

**The Importance of Initial Assignment Quality and Staff Treatment of New Volunteers:  
A Field Test of the Hobson-Heler Model of Nonprofit Agency “Volunteer-Friendliness”**

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**Abstract**

*Using the Hobson-Heler model of nonprofit agency “volunteer-friendliness,” the impact of initial assignment quality and treatment by staff on volunteer satisfaction and subsequent continuation of volunteering, and intentions to volunteer in the future and make donations was evaluated with a field sample of 542. Subjects were students at a university commuter campus, assigned to complete a 10-hour service learning project with local United Way affiliates. A written survey was administered at the conclusion of their assignment. Results strongly supported the Hobson-Heler model and indicated that: (1) initial assignment quality and treatment by staff were major determinants of satisfaction and (2) satisfaction was significantly related to continuation of volunteering, likelihood of future volunteering, and likelihood of making future financial contributions.*

**Keywords:**

volunteers, volunteer-friendly, satisfaction

**Introduction**

Several significant developments that affect nonprofits and their interaction with volunteers have been chronicled recently by both researchers and the popular press. The “good news” for nonprofits is that the number of volunteers has been increasing and this trend is projected to continue (Merrill, 2006). An estimated total of 65.4 million Americans volunteered in 2005, with the figure expected to rise to 75 million by 2010 (*Time*, September 4, 2006).

The major challenges facing nonprofits are three-fold. First, there has been

explosive growth in the size of the nonprofit sector. The Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University (2006) estimated a 67% increase in registered 501(c)(3) organizations from 1995 (626,225) to 2005 (1,045,979). Thus, there are substantially more nonprofits competing for volunteers.

A second challenge noted by Merrill (2006) and others centers on the evolving needs/expectations of volunteers. Among the most important are: (1) the desire for meaningful work, (2) scheduling accommodation, (3) flexible assignments, and (4) the availability of short-term project

options. It appears that volunteers are becoming more selective when considering opportunities to give their time and less likely to accept or tolerate unfulfilling work.

Unfortunately, many nonprofits have been slow to respond to the evolving needs/expectations of volunteers. This third challenge perhaps represents a generalized lack of awareness on the part of nonprofits and inability or unwillingness to modify traditional approaches to engaging volunteers (Merrill, 2006).

Evidence confirming the serious consequences associated with this problem appeared in *Time* (September 4, 2006). The article cited (p. 76) an estimate by the Corporation for National and Community Service that “nearly 38 million Americans who had volunteered with a nonprofit in the past didn’t show up last year [2005].” It is likely that nonprofits’ collective failure to meet the needs/expectations of these individuals resulted in their unwillingness to continue volunteering.

In discussing global trends and challenges for volunteering, Merrill (2006) called for increased sensitivity and flexibility on the part of nonprofits in structuring opportunities to meet the changing needs/expectations of volunteers. Hobson, Rominger, Malec, Hobson, and Evans (1996) developed a conceptual model of nonprofit “volunteer-friendliness” that can be very useful in understanding and improving the ways in which agencies engage volunteers.

### **Volunteer Friendly Model**

Hobson et al. (p. 29) defined volunteer-friendliness as “the extent to which an agency’s staff, policies, and programs provide a positive, pleasant, and rewarding experience for volunteers and prospective volunteers.” Their model consists of four

major components: (1) Volunteer Attraction and Recruitment, (2) Initial Personal Interaction with Agency Staff, (3) Volunteer Utilization and Assignment, and (4) Post-Volunteering Follow-Up.

The fundamental premise of the model is that volunteer-friendly nonprofits will have a positive impact on prospective and current volunteers through the development of favorable perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. Hypothesized benefits for nonprofits include such factors as: (1) more effective recruitment of volunteers, (2) enhanced retention of volunteers, (3) increased volunteer productivity, and (4) potential expansion of the financial donor base.

Subsequent research with the Hobson et al. model involved the operational definition, field measurement, and norming of initial telephone contact quality between prospective volunteers and nonprofit staff in 500 agencies (Hobson & Malec, 1999). In 2000, Malec, Hobson, and Guzewicz developed, field tested, and normed a survey tool (Hobson-Heler Volunteer-Friendly Index<sup>®</sup>) to systematically measure all components in the conceptual model. Heler (formerly Malec) and Hobson (2002) demonstrated the utility and value of Hackman and Oldham’s (1976, 1980) Job Characteristics Model of job design in measuring the quality of work assignments given to volunteers.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to test five specific propositions stemming from the Hobson-Heler Volunteer-Friendly Model concerning hypothesized determinants and consequences of volunteer satisfaction. They include:

- Proposition 1: Volunteer job quality is positively correlated with volunteer satisfaction.  
Proposition 2: Perceived treatment of volunteers by nonprofit agency staff is positively correlated with volunteer satisfaction.  
Proposition 3: Volunteer satisfaction is positively correlated with continuation of volunteering.  
Proposition 4: Volunteer satisfaction is positively correlated with intent to volunteer in the future.  
Proposition 5: Volunteer satisfaction is positively correlated with intent to donate financially in the future.

## Methods

### *Subjects*

The subjects in this study were 542 undergraduate and MBA students enrolled in one of three business classes: (1) freshman/sophomore level Introduction to Business, (2) junior/senior level Organizational Behavior and Leadership, and (3) graduate level Management and Organizational Behavior. All of the subjects were students at a midwestern regional campus of a state university, located in an urban setting.

### *Volunteer Project*

One of the course requirements for students in each of the above mentioned classes involved the completion of a 10-hour volunteer project at a local nonprofit organization and preparation of a 1-2 page final report. The purpose of the volunteer project was to introduce and reinforce the concept of social responsibility, and provide students with “hands-on” experience working with the nonprofit sector. The local United Way agency partnered with the university in sponsoring the project.

Guidelines for the completion of the volunteer project were distributed at the beginning of each course, along with a list of the 48 agencies sponsored by the county United Way. Students were not limited to the listed agencies, but were encouraged to identify a local nonprofit that they were

interested in helping. The only restrictions included no proselytizing or involvement with hate groups.

### *Volunteer Survey*

Upon concluding their 10-hour volunteer project at the end of a semester, students could earn 20 in-class participation points by voluntarily and anonymously completing the survey described below. Those who did so were allowed to print their names on a roster that was circulated in class, in order to receive the extra points. The written survey consisted of the following items:

- (1) Job Quality Hackman and Oldham (1976, 1980) developed a theory of job quality known as the Job Characteristics Model and a measurement tool called the Job Diagnostic Survey (JDS). This tool consists of a series of descriptive statements that are rated on a 1-7 scale, from *low* to *high*. Five core job dimensions are assessed by the JDS, including:
  - a. Skill Variety – the degree to which a job requires a variety of different activities in carrying out the work.
  - b. Task Identity – the degree to which a job requires completion of a whole and identifiable piece of work.
  - c. Task Significance – the degree to which a job has a substantial impact on the lives of other people.

d. Autonomy – the degree to which a job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the individual in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out.

e. Feedback – the degree to which carrying out the work on a job provides an individual with direct and clear information about performance effectiveness.

(2) Staff Treatment Perceived treatment by agency staff was measured on a 1-10 scale, from *low* to *high*.

(3) Satisfaction Overall satisfaction with the volunteer experience was assessed on a 1-10 scale, from low to high.

(4) Volunteer Work Continuation Whether students continued their volunteer work after completion of the 10-hour class project was measured with a simple *yes/no* question.

(5) Future Volunteering The likelihood of volunteering at the agency again in the future was evaluated on a 1-10 scale, from *low* to *high*.

(6) Future Financial Donation The likelihood of making a financial donation to the agency in the future was assessed on a 1-10 scale, from *low* to *high*.

(7) Biographic Information Basic biographic information was collected, including age, gender, marital status, hours employed per week, and class level.

#### *Data Analysis*

The following analyses were conducted. First, basic descriptive statistics were calculated for demographic characteristics of the sample. These included frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations.

Second, using Hackman and Oldham's Job Characteristics Model, the quality of jobs given to volunteers was determined. Specifically, they recommend computing an overall measure of job quality, known as the Motivating Potential Score (MPS). This value is calculated by combining scores on the five core job dimensions discussed above in the following manner:  $MPS = (\text{Skill Variety} + \text{Task Identity} + \text{Task Significance})/3 \times \text{Autonomy} \times \text{Feedback}$ .

Third, the relationship between job quality and volunteer satisfaction was examined by calculating the correlation between MPS and rated volunteer satisfaction. In addition, the correlations between each of the five core job dimensions and volunteer satisfaction were also computed.

Fourth, the degree to which treatment by staff was related to volunteer satisfaction was evaluated by calculating the correlation between the two.

Fifth, the combined effects (and relative importance) of job quality and staff treatment on volunteer satisfaction were assessed using a statistical procedure known as multiple regression. Specifically, the five core job dimensions and staff treatment were tested as possible determinants or predictors of volunteer satisfaction.

Sixth, the impact of volunteer satisfaction on continuation of volunteering was determined by computing a special type of correlation. The point-biserial correlation is used when one variable is measured on a continuous scale (volunteer satisfaction was rated from 1-10) and the second is measured with two categories (volunteer continuation was measured as either *yes* or *no*).

Seventh, the relationship between volunteer satisfaction and the likelihood of volunteering in the future was examined by calculating the correlation between them. Finally, in the eighth analysis, the linkage between volunteer satisfaction and

likelihood of making future financial donations was investigated by computing the correlation between the two.

In all instances, the test statistics appropriate for each analysis were accompanied by two important additional indicators. First, the likelihood that the findings occurred by chance was indexed by an associated probability level (or p-value) and second, the strength of relationships between variables was estimated with an effect size. In this study, effect sizes consisted of correlation values squared –  $r^2$  or  $R^2$ .

## Results

### *Sample Demographic Characteristics*

Demographic characteristics of the sample of 542 subjects were as follows (Table 1). NOTE: Due to limited missing data, the item totals do not all equal 542.

Table 1.

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<u>Age:</u>	Mean = 25.6, Standard Deviation = 7.7
<u>Gender:</u>	Male - 230 (43.7%) Female - 296 (56.3%)
<b>Marital</b>	
<u>Status:</u>	Single - 376 (71.4%) Married - 126 (24.0%) Divorced - 24 (4.6%)
<u>Hours Worked Per Week:</u>	Mean = 31.0, Standard Deviation = 16.6
<u>Class</u>	
<u>Level:</u>	Freshman/Sophomore - 206 (38.5%) Junior/Senior - 194 (36.3%) Graduate - 135 (25.2%)

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### *Determinants of Volunteer Satisfaction*

Complete results of the statistical testing for the five propositions evaluated in this paper are provided in the Appendix.

*Proposition 1.* Volunteer job quality is positively correlated with volunteer satisfaction. A strong, statistically significant, positive correlation ( $r = .49$ ) was found between overall job quality (Hackman and Oldham's Motivating Potential Score) and volunteer satisfaction. In addition, the correlations between each of the five core job dimensions and volunteer satisfaction were also large, positive, and statistically significant. Specifically, the computed correlations were .45 for skill variety, .37 for task identity, .51 for task significance, .35 for autonomy, and .48 for feedback.

These results provide solid support for Proposition 1. It appears that the quality of job assignments given to new volunteers is an important determinant of their satisfaction with volunteering.

*Proposition 2.* Perceived treatment of volunteer by nonprofit agency staff is positively correlated with volunteer satisfaction. Obtained results provided validation of Proposition 2. Perceived treatment by agency staff was significantly correlated with volunteer satisfaction ( $r = .39$ ). This finding confirms that well-treated volunteers are more likely to be satisfied with their volunteer experience than those treated poorly by agency staff.

The multiple regression analysis that was performed allowed for an assessment of the combined effects of job quality and staff treatment on volunteer satisfaction, as well as an evaluation of their relative importance.

Using Hackman and Oldham's five core job dimensions and perceived staff treatment as potential determinants of volunteer satisfaction, the results indicated that nearly half ( $R^2 = .46$ ) of the variance in satisfaction

scores could be explained by a combination of five of the above six factors. The relative order of importance, from highest to lowest was: (1) perceived treatment by staff, (2) task significance, (3) skill variety, (4) feedback, and (5) autonomy. The core job dimension of task identity was not found to be a statistically significant predictor in this analysis.

The multiple regression results provided compelling evidence of the importance of staff treatment and job quality in creating a satisfying experience for volunteers. Taken together, these two variables accounted for a sizeable 46% of the variance in volunteer satisfaction.

#### *Consequences of Volunteer Satisfaction*

*Proposition 3.* Volunteer satisfaction is positively correlated with continuation of volunteering. The obtained correlation between volunteer satisfaction and volunteer continuation (coded as 1 = *no*, 2 = *yes*) was .33 and statistically significant. Thus, satisfied volunteers were more likely to continue their agency work than those who were not satisfied with their initial experience, providing solid support for Proposition 3.

*Proposition 4.* Volunteer satisfaction is positively correlated with intent to volunteer in the future. The correlation between the two variables in this proposition was .63 and statistically significant. This finding confirms a very strong relationship between satisfaction and future volunteering, and confirms Proposition 4.

*Proposition 5.* Volunteer satisfaction is positively correlated with intent to donate financially in the future. Results yielded a correlation of .35, which was statistically significant. Satisfied volunteers indicated a higher likelihood of future donations than

those who were less satisfied with their experience, validating Proposition 5.

#### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Three principle conclusions can be reasonably drawn from the results of this study. First, strong support was provided for the validity of the Hobson-Heler Model of Nonprofit Volunteer Friendliness. Tests of the five model propositions all yielded statistically significant results, with large associated effect sizes.

Second, the perceived treatment of volunteers by agency staff and the quality of initial assignments were major determinants of volunteer satisfaction. Third, results confirmed that volunteer satisfaction was significantly related to three critically important outcome variables: (1) continuation of volunteer work, (2) likelihood of volunteering in the future, and (3) likelihood of making financial donations in the future.

#### **Implications**

##### *Nonprofit Administration*

Based upon the results of this study, there are several important implications for nonprofit administrators. First, a renewed focus on volunteer satisfaction and its role in overall agency success is clearly warranted. These findings suggest that regular measurement, analysis, and improvement of volunteer satisfaction is imperative. Constructing a satisfaction survey is relatively straightforward. Items can consist of a series of basic statements about volunteer experiences at an agency, including work assignments, interaction with clients, scheduling, and relations with staff. A simple 5-point response format can be used, from “*strongly disagree*” to “*strongly agree*.” Volunteers should be allowed to complete the satisfaction survey

Table 2.

<b>Five Core Job Dimensions and Motivating Potential Score</b>	<b>Student Volunteer Sample Means (n=542)</b>	<b>Original Normative Sample Means (n=6,930)</b>
Skill Variety	4.35	4.53
Task Identity	4.56	4.65
Task Significance	5.02	5.47
Autonomy	4.62	4.78
Job Feedback	4.66	4.81
MPS	116.20	122.10

anonymously. Responses can be entered into a spreadsheet and analyzed to provide means for all items. A review of item means will reveal agency strengths and areas for improvement.

Given the strong relationships found in this study between volunteer satisfaction and continued volunteering, future volunteering, and future donating, periodic measurement of volunteer satisfaction is essential. Results should be carefully reviewed and used to capitalize on existing agency strengths and improve areas of weakness.

Second, agency staff should be thoroughly briefed on their vital role in impacting volunteer satisfaction. Positive interaction with volunteers is critical to their retention, future volunteering, and likelihood of making financial donations. Agencies should revisit or develop standards for staff treatment of volunteers as internal customers, critical to organizational success. In many instances, it may be helpful to conduct staff training workshops to adequately address this issue.

Third, more attention is needed in developing high quality job assignments for volunteers. A comparison of the student volunteer sample in this study with Hackman and Oldham's original normative sample for the Job Diagnostic Survey (Hackman et al., 1978), including the five

core job dimensions and motivating potential score is particularly instructive.

In all five instances, the mean scores for the core job dimensions are lower in the volunteer sample than in the original sample. Not surprisingly, the mean MPS is lower as well. These results indicate that the average job performed by the student volunteers was less motivating than the average non-volunteer job in the original sample. Given the uncompensated nature of volunteer work, one could argue that jobs for volunteers should be more carefully designed to maximize their motivating potential. In view of the results obtained in this study, the typical nonprofit manager would benefit from using the Job Characteristics Model framework to assess and enhance the motivating potential of jobs given to volunteers.

When assigning work to volunteers, especially new volunteers, it is important for staff to resist the urge to give undesirable tasks to them. Reports from the volunteers in this study indicated that in many instances they were given menial, boring jobs to do, including sweeping floors, cleaning washrooms, picking up trash, "stuffing envelopes," making copies, and collating/stapling mailers.

When a new volunteer joins a nonprofit, there is a critical period during initial work

activities for the organization to effectively engage the individual and begin to foster motivation, commitment, loyalty, and a sense of fulfillment. High quality job assignments are essential to the success of this process.

A fourth implication centers on the finding that satisfied volunteers are more likely to donate financially to an agency in the future than dissatisfied ones. Assuming an organization has done well in providing a satisfying, fulfilling experience to volunteers, it may be advisable to include them in future fundraising efforts, either via mail or telephone solicitation.

Finally, a fifth potential implication involves the use of the Hobson-Heler Volunteer-Friendly Index<sup>®</sup> to conduct a comprehensive assessment of how well an agency interacts with volunteers and potential volunteers. Based upon the results, an organization could identify its current strengths, as well as prominent areas for improvement. Copies of the instrument are available from the first author.

#### *Future Research*

The results of this study suggest that future research would be useful in the following five areas. First, longitudinal designs are needed in order to confirm the intentions expressed by satisfied volunteers in this study to volunteer again in the future and make financial donations. Intentions are an important determinant of future behavior as conceptualized in Ajzen's (1985, 1991) Theory of Planned Behavior and supported by extensive research (Armitage & Conner, 2001). However, empirical confirmation would further underscore the importance of volunteer satisfaction.

More comprehensive measurement of the various facets of volunteer satisfaction and how they relate to important nonprofit organization outcomes is needed. Additional attention is warranted on how to

foster supportive interaction between staff and volunteers, especially during initial contact with an agency.

Finally, more research is needed on developing "high quality" work assignments for volunteers and carefully evaluating their impact. Finally, given the strong support for the Hobson-Heler propositions, a large sample, comprehensive assessment of all major components in their model and associated agency outcomes would be very useful.

#### *Study Limitations*

When interpreting the results of this study, the following four potential limitations should be considered. First, the sample was limited to undergraduate and graduate college students at a commuter campus. While this demographic group is clearly an important source of volunteers, other groups were not included. However, there is no compelling theoretical or empirical reason why the results of this study should not be generalizable to all volunteers. Second, the design of the study was cross-sectional in nature. This did not permit the evaluation of dynamic relationships between variables over time. Third, all variables used to test the Hobson-Heler Model were measured by the volunteer survey, without independent verification or validation. Thus, mono-method bias could have served to slightly inflate the magnitude of the observed statistical relationships. However, given the documented strength of these relationships, a slight downward adjustment for mono-method bias would not substantively alter the study's findings. Fourth, volunteer satisfaction was measured with a single item, on a 1-10 scale. In all likelihood, this variable is multi-faceted, thus requiring more items for comprehensive, accurate assessment.



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