

Volunteers as a unique organizational resource: Conceptualizations in practice and management responses - Lessons from Switzerland

Sibylle Studer

Research officer, Centre for Philanthropy Studies (CEPS)

University of Basel

Peter Merian-Weg 6, P.O. 4653, CH-4002 Basel, Switzerland

Tel. 0041 61 267 23 92 * FAX 0041 61 267 23 93 * E-mail: sibylle.studer@unibas.ch

Georg von Schnurbein, Ph.D.

Director / Assistant Professor, Centre for Philanthropy Studies (CEPS)

University of Basel

Peter Merian-Weg 6, P.O. 4653, CH-4002 Basel, Switzerland

Tel. 0041 61 267 23 92 * FAX 0041 61 267 23 93 * E-mail: georg.vonschnurbein@unibas.ch

Abstract

Volunteers' contribution to non-profit organizations (NPO) is immense, and it is often argued that they provide complementary, rather than substitute services. Exploring in as far as volunteers are perceived as a unique organizational resource, this article discusses literature and qualitative data of 22 interviews with 3 expert groups: volunteer resource managers, volunteer researchers, and representatives of Benevol Switzerland, Association of Competence Centers for Volunteering. The data shows that volunteers are perceived as a unique resource, whereas the explicitness with respect to the volunteers' role and position in the organization varies. Our interviewees highlight the uniqueness of volunteers' in moments of reflection about the added values of volunteers such as 'heart competence', ambassadorial representation, critical inputs and spirit. Volunteer resource managers respond to the uniqueness of volunteers by persuasion, multilingualism, empathy, framing boundedness and feedback. These alternative volunteer resource management strategies focus on emotion, interaction and negotiation in order to create a dialog between the organization and the volunteers, appreciating the distinctive features of volunteers. The findings show that reflection about the uniqueness of the volunteer resource reveal management responses which have a high potential to complement traditional human resource management (HRM) instruments. Further research is needed on how these two approaches - HRM and management responses to the uniqueness of volunteers' - can be effectively combined.

Key Words: added value, volunteer resource, volunteer management

Introduction

Volunteering is one of the main characteristics that distinguish non-profit organizations (NPO) from other organizational forms (Salamon & Anheier, 1992). Statistics show the importance of volunteers' contribution to NPO, e.g. the data provided by Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project. It is

often argued that volunteering not only substitutes, but also complements the work of paid staff (Handy, Mook, & Quarter, 2008; Preston, 2006). This implies that volunteering is distinct from paid work, but little is known about the unique value of volunteering so far (Metz, Roza, van Baren, Meijs, & Hoogervost, 2011).

This article explores in as far as volunteers are perceived as unique resource in the field of volunteer resource management. This main research question is divided into two sub-questions: What are the added values volunteers contribute to the activities of non-profit organizations (NPO), compared to paid staff? And how can management respond to the uniqueness of volunteers? In order to answer these questions, we first briefly review literature and then go into qualitative data from expert interviews.

The uniqueness of volunteers in volunteer resource management – Literature review

The distinctive nature of volunteers is revealed in various discussions about similarities and differences between volunteers and paid staff. Based on a literature review, Studer & von Schnurbein (2012) argue that the majority of publications on volunteering in organizational contexts emphasizes the differences, rather than the similarities, between volunteers and paid staff. Volunteers and paid staff differ with respect to motivation, compliance, resources and expectations. Several authors highlight aspects which make volunteers unique: their potential for sense production (Wehner, Mieg, & Güntert, 2006) by “emotional and value-based activity” (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008, p. 94) and the distinctive effect of a voluntary service on the client compared to a paid service (Metz, et al., 2011). Thus, volunteers generally are perceived to be distinctive from paid staff in literature on volunteering.

In literature on volunteer resource management the uniqueness of the volunteer resource is reflected to a lesser extent. Volunteer resource management literature is strongly informed by the human resource management (HRM), following the process going from planning to recruiting onto

orientation to performance assurance. While this ‘workplace model’ is prominent, some research differentiates between volunteers and paid staff (Rochester, Paine, Howlett, & Zimmeck, 2010). For example, Rice & Fallon (2011) show that three organizational care variables – recognition, respect, and welfare – have a higher explanation power for volunteers’ satisfaction and retention compared to the satisfaction and retention of paid staff. Also, research contrasts alternative management orientations against the traditional HRM approach, e.g. the ‘regenerative volunteer management’ (Brudney & Meijs, 2009) or the ‘homegrown model’ (Rochester, et al., 2010). It should be mentioned that the HRM approach transferred onto the volunteer resource management is a rather orthodox one (Smith, 1996). Only a few efforts have been taken to transfer newer HRM approaches onto the volunteer resource management context (Graf & Gmür, 2010; Merrill, 2010 [2003]). How to break these orientations down to concrete management practice remains largely unexplored. Hence, literature highlighting the uniqueness of volunteers supports the often-stated argument that the transfer of HRM onto volunteer resource management is not enough (e.g. Hustinx, Cnaan, & Handy, 2010), while implications of alternative management orientations for concrete management practice need further exploration.

To sum up, there is a certain consensus in literature on perceiving volunteers as distinct from paid staff, calling for interventions distinct from HRM. Still, HRM is the main theoretical framing used for volunteer resource management. In the following sections we explore the added values attributed to volunteers in the field and how management responds to the uniqueness of volunteers in practice.

The uniqueness of volunteers – insights from expert interviews

Research design

Research focus. This article is based on data collected for a research project, which aims at enhancing the understanding of volunteer resource management from an organizational perspective. The interview guide consists of a collection of research gaps identified by the authors, such as indicators of volunteer resource management quality, current challenges and central issues of volunteer resource management and the extent to which volunteers are perceived as a unique resource. This article mainly focuses on the latter: exploring conceptualizations of the uniqueness of volunteers and responses to them.

Sample. In order to obtain information on volunteer resource management from an organizational perspective, we chose to

interview three expert groups having a broad overview over organizational structures and representing the heterogeneous NPO population (see Table 1 and Figures 1&2): 12 volunteer resource managers* (VRMs) of NPO with different principal activities and size, 5 executive directors of the regional offices of BENEVOL Switzerland, Association of Competence Centers for Volunteering, who consult NPO in the collaboration with volunteers and help persons to find volunteering assignments, and 5 academics from different disciplines doing research on volunteering and seeing into various NPO. The interviews took 30 to 120 minutes.

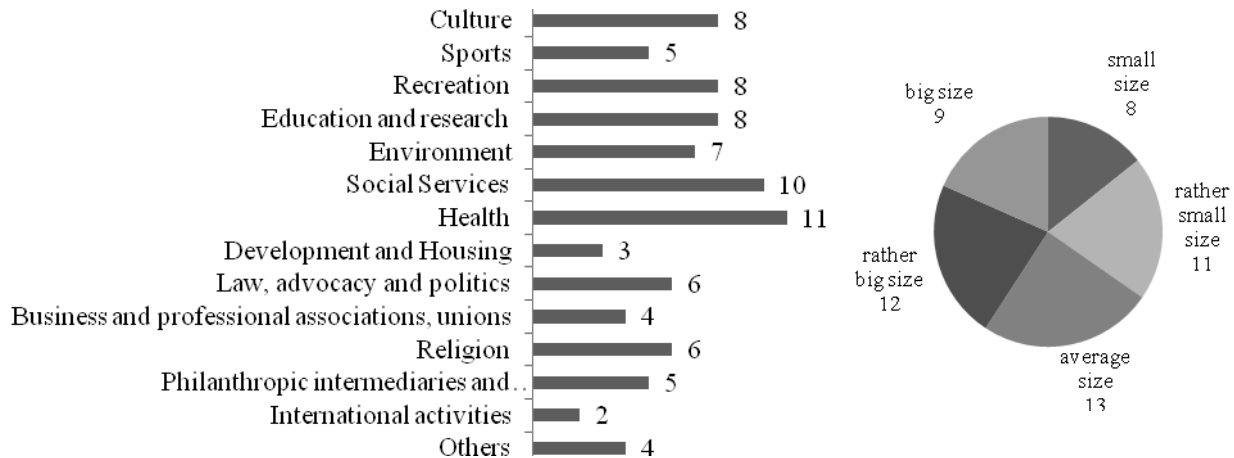
*Please note, we use this term as defined by IJOVA. In the Swiss context, many organizations do not have a formal volunteer resource management position. This position is often held by the executive director.

Table 1
Characteristics of the interviewees

	Min	Max	Average	Total
Age	28	70	46	
Years of experience in volunteering	0	60	16	355
Years of experience in honorary posts (boards)	0	40	12	253
Female				9
Male				13

Figure 1 and 2

Number of interviewees working with organizations of different principal activities and size (multiple answers were allowed). We used the following question for size classes: “Your experience on volunteer management is based on experiences in organizations of which size, in relation to other NPO in Switzerland?”



Methods. Twenty-two problem-centered interviews were conducted (Witzel, 2000; Witzel & Reiter, 2012). The interviews started with an introduction about the interviewer’s cognitive interests and were followed by opening questions about the concrete context within which each individual interviewee interacts with volunteers. Next, open questions from the interview guide were used to generate narratives for a general exploration and a list of ad-hoc questions served to intensify answers on problematic issues. Additionally, techniques for specific exploration were applied, such as discursive validation and confrontation (Witzel, 2000; Witzel & Reiter, 2012). After each interview, a postscript was written on the focus and priorities emphasized by the interviewee and on the researcher’s reflections on core categories. While the open questions asked remained the same during the whole research process, the postscripts informed the list of ad-hoc questions in order to intensify answers referring to emergent core categories in future interviews. The interview data were analyzed applying open coding in the beginning and selective coding in the later stages of analysis, which were informed by the postscript of the interviews

(Strauss, 1998). Additionally, the strategy of maximizing and minimizing differences was applied on the level of interview questions and expert groups in order to explore the usability, characteristics and scope of the emergent core categories (Glaser & Strauss, 2010). In the next sections, we present some core categories derived from data analysis.

Findings - volunteers’ added values

In our attempt to understand the uniqueness of volunteers, we found many stories about added values of volunteers, which can be categorized around the following issues:

Heart competence. Interviewees from all expert groups tell stories about how the quality of a service changes when the service is based on the expression of free will of volunteers rather than based on the duty of paid staff. This seems to be especially important in care services, where the acceptance of help is crucial for the recovery of the client. Interviewees value the way volunteers naturally engage in relationships. A representative of Benevol describes this unique quality of volunteers as ‘heart competence’, in contrast to social and intellectual competences.

Critical thinking from different backgrounds. Interviewees from all expert groups appreciate the various skills and experiences from volunteers of different socio-economic backgrounds, even though this heterogeneity is also perceived as challenge (especially by VRMs). Bringing in a view from the outside, volunteers are highly regarded for their potential to identify blind spots in organizational behavior. One VRM reports that volunteers ask about the “why?” of activities far more often than paid staff do. Working with volunteers demands from VRMs to challenge existing procedures and own habits. Another VRM elaborates how helpful volunteers are to avoid ‘business myopia’ (*Betriebsblindheit*). Hence, the variety in resources and the sense-seeking qualities of volunteers are perceived as unique assets for organizational development.

Ambassadors. Several interviewees – especially the representatives of Benevol – mention the role of volunteers as ‘ambassadors’ of the organization. An enthusiastic volunteer telling stories about the impact of an organization’s activities constitute an invaluable promotion which could not be provided with the same effects by paid staff. Accordingly, volunteers contribute in a unique way to the spread of word and reputation of an organization.

Spirit. All three expert groups praise the dynamism, joy and good mood volunteers bring into the organization. One VRM perceives volunteers as role model for the (young) employees showing them that people are successfully engaged in areas other than the one they are trained for. Others stress the exceptional intrinsic motivation and dedication of volunteers. Hence, volunteers contribute to a good organizational climate and provide unique role models.

While interviewees generally agree on added values of volunteers, variation exist in

the extent to which this leads to reflect the uniqueness of volunteers in the volunteers’ role and position in the organization, as outlined in the following.

Role – cost saving vs. priceless quality enhancement. The interviewees vary in the extent to which they define the volunteers’ main role as providing costless services (helping to save money in core services) versus providing priceless services (helping to top core services with additional quality). Asking our interviewees about the added value of volunteers, a common answer was that volunteers enable to provide services the organization could not pay for. When intensifying the answers to this topic, we found that some interviewees from all three expert groups did not talk about cost savings, but about services which there would never be a source of funding for. The following account of a café a nursing home – conjointly run by paid staff and volunteers – exemplifies this: When volunteers support to provide the service, more persons are scheduled, based on the reasoning that volunteers should have time to sit down, talk to the clients and spread a social atmosphere. It would be difficult to find a donor giving money to employ staff for this extra service. The same is true for much extra services in palliative care. Hence, while volunteers are at times perceived as mean for cost saving, the reasoning of ‘providing services we cannot pay for’ also refers to services which cannot be legitimized to pay for, but enhance service quality. This is in line with the argumentation of the representatives of Benevol, who demand that volunteers should never be used to cover a deficit in the core service provision of an organization, but to add quality at same costs. Accordingly, while perceptions of volunteers as means to save costs prevail in the forefront, interviewees vary in their explicitness of the quality enhancement and

extra services enabled uniquely by volunteers.

Position –volunteers as means vs. ends. Linked to the volunteers' role, the position attributed to volunteers with respect to the organizational aim varies. The majority of quotes contains wordings which indicate that volunteers are perceived as means to achieve the organizational aim, such as the volunteers contribute to, assist, provide etc. But when we asked for indicators for the quality and success of VRMs, the top answer across all three expert groups is 'when the volunteers are satisfied'. The augmentation of the volunteers' contribution to the organizational aim is rarely rated higher as performance indicator of VRMs than the volunteers' satisfaction. This implies that the well-being of the volunteer is judged highly important in relation to the organizations aim and therefore volunteers might also be perceived as part of the organizational aim. As one of the VRMs explains, he does not perceive volunteers as an added value, but as the main value of the organization. Only a minority of VRMs explicitly names volunteers as being part of the organizational aim. One VRM perceives the strategic body – including the VRM – as 'service providers' to the volunteers. Thus, while the perception of volunteers as a mean to achieve organizational goals is broadly accepted, volunteer satisfaction is of high priority for volunteer resource management; but volunteers are rarely explicitly conceptualized as organizational end.

To sum up, we identified several added values which demonstrate the uniqueness of volunteers. The extent to which the uniqueness of volunteers is reflected in the volunteers' main role and position in the organization varies. In the following section, management responses to the uniqueness of volunteer are explored.

Findings - management responses to the uniqueness of volunteers

By having conversations on the added values of volunteers, volunteer resource management quality and current challenges, we identified the following strategies used by VRMs in order to handle the uniqueness of volunteers in the organization.

Persuasion. All three expert groups call it a main task of VRM to clarify the perceptions of the volunteers' role in order to avoid feelings of competition or existential anxiety in paid staff. One VRM explains that her first priority is to create in the organization a consensus, that 'volunteers are useful, desirable and a joy'. Another VRM talks about 'cultivating an attitude in favor of the volunteers' and about 'awareness raising' for the importance and value of volunteering. Some VRMs utilize team meetings of paid staff in order to clarify roles and assure that paid staff are willing to collaborate with volunteers. Others engage volunteers in the same functions as paid staff, but frame it differently: E.g. one VRM 'enlists' volunteers to tasks, while paid staff are 'scheduled'. So the 'enlisted' volunteers are allowed to cancel their commitment at any time, while the 'scheduled' paid staff are expected to deliver the core services. When volunteers show up, they take the core services over so that paid staff have time to work on tasks they do not find time for when providing core services. Furthermore, all three expert groups stress the need for support by the strategic body in order to gain internal stakeholders for the volunteers' cause. VRMs highlight the utility of a written commitment to volunteers of the strategic body – e.g. by a concept or mission statement – in order to 'advocate' for the volunteers within the organization. Another VRM emphasizes the importance of continuity in the persuasion work when he states that he has to stress the importance of volunteer engagement over and over again,

especially in front of the members of the organization. Hence, volunteer coordinators do persuasion work in front of paid staff and other internal stakeholders in order to clarify the perception and the role of the volunteer resource, which seems to be in continuous redefinition and negotiation.

Multilinguism. All three expert groups underline the importance of continuous and target group-sensitive communication with and about volunteers. A VRM terms the challenge to provide an ‘interface’ between the volunteers and the organization, which includes a process monitoring in order to assure that work is clearly delegated, well understood by the volunteers and delivered in a way it can be integrated in the work processes of paid staff. Another interviewee states that ‘you need to learn their [the volunteers’] language first’, explaining that he deploys a different wording, but also a different communication style and rationale when talking to volunteers as when talking to other stakeholders in the organization. For example, a simple but new schedule sheet was not introduced by an email as one would send to paid staff, but by a presentation and discussion on a regional gathering of volunteers followed by a several months’ process in order to get it accepted. Additionally, several interviewees call it a challenge to find a common basis for communication between and with volunteers who constitute a very heterogeneous group of people. In contexts where persons with different professional and institutional backgrounds interact, the term ‘multilinguism’ was used, a term recently referred to by Wehner & Gentile (2012). Multilinguism demands high time investments and competences in communication, as interviewees of all three expert groups assert. Thus, interviewees acknowledge that a distinct language and rationale is needed to communicate with volunteers and that VRM should provide an

‘interface’ between different organizational stakeholders, which demands an investment of time and high communication skills.

Expressing empathy, balancing and framing boundedness. Interviewees of all three expert groups emphasize the importance to simultaneously consider both, expressing empathy for the volunteers and showing responsibility for the organizations’ needs. VRMs report that volunteers expect high personal engagement from VRMs, that VRMs are asked to perceive volunteers as human beings in its entirety (not only as service providers) and to consider their reflections about the volunteer assignment in order to avoid volunteers’ demotivation. Meanwhile, VRMs have to deal with suggestions of volunteers which are sometimes based on a ‘limited view shaped by the moment’ which does not correspond to the organizational structures or historical development. One VRM resumes aptly ‘it is important, that they [the volunteers] experience appreciation, that they can express themselves and can get involved (*‘sich einbringen’*) and at the same time they have to integrate themselves into existing structures. You cannot do everything they want’. One way to deal with this challenge is to involve volunteers in the development of work procedures and new projects, where volunteers can contribute their ideas but also learn to consider the view of different organizational stakeholders on the organization.

Interviewees of all three expert groups mention the challenge of ‘leading without power’ and that it is especially difficult to say ‘no’ to a volunteer in comparison to paid staff. One way to deal with this is to be very clear about expectations. While it is considered to be difficult to say ‘no’ to volunteers, it seems to be essential to do so. We found calls for setting volunteers limits in the narratives of practically all the interviewees. When it comes to over-

identification with the task or work overload, unauthorized actions (e.g. acting against the organizational working method) or misleading communication in the name of the organization (e.g. to personal or religiously-motivated communication), VRMs are asked to step into dialog with the volunteer, to induce reflection in volunteers about the limits of volunteering and to stop the volunteer's activity in order to prevent harm to the client, the volunteers and the organization. Accordingly, the uniqueness of the volunteer resource asks for empathy and balancing acts (Jäger, Beyes, & Kreutzer, 2009), which also include to frame the boundedness of volunteering and to assure that the limits of what volunteering is able to provide without doing harm are not crossed

Performance feedback vs. performance assessment. Interviewees of all three expert groups express a critical attitude towards the performance assessment of volunteers arguing as following: Defining objective, 'professional' criteria for volunteer performance equalizes volunteering with paid work and therefore puts the unique quality of the volunteers' activity – based on individual expression of free will and emotional engagement – at risk. Quantitative measurements are perceived to be inadequate for measuring the volunteers' contribution to the organizational aim. Instead, interviewees propose feedback rounds, regular appraisal interviews, self-evaluation, and satisfaction measurements (the latter mostly mentioned by academics). A concrete example is illustrated by a VRM who collects 'echoes' from volunteers in conversations and emails and includes them into the social balance sheet. Hence, the valuation of the volunteers' unique quality leads to the rejection of objective performance assessment with quantitative indicators, but to the appreciation of feedback loops and satisfaction assurance.

To sum up, several management responses to the uniqueness of volunteers were identified which are oriented towards emotion, interaction and negotiation (in the sense of balancing and mediating conflict). In the following discussion, we are combining our findings on added values and management responses.

Discussion & Implications

The study reviewed by this article primarily focuses on the perception of volunteers as unique organizational resource. While the literature review supports our assumption that volunteers constitute a resource distinctive from paid staff, our findings inform little about the circumstances under which the similarities of volunteers and paid staff are highlighted or about the importance given to these. Additionally, the sample was a purposive one and the majority of the experts we selected as interviewees are deeply interested in the development of a function or even a profession for volunteer management. This selection might have influenced the sample in a way that our analysis depicts a rather homogenous opinion. A sample including 'outliers' – e.g. personnel managers explicitly integrating volunteers in their HRM – would probably have revealed a more heterogenous picture. So with the sample, we intended to cover volunteer management in NPO of different size and different principal activities, but the scope of our analysis is limited by the initial focus on volunteers as a distinct resource compared to paid staff and the selection of interviewees with a high interest in the development of a volunteer management function.

While we focused on the uniqueness of volunteers in this article, we do not intend to deny that volunteers are perceived as a category of personnel at times. Interestingly, when interviewees use the term personnel

with respect to volunteers, they mostly refer to a concrete situation. For example, interviewees argue that volunteers are treated with the same respect as paid staff or that the complaints of volunteers are taken as serious as the one of paid staff. In the case of the nursing home café it was shown that volunteers and paid staff can hold the same

function, but be distinctive in the quality of service they provide. We assume that VRMs are challenged to handle differences and similarities between volunteers and paid staff simultaneously, depicting volunteers situationally as unique or as personnel category, which is outlined in Table 2.

Table 2

Core categories used for analyzing volunteers as a unique organizational resource

	Uniqueness of Volunteers	↔	Volunteers as Personnel Category
Volunteers' Role	Quality enhancement	↔	Cost effectiveness (in core service)
Volunteers' Position	Mean and end	↔	Mean
Volunteers' added value	Heart competence Spirit	Critical thinking Ambassadors	Cost saving
Management Responses	Expressing empathy Performance feedback	Multilingualism Persuasion framing boundedness	HRM instruments
Outcome Perspective	Service quality	Organizational climate/culture Organizational development Reputation	Core service delivery
Modes of Action	Emotion	Negotiation/interaction/ cognition	Efficiency

Table 2 shows categories spanning up a space for variation in volunteer resource management. Row 1 illustrates a continuum between highlighting volunteers as unique or as personnel category. Additionally, we identified continua with respect to the main role (row 2) and position (row 3) interviewees' attributes to volunteers, related to the different added values of volunteers emphasized. Interviewees vary in the extent to which they appreciate the volunteers' contribution to quality enhancement toping the core services (in contrast to cost savings

in core services) and in the extent to which volunteers are perceived as being part of the organizational aim (in contrast to being a mean to an end, see also Rochester, et al., 2010). With respect to the volunteers' quality in the relationship with clients in direct services is well established ('heart competence', see also Metz, et al., 2011). We see further potential in volunteers' contribution to quality enhancement in indirect services, whereby the added values of volunteers as ambassador and 'critical

input giver' could provide interesting starting points for further exploration.

In the second part of table 2 we provide an overview on how the added values of volunteers (row 4) and the management responses (row 5) can be further specified in respect to the outcome perspective (row 6) and modes of action (row 7). Depending on the added value of volunteers' emphasized, volunteers are engaged in strengthening service quality, organizational climate, organizational development, reputation or core service delivery. Additionally, we argue that the management responses to the added values of volunteers express modes of action focusing on emotion, interaction and negotiation. One could argue that these management responses compromise classical leadership competences. We suggest that it is not only about (top-down or bottom-up) leadership of volunteers, but about (horizontally) moderating interactions and providing an interface between different stakeholders of the organization. It would be interesting to further explore which role and position VRMs is given in the organizational structure and how this affects their capacity to effectively manage interfaces and group interactions.

Concluding remarks

Data show that volunteers are perceived as unique organizational resource. The uniqueness of volunteers is demonstrated in the added values contributed by volunteers, such as heart competence, ambassadorial representation, spirit, critical thinking, and also cost savings. But the extent to which the uniqueness of volunteers is reflected in the volunteers' main role and position in the organization varies.

Management responds to the uniqueness of volunteers by persuasion, multilinguism, empathy, framing

boundedness and feedback; all of which focus on emotion, interaction and negotiation. They not only aim at volunteers, but at all internal stakeholders of the organization. Further research is needed on how management responses to the uniqueness of volunteers and traditional HRM instruments treating volunteers as personnel category can be effectively combined.

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About the Authors

Sibylle Studer holds a master degree in Cultural Anthropology, with Management&Economics and International Relations as minors. She is currently working as research officer and writing her PhD Thesis in volunteer coordination. Besides her studies she is/was engaged in several voluntary organizations. Amongst others, she was coordinating international youth exchanges between Switzerland and Togo, West Africa.

Georg von Schnurbein received his PhD in 2008 and holds a master degree in Business Administration with a minor in Political Science. Currently, he is Assistant Professor of foundation management and director of the Centre for Philanthropy Studies (CEPS) of the University of Basle.