying government policy (Rochester et al. 2016) and overall, 36% of people in the UK took part in formal volunteering at least once a month in 2018-2019 (White, 2019). The value of volunteering is also being recognised on a much wider scale. One example is the latest UN report on volunteering which celebrates the resilience that volunteers build in communities worldwide (UNV, 2018). This was published before the pandemic but despite its negative effects in many areas the Covid 19 crisis has illustrated that as in the past there is a reservoir of people, indeed an oversupply, who will volunteer their help (Trautwein et al., 2020). Accordingly, there was a massive response to a call by the UK National Health Service in the early stage of the

pandemic. An initial target of 250,000 was quickly reached and then considerably exceeded (NHS England, 2020)

There is little global data on heritage volunteering, however the World Heritage Volunteers Initiative was launched by UNESCO in 2008 and 3500 young volunteers have participated in action camps since then (UNESCO, 2020). With regard to the UK heritage sector, the National Trust currently has 53,000 volunteers working all year round and a further 4,000 regular seasonal volunteers (National Trust, 2020). However, because the Trust relies on visitor numbers there has been a major detrimental effect to operations due to the pandemic and the Trust is keen make £100 million in annual savings which include a possible total of 1,200 redundancies (National Trust Press Release, 2020). Although the National Trust are the largest heritage UK organisation, English Heritage also utilised a volunteer workforce of nearly 4000 in 2017/18 (English Heritage, 2020).

However, despite the reliance of many organisations on a volunteer workforce (NCVO, 2019), research on learning and development processes in such organisations is extremely limited. Furthermore, research is clear that the characteristics of the volunteer workforce are very different from the for-profit sector particularly in terms of motivation to join, affective commitment, lack of monetary reward and patterns of working hours (Cnaan & Cascio, 1998; Ward & Greene, 2018). Because of the lack of reward, managing the performance of volunteers has previously been considered a sensitive issue (Cnaan & Cascio, 1998).

However, in recent years more processes characteristic of the for-profit sector have been applied to volunteers (Stirling, Kilpatrick, & Orpin, 2011; Ward & Green, 2018). Moreover, according to Dwiggins-Beeler, Spitzberg, & Roesch (2011) volunteers are strongly motivated to build social relationships. Thus, learning and development and knowledge sharing processes may be quite different from the paid sector.

The contribution of knowledge sharing to individual learning and development and in turn organisational learning in the for-profit and public sectors has been widely researched and recognised (Andrews & Delahaye, 2000; Ipe, 2003). Consequently, it is as appropriate to ask what knowledge sharing can contribute to individual learning and development amongst volunteers. We also seek to give insights into the sharing processes which are illustrated later in our Volunteer Development and Knowledge Sharing model.

However, previous investigations in to learning and knowledge sharing amongst volunteers have examined only a small part of the volunteer workforce. This has been mainly at festival environments where volunteers come together on an annual basis for short-term projects, rather than on organisations who rely on a stable volunteer workforce (Abfalter, Stadler, & Müller, 2012; Ragdell & Jepson, 2014; Clayton, 2016). In contrast this is the first article to study the contribution of knowledge sharing to learning in large organisation that is heavily reliant on a stable volunteer workforce.

This article reports on a study that investigates the knowledge sharing processes that contribute to individual development in a large UK heritage organisation. Enhanced development of volunteers could contribute considerably to organisational learning, organisational performance, commitment to the organisation and retention (Newton, Becker, & Bell, 2014; Bartram, Cavanagh, & Hoyer, 2017). Such development can also result in beneficial outcomes for volunteers such as the opportunity to learn and make social contacts, acquire cultural capital and experience self-efficacy and self-esteem (Clary & Snyder, 1999; Harflett, 2015; Stukas, Hoyer, Nicholson, Brown, & Aisbett, 2016). This could be highly significant within the context of the expansion of the UK volunteering sector where the value of volunteer output totalled £17.1 billion in 2018 (NCVO, 2019).

The article is organised as follows. The next section critically reviews research on learning and development of volunteers. A discussion of the role of knowledge sharing in the for-profit sector is followed by an examination of the meagre extant research on knowledge sharing in the volunteer context. The methods section looks first at the case study heritage site and then at the how the data was collected and analysed. A discussion of research themes precedes the overall conclusions which also contain implications for management practice and future research.

Specifically, this research aims to develop a conceptual model of the processes associated with volunteer development, and to address the following research questions:

- How central is knowledge sharing to volunteer development?
- Which knowledge sharing processes make the most significant contribution to volunteer learning and development?

Learning and development in the volunteer context

Lachman (1997) suggests that learning has been widely defined as a change in behaviour that is due to experience, whereas development concerns the fulfilment of an individual's potential through learning and other educational experiences. The benefits of the development of employees, such as increased skills, knowledge, motivation, job satisfaction and performance have been widely recognised in the paid sector (Lee & Bruvold, 2003; Schmidt, 2007; Alagaraja, 2013). These can be part of an overall Human Resource Development approach where a learning culture is developed and staff gain the necessary knowledge and skills to enhance their performance in their role (Bergenhengouwen, 1990; McCracken & Wallace, 2000). Such individual learning could lead to organisational learning if the knowledge gained can be stored in a repository and reused thus embedding the

knowledge in the organisation (Argote, 2011). The concept of the learning organisation also links individual to organisational learning and explores how organisations as a whole learn through a multi-faceted approach, although some organisations are better at learning than others (Senge, 1990).

However, in contrast to the for-profit context, there is a lack of research into the learning and development of volunteers and existing literature has focused on linking such processes to enhanced retention (Alfes, Antunes, & Shantz, 2017). For example, Newton et al. (2014) point out that learning and development opportunities have been associated mainly with paid staff but suggests that such opportunities could be regarded as added value for volunteers and provide an additional reason for them to stay with the organisation. Volunteers also give up their time for a number of different reasons and matching development activities to motivations for volunteering such as gaining skills for future employment has become much more important in recent years (Clary and Snyder, 1999). Volunteer development has also been linked to role mastery and the positive effect on volunteer self-efficacy (Saksida, Alfes, & Shantz, 2017).

Extant research in the volunteer context is very limited due both to the marginalisation of volunteer work and the lack of literature on informal learning, in general (Schugurensky, Duguid, & Mundel, 2015). Understanding how adults learn in social action situations such as volunteering is essential because it can give an awareness into how organisational strategies can create opportunities to learn (Duguid, Mündel, & Schugurensky, 2007). Volunteer learning processes are also often embedded in formal or informal mentoring and supervisory relationships (Stadler and Fullagar 2016). Indeed, Duguid et al. (2007) suggest that informal learning happens extensively in volunteering through unconscious interactions. In their study of volunteer-led beer festivals, Ragdell & Jepson (2014) concur, suggesting that there was scant evidence of formal training, apart from that prompted by health and safety and other

legislation, and that informal learning practices were in the ascendancy. Similarly, Abfalter et al. (2012) suggested that most learning at the Colorado Music Festival took place on the job, utilising job shadowing and mentoring. Research by Kemp (2002) into volunteering at the Olympic Games also suggested that experiential learning was pre-eminent amongst volunteers.

Knowledge sharing in the volunteer context

Given the pre-eminence of informal and embedded learning in contexts that are heavily dependent on volunteers, it is to be anticipated that knowledge sharing is a key element of volunteer learning. Yet, there has been very little research on knowledge sharing in the volunteer context where workforce characteristics, particularly in respect of the motivation and values of volunteers are very different from those of paid employees (Stukas et al., 2016). Prior research in knowledge sharing has focussed almost exclusively on paid employees often in the context of multinational companies and public organisations. Such research has concentrated on how knowledge sharing can assist organisational performance, which, in turn, can lead to competitive advantage (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005; Lee, Foo, Leong, & Ooi, 2016) thus may lack relevance to the volunteer context due to the characteristics of the volunteer workforce such as high intrinsic motivation and absence of monetary reward (Cnaan & Cascio, 1998; Ward & Greene, 2018).

Davenport & Prusak (1998) highlighted the growing importance of sharing tacit knowledge and the need to ensure that organisational culture and individual values support such sharing. Wang-Cowham (2011) focuses on the importance of social exchange theory and the significance of knowledge sharing opportunities at social events where socialisation enables the acquisition of tacit knowledge. Much research has also focussed on the individual and organisational barriers to knowledge sharing in the paid sector such as an unsupportive

culture and leadership style and interpersonal and organisational trust (Al-Alawi, Al-Marzooqi, & Mohammed, 2007; Hislop, 2015; Asrar-ul-Haq, & Anwar, 2016).

The role of communities of practice in informal knowledge sharing processes is also highly significant in relation to volunteers (Wenger, 2004). Such communities are self-organising joint enterprises, where participants are mutually engaged in their shared interest.

Organisations can support these communities through recognition and resources (Wenger 1998). A positive relationship between community of practice membership and intention to stay with the organisation was also found by Chang, Chang, & Jacobs (2009). In recent years, social media has been increasingly utilised as a tool for sharing explicit knowledge amongst member of communities of practice. However, some older adults choose not to access computer-mediated activities due to factors such as attitudinal and cognitive barriers in addition to age related changes such as motor control (Charness & Boot, 2009).

Knowledge sharing in the NPO sector, the sector in which most volunteers are engaged, has been depicted by Lettieri, Borga, & Savoldelli (2004, p.17) as "...heterogeneous, widespread, rarely formalised and unstable". Moreover, Hume & Hume (2008) suggest that there is a lack of interest in knowledge management in the NPO sector due to shortage of resources.

However, Rathi, Given, & Forcier (2016) point out that organisations focussed on social value still need to manage their resources efficiently.

Against this backdrop, there is a lack of research on knowledge sharing in organisations utilising volunteers and the few studies that have been conducted mainly concentrate on festivals, where volunteering is predominantly episodic (e.g. Abfalter et al., 2012; Ragsdell & Jepson, 2014; Clayton, 2016). Festival volunteers generally return every year to the same event, although there can be many new volunteers and consequently changes in team

membership (Bryen & Madden, 2006). This is likely to have a significant impact on the continuity of volunteer relationships and therefore the capacity for knowledge sharing.

The Colorado Music Festival mapped knowledge sharing processes with volunteer and staff groupings (Abfalter et al. 2012). They discovered that a core group of permanent all year-round employees possessed most of the knowledge and volunteers and musicians are depicted as part of a peripheral group. Formal meetings were largely absent, although formal communication was useful for inter-group communication, and knowledge sharing was largely achieved by informal processes. Such processes exhibited the characteristics of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) where different groups had different levels of involvement and newcomers gradually acquired knowledge from longstanding members. The festival website was considered as indispensable to sharing explicit knowledge and interviewees generally expressed a desire for more codified information (Abfalter et al., 2012).

Ragsdell & Jepson's (2014) investigation into Campaign for Real Ale festivals in the UK also provides insights into knowledge sharing. It involved episodic volunteers but focussed more on the processes involved in tacit knowledge sharing. These festivals differed from the Colorado case in that they were all volunteer led projects. Findings suggested that the informal exchange of tacit knowledge was pre-eminent and that this was operationalised using three methods. These consisted of post festival review, job rotation and a master-apprentice model, which consisted of mentoring and job shadowing (Ragsdell & Jepson, 2014). Thus, the previous research on knowledge sharing and volunteer development amongst volunteers has demonstrated the primacy of informal learning through sharing of tacit knowledge and also the significant role of communities of practice, despite the absence of an explicit knowledge management strategy.

In a recent substantial quantitative study of volunteers in European charitable NGO's, knowledge sharing itself was found to enhance engagement levels through feelings of greater recognition and value to the organisation, skill attainment, enhanced reputation, satisfaction and trust (Fait and Sakka, 2020).

In summary, research on the benefits of knowledge sharing for individual and organisational learning has focussed on the for-profit sector. Benefits such as increased skills, knowledge, confidence and satisfaction would be valuable for a volunteer workforce. Yet, there is scant research on this topic within the volunteer context and this has focussed on festival environments where volunteering is predominantly episodic. This context is characterised by the prevalence of informal and experiential learning and a lack of codified knowledge. Also, there appeared to be a lack of interest in managing knowledge. In contrast, the research reported in this article examines learning and sharing processes that take place amongst principally long-term volunteers in a heritage environment.

Methods

Research site and participants

The research context was a large heritage site located in the North of England. This attraction is one of many owned and run by the National Trust which is the pre-eminent heritage organisation in the UK. The National Trust was chosen as a case study for this research because of the existence of a stable and extensive volunteer workforce of approximately 53,000 (National Trust, 2020). Approximately 500 of these work on the case study site.

The site comprises a mansion house surrounded by formal gardens, in a deer park. The site is managed by a team of around 40 full-time and 50 seasonal staff, including a General Manager and other heads of department responsible for specific areas, such as the house, the

gardens, the estate, and the visitor experience. This full-time team is supported by a considerable number of volunteers who work in a variety of different roles. These can range from Ranger roles where there is little contact with peers and the public to Tour Guide roles in the mansion house, which involve significant face-to-face interaction with colleagues and visitors. Some volunteers work in more than one area. A significant proportion of volunteers are retired, and many have been at the property for some considerable time. These volunteers often have a significant body of skills and knowledge associated with their previous work experience. There are also a relatively small number of younger volunteers who are working towards vocational qualifications. Volunteers are managed by paid volunteer managers. The manager role is challenging due to the number of people with whom the volunteer managers need to interact, their varying levels of commitment and experience as volunteers, and their diverse backgrounds and skills. In addition to the volunteer managers, the larger teams also have Day Organisers, who are volunteers that assist staff in coordinating and organising other volunteers. Day Organisers are important intermediaries in communications between paid permanent staff and volunteers.

Research process

This research focused on knowledge sharing between volunteers and their peers and between volunteers and paid staff. A qualitative approach was adopted due to the exploratory nature of the research, accessibility of participants and the need to understand human experience (Creswell, 2013; Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). A single case study approach has been chosen because of the depth and of the insights that it can provide (Farquhar, 2012; Rowley, 2002). Volunteers were recruited from across a broad range of indoor and outdoor roles. Consequently, volunteers and managers from a wide range of departments were involved in the research. This enabled insights to be gained into the characteristics of their different roles as a basis for fostering an in-depth understanding of

knowledge sharing and development processes (Miles & Huberman 2013). The Volunteer Development Manager for the site facilitated access to the participants and a pilot study was performed with two managers in order to test the questions. Six managers were interviewed, and these were drawn from departments who utilised volunteers. Specifically, these consisted of the Head Gardener, House Steward, Head Ranger, Buildings Manager, Business Support Manager and the Volunteer Development Manager.

Interviews with managers concentrated on their role in volunteer development and the extent to which volunteers require such development, their perceptions regarding the existence of a knowledge sharing culture at the site, characteristics of the volunteer workforce and also the processes by which volunteers learned from their peers and from full time staff. This approach flowed from existing literature on knowledge sharing but input from the Volunteer Development Manager enabled the questions to be contextualised to a greater extent. The purpose of the questions was to ascertain the degree and nature of knowledge sharing and learning between managers, volunteers and their peers and the effect of the volunteer context. The details of the interview participants are shown below:

[Table 1 here]

Focus groups also explored the degree and nature of knowledge sharing and learning. More specifically volunteers were asked how much training they received, access to resources and interactions with volunteers and managers. Volunteers own preferences for accessing knowledge were also explored. Ness (2015) suggest that focus groups are useful in quickly gathering multiple perspectives in order to achieve data saturation, and that they are

particularly effective if conducted alongside a small number of individual interviews. Focus groups also facilitate the investigation of a range of insights, feelings and outlooks from participants across different areas to be investigated (Keegan & Powney, 1987). Accordingly, five focus groups were organised together comprising 22 volunteers. Indeed, in this case the focus group format enabled volunteers from different departments to explore common themes as well as highlight their own experience and in this way, they also learnt from each other.

The composition of the focus groups is shown in Table 2.

[Table 2 here]

All participants were briefed on the purpose of the project, assured that all comments would be treated in confidence and signed a consent form. Focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed, prior to thematic analysis. Field notes were also taken during the interviews and focus groups in order to provide rich contextual information (Flick, 2014).

Braun & Clark (2006) suggest that thematic analysis enables the investigation of different viewpoints and has the potential to reveal unexpected insights. Thematic analysis was performed to identify key themes (Miles & Huberman, 2013). The development of the themes was initially informed by the questions in the interview schedule. The researchers identified sub-themes for each of the key themes by reading the interview transcripts independently of each other. The primary focus was on the various processes that informed either learning and development and/or knowledge sharing.

Results

Interviews and focus groups focussed on the processes associated with volunteer learning and acquisition of the knowledge they need to perform their roles. A model depicting the key processes that contribute to volunteer development is shown below in Figure 1. ‘Informal learning’ processes were regarded as the most important, followed, respectively, by ‘Research by volunteers’, ‘Formal training’, and ‘Learning resources’. Arguably, more significantly, knowledge sharing was pervasive across most of these categories. Informal Learning was entirely through knowledge sharing. Formal training also relied heavily on person-to-person exchange in the form of job shadowing and formal mentoring. Research by volunteers, included informal sharing, and the formation of communities of practice and Learning resources comprised of online information as well as more traditional printed induction material. All of these processes contribute to volunteer development, but they are not mutually exclusive. For example, research by volunteers takes place through informal learning and contributes to learning resources. The following sub-sections offer further insights into the various processes and sub-processes, using the participant’s own words.

[Figure 1 Here]

Informal Learning

Informal learning through the sharing of tacit knowledge was very much in evidence. Advice is freely given by volunteers both to peers and paid staff and new volunteers quickly learned the identity of the most knowledgeable colleagues in a particular area. Volunteers also tend to have their break with other volunteers in designated rooms or in a group when working outdoors which facilitates informal learning.

Yeah, it's very informal, I mean the guy that I went around with when I started, I still know and see so he's a fount of all knowledge, so I'll ask his advice (FG 3, Room Guide).

This type of knowledge exchange tended to be situational and depended on the nature of the volunteering role. Volunteers in house roles are allocated a buddy for the first few weeks of their role, whereas Volunteer Rangers have a much more solitary existence than room guides who came into contact with their colleagues much more frequently.

Yes, well there aren't that many patrolling Rangers each day so you may occasionally see them, or you may not (FG 3, Ranger).

In general, volunteers working in teams preferred to stay where they are, and the subsequent social interaction enhanced knowledge sharing. Volunteers were keen to expand their knowledge of the property overall and some performed multiple roles which gave them the opportunity to share their knowledge. An example of this was the use of volunteers in different areas.

The roles I do now; I'm one of the day leaders in the house, I am also a room guide in the house. I'm one of the office assistants who help out in the office and occasionally I drive the minibus as well (FG 4, Day Leader/Business Support).

Some volunteers were very much aware of their own value to the organisation and the life experience they brought to the role. They were also keen to testify how the organisation was keen to promote sharing knowledge.

I've been here 17 years, so I have more knowledge than any of the permanent staff and they don't object to that, they want me to share that knowledge (FG 2, Room Guide).

Managers were very much aware of the critical importance of informal learning and how this is linked with social interaction but were mindful of the need to monitor team dynamics.

I think that [learning from each other] is probably crucial, more so than if it is coming from the staff (INT 1).

Many volunteers were enthusiastic about the socialising and networking opportunities at the social club. Its value as a vehicle for informal learning and benchmarking was also recognised.

I would say that social club members have a great deal of knowledge and they also go out to other sites within the organisation and they come back with lots of ideas of what could be done here (FG1, Room Guide).

Research by volunteers

Many volunteers were keen to highlight the extent to which their own research into the history of the site contributed to their development and the execution of their role. This was more apparent in the groups that worked in the house itself, although botanical research (gardens) was also mentioned.

I mean I already knew, and I didn't realise I knew until visitors asked me things because I've read quite extensively around and because you're interested in something you remember things and you go further. And... if you're interested in something you research it (FG 1, Wardrobe Assistant).

This was particularly the case with room guides, some of whom had been part of an initiative to provide in-depth talks about specific aspects of the mansion. These are prepared for presentation to the public but are also given to interested volunteers. On some occasions managers observed that this was organised as a community of practice, where skills gained previously were utilised towards the success of a historical research project (Wenger, 1998).

I think there were some teachers, architects, all sorts of different backgrounds and they kind of went off and researched their own area (INT 5).

One volunteer recounted how a research group had developed as a result of an organisational initiative to offer additional, more specialised, talks to the public.

So, each year we independently research new subjects. In the group I am working with, we pool those ideas and we then present a basic story about whatever it may be, but in our own words. We might add little bits of our own personal research (FG 2, Room Guide).

The same group of volunteers also set up an informal knowledge repository using a dropbox for articles to help enhance the learning of other members of the group which in turn can be passed on to members of the public.

We have a team of tour guides and we have set up our own dropbox in which we put articles, but it's really just for dissemination amongst us guides so that we can share our knowledge to pass it on to visitors (FG 2, Room Guide).

Formal training

Most managers viewed the development of volunteers as central to their role, often linking recruitment and selection to job roles and stressing the quality of training provided.

They can go off and do jobs without us constantly checking on them, because we'll know if we train them properly, they're going to go out and do the job to a high standard and they'll know what we expect (INT 4).

Some volunteers were on a work placement scheme. With these volunteers, managers stressed their commitment to training and career skills and the acquisition of industry-recognised qualifications in operating machinery. On the other hand, whilst some (more

recently appointed) volunteers had participated in a formal induction programme, for the majority, job shadowing had been the main component of their introduction to their role thus providing a platform for informal learning to take place.

Just shadowing people; picking up how different people have different approaches, working out how you would like to use your own personality and the way that you treat people or approach people (FG3, Ranger).

Several volunteers, particularly in Ranger and Estate roles recognised that they received the appropriate Health and Safety briefing and job-related training particularly in areas such as machine operation. Some were also involved in inducting other volunteers, which they were generally happy to do. Other volunteers relied on the skills amassed from their career in order to fulfil a role managing other volunteers.

I'm using skills that I already had, because I was in a management job and it's the day leader role in the house which is sort of managing the volunteer team, doing the rota for them and so on, which is quite similar to some of the jobs that I used to do at work previously (FG 4, Day Leader).

Managers generally felt that formal training and opportunities to lead other volunteers resulted in increased confidence through experience as well as enhancing knowledge and skills. Although there was a realisation that the pace of development varied with the time that volunteers committed to their on-site role.

Moreover, volunteer managers generally recognised the importance of their own role in sharing knowledge and developing volunteers, although practice varied between departments. The Business Support manager saw knowledge sharing as cascading insights gained at regional meetings, whereas some departmental managers, particularly those in outdoor roles,

cited the importance of creating a team ethos and a culture of experienced hands helping new volunteers in a sociable environment. They also realised that if volunteers shared knowledge with each other this gave the managers more time to devote to the other elements of their role.

Learning resources

The parent organisation has recently been providing access to an online portal through which volunteers can claim any expenses, keep themselves informed as to events and developments, and access local, and national training materials. However, there is some resistance amongst volunteers to the use of this portal:

I've certainly heard at one of the meetings people saying, 'I don't bother claiming anymore, I can't be doing with this computer business!' I can understand that (FG 5, Ranger).

Volunteers prefer the more informal information and knowledge sharing that occurs through weekly briefings, annual briefings and meeting room notice boards. The general office was also cited as a useful information hub. The staff there were very much aware of the importance of their role in sharing information:

I think the fact that we're all based in the Estate office and people can just walk in is useful. Sometimes we find that volunteers will come to us rather than go to their manager (INT 2).

Discussion

The critical significance of informal learning to volunteer development through the sharing of tacit knowledge was stressed by both volunteers and managers (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). They were also very much aware of their key role in the development of volunteers (Bergenhengouwen, 1990; McCracken, & Wallace, 2000). The crucial importance of informal learning was emphasised in earlier research into episodic volunteering at music

festivals (e.g. Abfalter et al., 2012; Clayton, 2016) and of research into learning in general (Eraut, 2004). However, the developmental role of managers was not stressed. Volunteers frequently experienced learning in teams and in different work areas, as well as through visits to other sites. The creation of long-term social relationships enhanced this process, as well as being a significant motivation for volunteering (Clary & Snyder, 1999).

Volunteers learned from interaction with both peers and paid staff. Outdoor roles such as Ranger, facilitated knowledge sharing less than did roles within the mansion. Informal mentoring by expert volunteers was also very evident, mirroring the findings of Mundel & Schugurensky (2008) in their study of a volunteer community. Knowledge shared within such interactions is generally tacit in nature (Polyani, 1969). In contrast, formal training and inductions, often covering mandatory topics, such as health and safety briefings focussed on explicit knowledge. In addition, systematic induction briefings were relatively new; induction for many longstanding volunteers had comprised of job shadowing only. As regards ongoing learning, there was evidence of extensive mentoring of volunteers in informal learning situations as also encountered by Holmes (2006).

Explicit knowledge was also shared for development and communication purposes, through a newly installed intranet system for volunteers. Abfalter et al. (2012) report on the usefulness of intranets for sharing knowledge amongst the volunteers working with the Colorado Music Festival. However, the success of such an initiative in this study was more mixed, since many older volunteers preferred face-to face, notice boards and printed briefings. Charness & Boot (2009) suggest that such resistance to technology may be associated with attitudinal and cognitive barriers, as well as age related changes to, for instance in motor control.

In contrast to previous research, this study found evidence of volunteers forming groups independently to pursue their own research interests. These exhibited the characteristics of a

community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Chow & Chan (2008) suggested the pursuit of social networks and shared goals were influential in knowledge sharing behaviour. Group members pursued a shared interest in disseminating the site history and the resultant findings were converted into explicit knowledge and used by Room Guides for in-depth talks to the public.

Working in these volunteer-led groups to deliver on shared projects, volunteers also reported a sense of increased autonomy. Ahmed, Lim, & Loh (2007) also suggest that people make sense of their current environment by accessing their own past experience, leading to a variety of different views that can lead to innovative solutions. Consequently, the diversity of volunteers' previous work experience, could be an important contributory factor to successful outcomes in volunteer-led projects.

The volunteers' social club also acted as a vehicle for informal learning; volunteers were enthusiastic about the networking, and social benefits associated with the regular meetings and excursions. This is consistent with Clary & Snyder (1999)'s view that the need for social connections is a prime motivation for volunteering. In addition, Hansen, Nohria, & Tierney (2016) suggest that face-to-face interaction allows insights to emerge in a way is not possible with information systems. Moreover, there was no evidence of the fragmentation of knowledge purported by Letteiri, Borga, & Savoldelli (2004) to be characteristic of the non-profit sector, although it may be relevant that Letteiri's research took place in a context of high volunteer turnover. Managers demonstrated a clear understanding of their pivotal role in sharing knowledge but operationalised this in different ways, both informally, within their own team and as part of a pyramid of communication.

Knowledge sharing processes in the site were also significantly affected by volunteer workforce characteristics. The desire by volunteers to perform research (as part of a community of practice) can be linked to the affective commitment discussed by Ward &

Greene (2018) in their study of heritage volunteers. Moreover, the lack of both performance management, and dependency on a regular salary (Cnaan & Cascio, 1998), means that volunteers can share knowledge without being concerned about their pay and promotion prospects. Indeed, there was little evidence of the barriers to knowledge sharing attributed to knowledge sharing in the paid sector such as a lack of trust, an unsupportive culture and the lack of a knowledge sharing example from leaders (Al-Alawi, et al., 2007; Hislop, 2015; Oliver & Kandadi, 2006). Volunteers often stayed until they were unable to continue working and thus amassed a considerable body of knowledge. There was certainly no evidence of the knowledge as power perspective described by Ipe (2003) and volunteers were generally keen to pass on their experience to peers and paid staff. Furthermore, there was evidence that in fulfilling their motivation to learn, volunteers did in fact experience higher levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy and trust (Stukas et al., 2016).

Conclusions

It is clear that a culture of knowledge sharing is central to volunteer development. The proposed Volunteer Development through Knowledge Sharing Model that has emerged from our research provides a framework that indicates the importance of these processes.

Development for employees in the for-profit sector concentrates on enhancing knowledge and skills and this is also a driver for the development of volunteers. However, workforce motivation and a focus on improving performance to gain competitive advantage are critical drivers for development in the for-profit sector development, but do not apply to volunteers.

In the case study the workforce characteristics of the volunteer sector have been influential in shaping both volunteer development and supporting knowledge sharing processes.

Autonomous research by volunteers into the site history in the form of a community of practice is highly significant in generating knowledge later used to inform the public. Such

research is driven by the inherent affective commitment of volunteers and the desire to fulfil initial volunteer motivations such as understanding and the need for social relations.

The article seeks to add to the scarce research on volunteer development by arguing that volunteers push forward with their own development, despite the lack of a human resource development strategy common in the for-profit sector. Organisations with a volunteer workforce can sometimes thereby derive substantial performance benefits from a more developed and knowledgeable workforce better equipped to deliver a richer experience to site visitors. Moreover, unlike the paid sector, volunteers are unfettered by concerns about performance, reward and career implications when sharing their knowledge and this can enhance the transfer of knowledge and skills in the development process. Also, volunteers have very different motivations from paid staff, but providing an environment with plentiful opportunities for learning and making social connections is paramount to their sense of well-being and engagement as well as contributing to organisational performance. Such performance is measured on a nationwide basis by the National Trust in the form of key performance indicators, but it would be difficult to connect these to the results from a single qualitative case study.

For practitioners there are some clear implications. Knowledge sharing lies at the heart of volunteer development. Some of this is embedded in formal or semi-formal processes, such as work shadowing. As such, it is imperative that organisations working with volunteers acknowledge the centrality of knowledge sharing to volunteer development and consider knowledge sharing at a strategic, rather than at a tactical level, with a view to optimising both the explicit and tacit knowledge of their volunteer workforce. The VDKS Model will assist them in identifying the key processes that should be considered. However, each situation is different, and managers therefore need to be alert to additional processes that might be appropriate in their settings. For example, the nature, relative importance, and effectiveness,

of the various learning and knowledge sharing processes may vary with context, such as volunteers' prior work experience. In particular, this study shows a relatively limited use of learning resources, especially anything that is online, and our model, as it stands does not include engagement with social media as a learning or knowledge sharing process, which might be highly significant for younger volunteers. Furthermore, although the model depicts learning and development being enhanced by four factors, there is also a feedback process to consider in that volunteers whose learning and development is informed by research and informal learning would themselves be able to make a greater contribution to research and peer to peer learning.

Research on knowledge sharing and learning in the volunteer context has focussed on episodic volunteers often in a festival environment. This research focusses on a specific, large high-profile national organisation in the heritage sector that finds it relatively easy to attract volunteers. However, volunteers will need to be confident in returning to their roles after the pandemic. Also, the cuts in funding and permanent staff at the National Trust could have consequences for roles and responsibilities for volunteers.

Future research could also explore volunteer development and knowledge sharing in organisations such as the health and social care sector. Knowledge transfer from team to team or between locations could also be considered. Also, it is often the case that volunteers associated with a specific organisation have a range of different roles, such that their engagement with, and experiences of learning and development are not identical. Further research could usefully explore these differences. Finally, volunteers could also have an important role to play during the pandemic. There was an oversupply of volunteers following a call from the UK NHS, and future research could examine how best to train, develop and utilise such volunteers, given the diversity of experience and intrinsic motivation they will bring with them.

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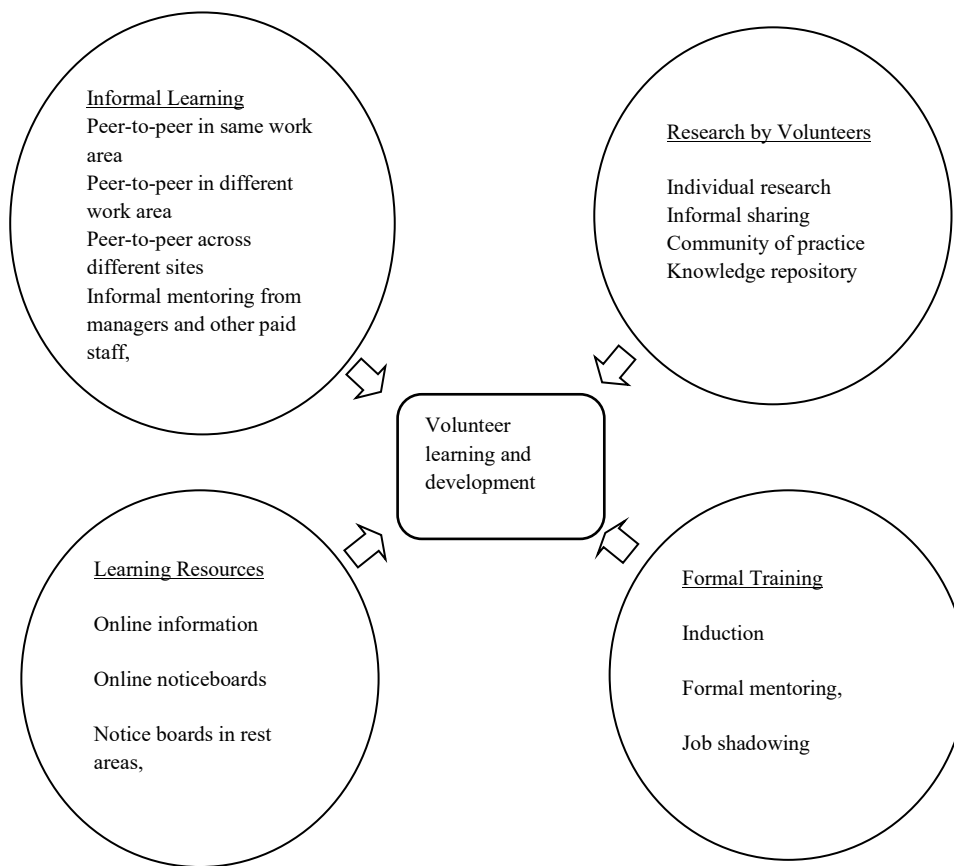


Figure 1. The Volunteer Development through Knowledge Sharing Model.

Table 1. Details of managers interviewed.

Interview Number	Role	Gender
INT 1	Head Gardener	M
INT 2	Business Support Manager	F
INT 3	Estate Buildings Foreman	M
INT 4	Lead Ranger	M
INT 5	House Steward	F
INT 6	Volunteer Manager	F

Table 2. Composition of focus groups.

Focus group number	Composition of group
FG1	Gardener, Wardrobe Assistant, Minibus Driver, Learning support
FG2	Room Guide, Ranger, Greeter, Conservation
FG3	Ranger, Room Guide, Greeter
FG4	Day Leader/Business Support, Ranger
FG 5	Ranger, Wardrobe Assistant, Room Guide

