

**Obtaining an Entry-Level Position in Sport and Recreation:
Do Volunteer Experiences Matter?**

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Abstract

In the field of sport and recreation, instructors often emphasize the importance of experience as students seek their first position within the field. This experience comes from a variety of opportunities including internships, volunteer experiences, service learning, and paid positions. Barr and McNeilly (2002) found internships, part-time work, and leadership positions provided better opportunities for potential employability than classroom experience. Research also shows volunteerism can strengthen a resume and support other traits sought by employers (Cole, Feild, & Giles, 2003). The exploratory investigation reported here examined the impact of volunteer experience on an applicant's chance of receiving an entry-level position at the YMCA. The researchers surveyed hiring officials at Y's across the Southeast and Midwest regions of the United States. Results showed 88% of the respondents felt volunteer experience mattered in their decision to offer the candidate an interview. Other important characteristics for entry-level employment were also identified.

Key Words: Volunteerism, entry-level sport and recreation

Introduction

Making sure students are prepared to enter the workforce upon graduation should be the focus of any academic program. Along with a strong academic background, students need other skills to set them apart in the current job markets. In the field of sport and recreation, instructors and guest presenters often emphasize the importance of gaining experience as students prepare to seek their first position within the field. This experience comes from a variety of opportunities available to students during their college career including internships, volunteer experiences, service learning, and paid positions within the field. While recruiters and employers consider many variables, this exploratory investigation seeks to understand the impact of volunteer experience on an applicant's chance of receiving an interview for an entry-level position in recreation and sport management fields. The findings of this research may guide faculty working to prepare future professionals, as well as, volunteer program administrators seeking to recruit college-age volunteers for their programs and services.

The first section of the article describes the desired skills and competencies identified by employers. The second section identifies the impact of resume content on employment perceptions. The third section discusses the role of volunteerism and employment. Finally, the methodology, data collection and analysis, results and discussion complete the article.

Desired Skills and Competencies

Internships, part-time work, and leadership positions in student and campus organizations often lead to better opportunities for employment than classroom experience (Barr & McNeilly, 2002). Researchers examining competencies and skills sought by recruiters have found that multiple variables influence whether an applicant is a strong job candidate (Hansen & Hansen, 2010; Barr & McNeilly, 2002). Hansen and Hansen (2010) examined competencies and skills sought by recruiters and found that multiple variables influence whether an applicant is a strong job candidate. They suggest a combination of soft and hard skills. Hard skills include computer and other field specific technical skills. Soft skills generally refer to verbal and written communication, analytical, and the ability to effectively address conflict and work as a team. Furthermore, recruiters reported an applicant's GPA as a consideration only after the other variables were examined (Barr & McNeilly, 2002).

Research focusing on sport management and recreation produce similar findings. Case and Branch (2003) found facility managers look for communication and computer skills, problem solving ability, decision-making skills, time management skills and the ability to recognize potential facility hazards and risks. Hurd (2005) found park and recreation competencies include communication, community relations, interpersonal skills, leadership and management, and professional practice. Schneider, Stier, Kampt, Haines, and Wilding (2006) concurred with the need for communication skills and emphasized prior experience, neat appearance, and holding a graduate degree. A common theme in the research on employability in the sport and recreation field is the need for a combination of soft interpersonal skills, communication ability and technical professional practice related skills are important for entry-level jobs in sport and recreation. Research also supports a combination of various skills leads to potential employability.

Resume Content and Employability Perceptions

Researchers have examined perceptions of employability based on resume content and applicant personality traits (Cole, Feild, & Giles, 2003; Cole, Feild, Giles & Harris, 2004; Cole, Rubin, Feild, & Giles, 2007). While researchers have not solely reviewed sport and recreation management candidate resumes those examining resumes from business colleges have direct application to sport and recreation management. Cole et al. (2003) found that when reviewers examined the resumes of seniors within a business college they associated volunteer involvement with an extrovert personality trait. Continuing this examination Cole et al. (2004) found that recruiters emphasize certain traits based on type of position. Those applicants interested in enterprising positions, such as marketing, are viewed extraverts and highly employable. This finding has application for those sport management entry-level professionals seeking positions in sport marketing areas such as professional or collegiate team ticket offices and/or sport promotion. Cole et al. (2004) also noted a well-rounded candidate based on academic qualifications, work experience and extracurricular activities positively related with perceptions of employability. In cases where the quality of information was highly rated in one content area but lacking in the others, recruiters may perceive the applicant excelled only within a content area. However, one resume content area (i.e. academic qualifications, work experience or extracurricular activity) is not the only contributing factor to recruiter perceptions of employability. Cole et al. (2007) found it is an assessment of all areas that contributes to recruiter employability assessments.

Extending our understanding of recruiter perceptions associated with resume content Chen, Huang and Lee (2011) found both educational background and work experiences related positively with recruiter perceptions of person-job fit (P-F Fit), person-organization fit (P-O Fit) and person-person fit (P-P Fit). These positive associations also related with recruiter recommendations to hire potential candidates. For instance, a candidate's work experience positively associated with recruiter perceptions of perceived P-J Fit and perceived P-O fit. These positive associations also related to recruiter recommendations in the hiring process (Chen et al., 2011).

Role of Volunteerism in Employment

For young adults several motives facilitate their volunteer involvement. These range from a desire a) to help other, i.e. values motives; b) to improve skills currently not utilized, i.e. understanding motives, c). to enhance their resume, i.e. career motives, or d). to volunteer because their friends do, i.e. social motives, (Clary et al., 1998). Fletcher and Major (2004) found that female medical students placed more emphasis on enhancement, social, career and protective motivations for their volunteer involvement. Using a sample of undergraduate student volunteers Gage and Thapa (2012) found the highest functional motivations included values and understanding. Recently, Handy et al. (2010) concurred that volunteer motivation is not the result of one aspect but rather several working in concert. Furthermore, motivation to volunteer it not solely based on career building motives. Exploring only volunteers within a sport and recreation setting, an examination of motivation factors of youth sport coaches revealed value motives as the most important factor contributing to a coaches' desire to volunteer (Busser & Carruthers, 2010).

Research focusing on motivation to volunteer suggests many things contribute to these decisions. Young professionals may be motivated by a desire to help others, feel better about themselves, or to learn and/or utilize skills that may contribute to future professional success.

Additionally, research suggests recruiters assess a candidate's employability based on their resume content. This assessment is not based on a single area but on an assessment of several content areas. The review of literature leads to the following research questions:

RQ1: Will volunteer experience serve as a suitable substitution for paid experiences in the eyes of those screening potential candidates for entry-level recreation and sport professionals?

RQ2: Does a candidate's volunteer experience impact decisions to offer the candidate an interview?

RQ 3: How does volunteer experience affect your decision to offer a candidate an interview?

Methodology

The YMCA, known simply as the Y, is a leading nonprofit organization for youth development, healthy living and social responsibility (YMCA of the USA). In the United States, there are more than 2,700 Y's with an estimated 19,000 fulltime staff and 600,000 volunteers in 10,000 communities across the country. The Y hires many employees with a background in sport and recreation administration. The researchers surveyed hiring officials at Y's across the Southeast and Midwest regions of the United States. The authors randomly selected individuals in positions to hire entry-level sport and recreation professionals from the YMCA of the USA's homepage. The authors developed a database of potential participant email addresses from two sources. First, the authors reviewed vacant entry-level positions posted on the Y's national website collecting email addresses of those collecting resumes for vacant positions. These entry-level positions included Youth Sport Director, Assistant Youth Sport Director, Aquatic Director, Program Director, and Assistant Program Director. The authors next used the "find your Y" function of the national website to add to the database. This function allowed the authors to find additional email addresses from the individual or association Y's website.

A total of 200 email addresses were collected for potential survey participants. The Y professionals included served as Senior Program Directors, Associate Executive Directors, Executive Directors, Branch Directors, Center Directors, Human Resource Directors, President/CEO, and Vice President of Human Resources within their Y's and associations. Y's from Kentucky, Tennessee, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Missouri were included in the sample database.

Upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval data collection occurred from June 17 through July 8, 2014 using Qualtrics survey software. Through the software program, each potential participant received an invitation to participate with the survey link attached. To increase the response rate two follow-up emails were distributed (Dillman, 2007). These emails thanked those who already participated in the investigation and encouraged others to take the survey. Of the 200 surveys distributed a total of 58 Y professionals participated in the study representing a 29% response rate.

Respondents were asked to select from a pool of three candidates for potential interviews and describe why they selected the candidate. For this selection process, candidates were differentiated by five criteria including GPA, Work Experience in the field, Volunteer Experience in the field, Maintaining Professional Memberships, and Maintaining Professional Verifications. Next, the survey asked respondents to rank the five criteria in order of importance in their applicant screening process. The final two open-ended questions sought to determine the importance of volunteer experience in the applicant screening process. This section included the following research questions:

RQ1: Will volunteer experience serve as a suitable substitution for paid experiences in the eyes of those screening potential candidates for entry-level recreation and sport professionals?

RQ2: Does a candidate's volunteer experience impact decisions to offer the candidate an interview?

RQ3: How does volunteer experience affect your decision to offer a candidate an interview?

Data Analysis

The survey collected demographic information including gender and respondents position within their Y. This data revealed that 64% of the sample was male and 36% of the sample was female. Individuals representing President and CEO and Executive Director positions within the Y made up a combined 56% of the survey's respondents. Additional results of the analysis of the respondents' role within their Y or association are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Current Role within the Y

Role	Number	Percentage of Respondents
President and CEO	16	28
Executive Director	16	28
Associate Executive Director	6	10
Branch Director	5	9
Program Director	5	9
Senior Program Director	4	7
Director	3	5
Human Resource Director	2	3
VP Human Resources	1	2

Results

Respondents ranked the five criteria (GPA, Professional Certifications, Professional Memberships, Volunteer Experience in the Field, and Work Experience in the Field) in order of importance in the hiring decision. The data indicated working experience in the field and volunteer experience in the field ranked first and second respectively. The results showed that 88% of the respondents felt volunteer experience mattered in their decision to offer the candidate an interview. Additional results of the criteria ranking are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Criteria Ranking

<u>Criteria</u>	<u>Rank</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>
Work in the field	1	37
Volunteer Experience in the field	2	27
GPA	3	17
Professional Certifications	3	17
Professional Memberships	4	16

n = 58

The researchers used qualitative methods to analyze the open-ended responses on the survey. An inductive analysis of this data provided further insight into the opinions of the employers on the criteria important in the hiring process, specifically the impact of volunteerism. The researchers individually reviewed all 58 responses line by line for commonalities. After the individual coding of data, the team collectively reviewed, analyzed and discussed the findings. An agreement was reached on three consistent themes, 1) Experience, either paid or volunteer is the most important criteria considered during the hiring process, 2) A student's GPA is rarely considered unless used in conjunction with other criteria, and, 3) The Y employers consistently looked for key personality traits that fit their organizational goals. Each of these themes support the data ranked from the previous questions.

The first theme supports previous research and efforts by faculty to encourage students to seek opportunities for experience. It is important that students work and/or volunteer in jobs within their field of study. The majority of the respondents mentioned the "value" of having experience and that "it got their attention." The second theme also supports prior research, showing it is important to maintain a quality GPA, but without the experience, it may not be enough to secure a job upon graduation. Respondents often referred to the GPA as a "lesser factor" in their hiring decision and as long as it was "acceptable" it did not impact hiring decisions. The third theme is interesting in that several key characteristics and personality traits were described consistently by the respondents. The majority of the employers spoke about "passion", "commitment", "dedication" and "enthusiasm" for the field. They looked for these traits while reviewing the criteria and many indicated that volunteer experience was an indication of passion and commitment.

Discussion and Conclusion

There are several implications from this study for both volunteer program administrators and faculty of programs that train future sport and recreation professionals. First, there is a need for collaboration among organizations like the Y that seek volunteers and sport and recreation department students who need this experience to enhance their educational experience. Volunteer program administrators should seek opportunities to work with faculty and students in their area. Many times faculty encourages involvement and discusses those concepts that can be put into practice with real life work experiences and volunteer opportunities provided by local agencies.

These relationships provide a win-win for both the agency and the student. Students are young and excited about a future career and provide a large and qualified pool of volunteers. Creating such partnerships between schools and volunteer organizations provides opportunities to the student/future professional, support for the faculty and the organization. Also, the volunteer administrators and agencies can build a network of future employees, while the student is building their resume and learning about future employment. Finally, study findings suggest those in positions to screen resumes view volunteer experience as representing important personality characteristics of potential employees. These personality characteristics (i.e. passion, commitment, dedication, enthusiasm, and work ethic) cannot necessarily be taught in the classroom but may be developed or enhanced via involvement in profession related volunteer opportunities.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of the investigation is the study's sample of only individuals seeking entry-level professionals at YMCAs. The study's sample selection limits the ability of the researchers to generalize the findings to this organization or similar organizations. Future research may expand the sample to include other park, recreation, sport and non-profit organizations. A second limitation of the investigation is the criteria examined. The researchers only sought information relating to volunteer and/or work experience, professional membership, GPA, and professional certifications. Future research may also explore whether volunteer program administrators consider the same personality characteristics as potential employers do when they recruit for their volunteer pool. Future research may also expand on additional benefits students gain from volunteer experiences and their relationship to future employment. Finally, a pedagogical question may focus on what activities, experiences, and opportunities can faculty provide to help enhance personality qualities (i.e. passion, dedication, drive, work ethic) that future employers seek. It is at times easier to teach technical skills needed to be successful in the field but sometimes more difficult to develop soft skills or personal characteristics that contribute to success.

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