



VOLUNTEER RETENTION AS MANAGEMENT CHALLENGE

The Case of the Boy Scouts of America, Crossroads of America Council

SUMMARY

Retaining volunteers is a daunting task for nonprofit organizations. Not only are volunteers motivated differently than paid employees, but they also tend to leave the organization when dissatisfied. This policy brief presents findings from a study conducted with the Boy Scouts, Crossroads of America Council (BSA) and researchers at the Indiana University Public Policy Institute (PPI). This study was guided by the following question: Which human resources practices have the best effect on volunteer retention? Particularly, our findings show that human resource (HR) practices influence volunteer retention. However, HR practices in the form of recognition and training are not equally effective for all volunteers. As turnover rates among volunteers in nonprofit organizations are high—ranging between 24 and 47 percent in 2015¹—findings from this study will be of interest to nonprofit practitioners in Indiana and beyond.

INTRODUCTION

In 2014, about 25 percent of US adults donated 8.7 billion hours of their time to nonprofits.² Volunteering can therefore be considered a major source of (unpaid) labor. Indeed, an estimated 80 percent of all 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations rely on volunteers to provide services and to help run the organization.³ Managing volunteers, however, is a difficult undertaking. Volunteers due to their non-contractual relationship with nonprofits 'vote with their feet' and leave organizations when they are dissatisfied. As such, the volunteer nature of work challenges traditional retention strategies.

KEY FINDINGS

- Volunteer turnover rates were higher for younger volunteers (17% of ages 20-29) than for their older counterparts (5% ages 70-79)
- Turnover for female volunteers was higher (16%) than for male volunteers (11%).
- In 2016, 24% of volunteers received an award and those volunteers had a lower turnover rate (6%) compared to volunteers who did not receive an award (15%)
- Exemplary volunteers, while a lower percent of overall, are more likely to continue with BSA.
- Training also impacted retention rates. Men were more likely to stay after they received training, while women who were trained were more likely to leave.

Traditional retention strategies operate under the assumption of mutual dependency between employee and organization (e.g., exchange of labor for a wage). Volunteer turnover has been regarded as an increased challenge to the provision of services for nonprofits. Reliable statistics are scarce, but the Corporation for National and Community Service report turnover rates between 24 and 47 percent in 2015 for their affiliated organizations.¹

To survive and thrive, nonprofits have to adapt structurally and develop strategic responses for the retention of current long-term volunteers and capitalize upon the factors that draw them to volunteer-work, while creating organizational environments that enhance volunteer retention.

This policy brief outlines implications for nonprofit practitioners recommending strategic HR practices as vital tools to mitigate volunteer turnover.

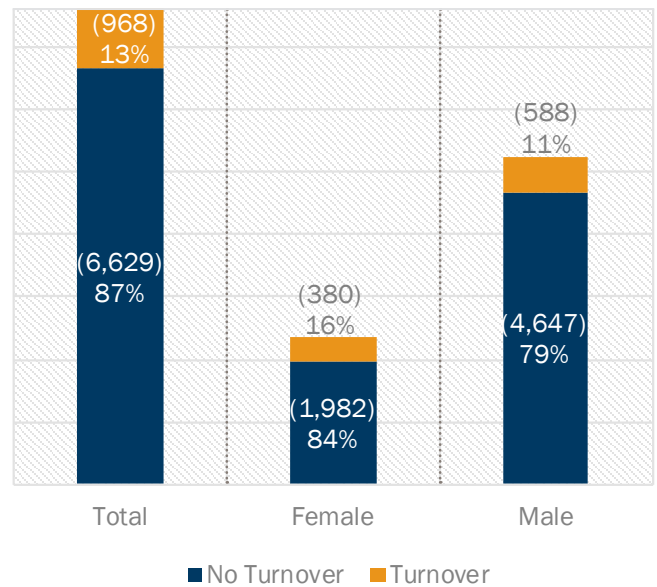
METHODOLOGY

The BSA operates in 26 counties in Indiana serving 33,000 youth through the support of about 7,500 volunteers. In 2017, the BSA collaborated with PPI, to determine ways BSA can increase the retention rates of their volunteers. BSA collects administrative data from adult application forms and regularly enters information into the system (e.g., when volunteers participated in training, won awards). Moreover, all BSA volunteers have to renew their volunteer commitment annually in a process that is called rechartering. The rechartering data can be considered actual turnover data as those who have not renewed their commitment have dropped out of their volunteer service. We were granted access to de-identified data for 2016 and 2017 and use this data for our study. This study focuses on HR practices such as awards and training to see if they influence volunteer turnover. As data was available over time, we matched 2016 demographic characteristics and information on HR practices (i.e., training and awards) with 2017 retention records to determine what factors lead to turnover.

FINDINGS

The findings show that of the volunteers reported in 2016, 69 percent were male, 95 percent were white and the average age was 46 years. Moreover, 33 percent received training and 24 percent received an award. The overall turnover rate for volunteers was 13 percent between 2016-2017. Volunteer turnover differed by age and gender as well as HR practices such as training and awards as presented below.

FIGURE 1.
Turnover in Volunteers by Gender (2016)



As Figure 1 indicates, women, a decided minority of volunteers for BSA, had a higher turnover rate (16 percent) than men (11 percent) from 2016-2017.

Interestingly, as Figure 2 illustrates, volunteer turnover rates are higher for younger people, declining with age, from a high of 17 percent for those 20-29 to a low of 5 percent for those 70 and above, perhaps indicating a higher percent of long-term volunteers in the higher age categories.

Volunteers who received an award had a lower turnover rate (6 percent) than those who did not receive an award (15%). (Figure 3). Our regression analyses confirmed that those who receive an award are less likely to leave the BSA. In other words, the odds of staying are 1.43 times higher for those who have received an award than for those who did not.

As Figure 4 indicates, one counter-intuitive finding is that volunteers who received training were more likely to leave. Upon exploring this pattern further in a regression analysis using interaction effects, we find that the training is more effective for men than for women. Men who received training were more likely to continue their volunteering with the BSA the following year as compared to women who

FIGURE 2. Turnover in Volunteers by Age (2016)

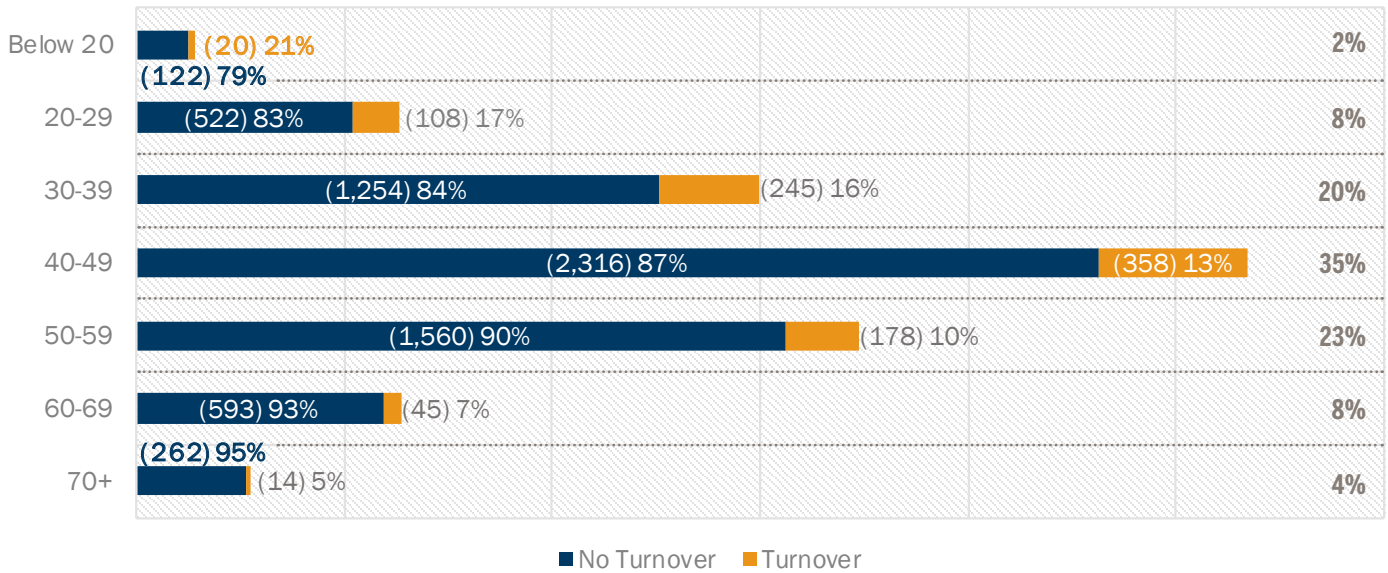


FIGURE 3. Turnover in Volunteers by Award Reception (2016)

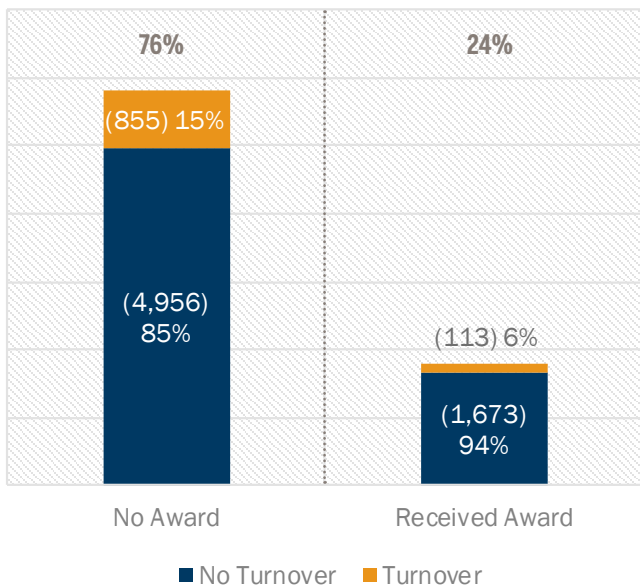
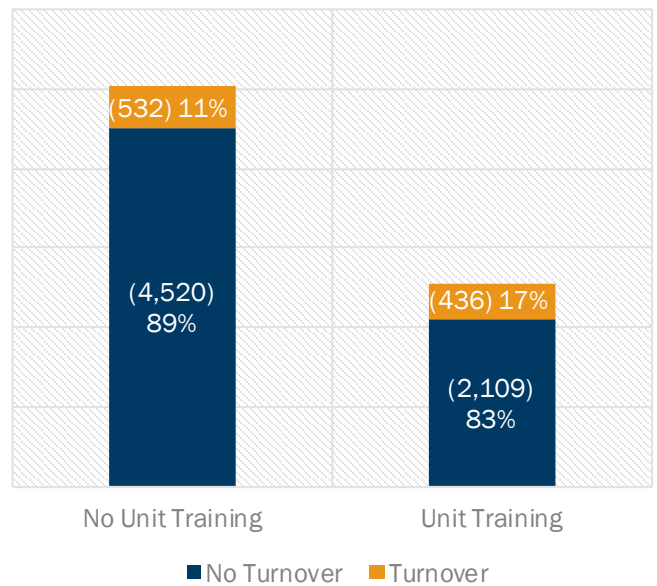


FIGURE 4. Turnover in Volunteers by Training (2016)



completed training. In other words, the odds for females who received training to leave are 1.41 times higher than for men who received training. From this data, it is unclear why women who received training are more likely to leave. Reasons are speculative, but could lie in the particular training (content) as well as the delivery of training (by whom, online vs. face-to-face).

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

HR practices, as presented in the case of the BSA, can help nonprofit organizations to mitigate the extent of turnover. Particularly, recognizing volunteers—in form of awards—and providing training may be valuable strategies.

AWARDS. Recognizing volunteers through awards is an effective management tool to increase future retention rates. We would recommend that nonprofit organizations utilize this practice. Other forms of recognition besides awards can range from thank you cards or certificates of appreciation to thank you luncheons, or public acknowledgements in newsletters. However, the effectiveness of recognition activities may well depend on volunteer motivations; not all volunteers may necessarily respond positively to these strategies. Moreover, nonprofit organizations might want to strike a balance between recognizing volunteers (given the positive benefits) while simultaneously not overly emphasizing the importance of recognition activities, as this could potentially backfire if these are no longer perceived to be something special.

TRAINING. Volunteer training is a beneficial mechanism to develop the knowledge and skills that volunteers need to fulfill their roles. As indicated in the findings, providing volunteers with training does affect turnover rates. However, we were able to identify a notable pattern: Training was only effective for male but not for female volunteers. Potential reasons might lie in the training delivery methods (online vs. face-to-face, the specific trainer) as well as

the content of the training. Nonprofit organizations aiming to utilize training as a retention tool for their volunteers should be intentional and careful when designing training programs.

DATA & ANALYSIS. Studying the extent of volunteer turnover is becoming increasingly important for nonprofit organizations and with it the use of data and analytics tools commonly seen in larger corporations or nonprofit organizations. Reliable data collection approaches are essential to accurately capture trends over time. Nonprofit organizations aiming to improve volunteer recruitment, placement, and retention should invest in this data infrastructure. Only after collecting and analyzing data, can nonprofits see preliminary trends and act appropriately.

References

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2. Urban Institute *The Nonprofit Sector in Brief* 2015. 2015.
3. Hager, M. & J.L. Brudney, *Volunteer Management Practices and Retention of Volunteers*. 2004, Urban Institute: Washington, D.C.



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