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Volunteering 2.0: How Can Volunteer Organizations Employ Online Social Networks?

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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of online social networks such as Facebook and Twitter for managing an organization is an area ripe for investigation in information systems research. Volunteer organizations in particular (who typically lag rather than lead in technology) stand to benefit from online social networks, if equipped with the knowledge to strategically implement these tools. This research context is especially unique because volunteers and employees approach work differently, which affects how they interact with the organization and its systems. We use the theory of functionalist motivations to support the use of online social networks to manage volunteers. Because this research area is relatively new, this study provides a theoretically-grounded exploration into how volunteer organizations are using online social networks to manage their volunteer workforce, in what ways they are using these systems, and their effectiveness compared to previous systems.

Keywords

Social networking, Facebook, Web 2.0, volunteer management

INTRODUCTION

Volunteering and online social networks are social activities. They allow us to contact other people with similar interests, goals and motivations, to learn about them, and to have our voices be heard. Mahatma Gandhi urged us, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” Volunteer organizations (VOs) improve the quality of life each and every day, increasing social capital at a micro level. Information systems offer VOs the capability to support and strengthen their company missions. Thanks to powerhouse companies like Facebook and Twitter, online social networks (OSNs) have become ubiquitous to daily life. The majority of working age people in the United States use these sites regularly or, at the very least, are familiar with them (Pingdom 2010). Coincidentally, this same demographic are those people most likely to donate their time to voluntary organizations (VOs) to champion well-deserved humanitarian causes that change our world. But how much are their needs being met in today’s Web 2.0 world? The extent and efficacy of organizational use of online social networks is ripe for investigation, particularly with respect to volunteer management.

VOs simply do not have the resources to investigate ways to implement and effectively use OSNs (being averse to act without this information) (Lee and Bhattacherjee 2011). A few VOs have dabbled with OSNs for marketing, but very little is known about how they are using them to recruit and manage their invaluable volunteer workforce (Burt and Taylor 2003; Newmark 2011; Panagiotopoulos Brooks Elliman and Dasuki 2011; Waters Burnett Lamm and Lucas 2009). The information systems field has made repeated calls to action in this area, which have gone largely ignored because the field lacks fundamental theoretical backing necessary to understand VO behavior (Pereira and Cullen 2009; Reilly 2005). Liao-Troth states that “the study of volunteers and voluntarism needs to cross all … organizational and discipline boundaries to be fully appreciated and understood as a field of interest” (2011). Information systems research examines I.T. use in organizational contexts, but it has primarily focused on for-profit organizations and paid employees. In fact, the IS literature has sometimes assumed that the voluntary sector is similar to or the same as the employed sector, despite reference literature to the contrary (Burt et al. 2003; Lee et al. 2011).

This study proposes to extend our understanding of the use of online social networks into the context of volunteer organizations. It answers the call to investigate the organizational digital divide, focusing on volunteer recruitment and relationships management (Lee et al. 2011). To fill this gap, our study investigates the following research questions.

RQ 1: To what extent are online social networks being used to manage volunteer resources?
RQ 2: In what ways are OSNs being used to manage volunteer resources?
RQ3: How effective are OSNs for managing volunteer resources?
RQ4: In what ways could OSNs be used to manage volunteer resources?
This study will provide VOs and the research community with a wider understanding of how OSNs are being used to manage volunteer resources and their efficacy. This information is invaluable for helping VOs implement a course of action to use OSNs in their organizations to manage volunteers and will provide the IS research community with a starting point to further investigate this important area of inquiry.

This paper is organized as follows. The first part of this paper discusses why organizational behavior in VOs significantly differs from the for-profit sector, particularly with respect to their goals, and the significance of online social networks in volunteer organizational behavior. The second section explains how online social networks are related to volunteering based on the theory of functionalist motivations. The next sections describe (1) the exploratory study to be conducted to investigate the research questions, (2) how the data will be analyzed once collected, (3) the paper’s anticipated contributions (both practical and theoretical), and (4) suggestions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Volunteerism includes “any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group, or organization” (Wilson 2000). Although volunteers may also donate money to the organization, we only include them in our definition if they are personally giving their time. The person, group or organization that benefits is termed the volunteer organization (VO). We define voluntary organization as any formally-recognized company (whether for-profit, non-profit, or governmental) that uses a combination of unpaid, freely given labor in addition to paid employees to further the organization’s stated purpose. This definition does not include informal, grass roots social movements that are not registered with any governmental agency. We chose this definition to align the study with mainstream research on voluntary organizations and to narrow the scope to those organizations most likely to “provide work experiences virtually identical to profit-making or governmental entities providing similar services” (Pearce 1993).

Volunteer organizations enlist volunteers in addition to paid staff. Many VOs must rely heavily on contributions from outside the organization, in part, because they cannot afford to pay full time staff to fill the multitude of job responsibilities required to properly run the organization. We have used the literature on non-profit organizations to inform our study, but the definition of voluntary organization used here is not restricted to charities, non-profits, not-for-profits, social enterprises, foundations or public organizations. These terms are often used interchangeably because there are many different ways that companies can be organized. However, in this study, the definition of voluntary organization could cross these boundaries to include for-profit organizations as well. Examples include hospitals and healthcare or nursing facilities, schools, and county and state programs.

Previous literature states that volunteers’ organizational behavior differs from employees’ which suggests that these differences have a significant impact on information systems from an organizational behavior standpoint (Green 1989; Mele 2008; Sharon Gorr and Newcomer 1991; Zhang Gutierrez and Mathieson 2010). Volunteering is of such high importance that in 2009, U.S. President Obama tripled the size of AmeriCorps, a national volunteer service, and urged all Americans to volunteer in their communities (Baker 2009). Yet in the same year, the U.S. Department of Labor reported that only 1 in 4 Americans volunteered their time to a non-profit organization (Elowitz 2011; USDOL 2011). While this may be a significant number, at approximately 62 million, could information systems help us do better? Volunteer organizations play a vital role in relieving needless suffering throughout the world and in our own communities. Any research to increase volunteerism contributes hugely to society in and of itself. Beyond that, this research presents important theoretical and practical contributions to the fields of information systems and organizational behavior, particularly organizational behavior in the voluntary work sector.

Volunteers represent a highly valuable resource for VOs. They offer highly skilled, free labor. “Individuals with higher levels of educational attainment engaged in volunteer activities at higher rates than did those with less education” (USDOL 2011). Volunteers were approximately equally divided between full-time, part-time, or unemployed workers. Volunteers invested their time towards religious organizations, educational or youth-related organizations, and social or community service oriented companies, respectively (USDOL 2011). In the U.S., higher rates of volunteerism are seen amongst married persons than single or other marital status and among age 35 to 44 years old. “Persons in their early twenties were the least likely to volunteer (18.4 percent)” (USDOL 2011). Younger generations represent an untapped resource that VOs can cultivate and encourage to join (Eisner Grimm Jr Maynard and Washburn 2009). Volunteers often have additional commitments; most are working professionals who have no requirement to serve (Eisner et al. 2009; USDOL 2011). In summary, volunteers are well educated, civic-minded pillars of their communities. As such, they represent a wide range of skills, ideas, and community contacts that VOs need in order to serve their communities effectively.

Research on volunteering has been largely confined to sociological factors such as age, race, community and education through long term ethnographic studies or large-scale surveys like the General Social Survey or individual psychological investigations (Wilson 2000). It is insufficient to rely on studies of employees. Volunteering has a “peculiar moral economy” such that traditional metrics designed for employees in work settings fail to find results when applied to volunteers (Wilson
Volunteers versus Employees in Organizations

A volunteer’s motivations significantly differ from an employee’s, which changes how a volunteer approaches the organization and his or her role within it (Clary Snyder Ridge Copeland Stukas Haugen and Miene 1998; Pearce 1993; Wilson 2000). Unlike regular employees, there exist quite a few distinctions between volunteers and paid employees.

(1) Volunteers give their time to the organization of their own free will and are not paid, which means they cannot be motivated by monetary rewards and are free to join or leave the VO at any time.

(2) Volunteers are typically only involved emotionally and/or morally, whereas employees feel additional commitment because they need the income, security, or similar benefits provided by having a job, therefore, “volunteers can leave at will without worrying about the next pay check, pension rights, health care benefits, or where they will work next” (Cnaan and Cascio 1998). Additionally, unlike employees, volunteers do not worry about losing their jobs for fear of being replaced by new technology. The contribution of their time is always needed (Eisner et al. 2009).

(3) Volunteers may only give a few hours per week in a piecemeal fashion, whereas employees work sufficiently more consistent hours per week, because of their fragmented schedule volunteers may find it much more difficult and time consuming to become socialized into the organization than if they were paid workers who spend more time there (Haski-Leventhal and Bargal 2008; Pearce 1993).

(4) Volunteers may divide their time and attention between multiple volunteer organizations, whereas employees usually do not have more than one employer.

(5) Volunteer recruitment is considerably more informal and less prohibitive or time-consuming in nature than for employees.

(6) Since volunteers are not paid, if discriminated in the workplace, “courts may consider that no damage has been done if there is no monetary loss.” Unhappy volunteers will simply leave the VO (Cnaan et al. 1998).

(7) Volunteers often exert considerably more free will in exercising their moral and social obligations than employees feel able to do. A volunteer is therefore more likely to respond with his or her honest opinion rather than a political one (Pearce 1993). Similarly, volunteers are driven by their own desires to further the volunteer organization’s goals and they will readily and often vocalize those opinions (Wilson 2000).

(8) Laws governing volunteers who cause damages or liability for the organization may be less clear than for employees.

(9) Job evaluations of volunteers that “may seem to question volunteers’ efforts,” (Cnaan and Cascio, 1998 p. 5) may motivate volunteers to simply quit, rather than facilitate improvement as intended for employees.

Retention of volunteers is a significant problem. Studies deeply questioning volunteer continuance are only beginning to appear in the literature (Yanay and Yanay 2008). This problem has definitely not been solved (Eisner et al. 2009; USDOL 2011; Yanay et al. 2008), and in fact, may be getting worse. According to the Current Population Survey, the attrition rate of volunteers in 2000-2007 was nearly 33%, representing an estimated $38 billion in lost labor in the U.S. alone (Eisner et al. 2009). This one-third stated they did not return the next year because, (1) their assignments did not match their skills or interests, (2) their contributions went unrecognized by the organization, (3) VOIs did not measure the hard dollar value of the volunteers’ time, preventing companies from taking it seriously, (4) staff and volunteers did not receive enough training to cooperate effectively with each other, and (5) VOIs’ leaders did not invest enough time in promoting volunteers (Eisner et al. 2009). Many of these areas of dissatisfaction are closely relate volunteers’ perception of lack of support by the volunteer organization. In fact, research shows that volunteers are more likely to continue donating their personal time and money when the VO actively engages them in important activities that support the organization’s cause (Eisner et al. 2009). For example, in the Yanay et al. (2008) study many volunteers simply quit the organization because they felt unsupported. While
longer-term volunteers reported they had learned ways to cope through social avenues (Yanay et al. 2008), which supports the focus of this study to investigate systems to increase that feeling of social support among volunteers.

Theory of Functionalist Motivations

The theory of functionalist motivations states that volunteers donate their time to the VO because it fulfills a mixture of six functions or needs that motivate them to continue. When motivations match experiences, volunteers report a higher intention to continue and higher satisfaction (Clary et al. 1998). These six motivations are protective, values, career, social, understanding and enhancement motivations (Clary and Snyder 1999). These six motivations, or functions, are more or less important to different individuals, motivating them to perform the same action (in this case, volunteering) “in the service of different psychological functions” (Clary et al. 1998).

Peterson et al (2008) found that a sense of community can increase participation in volunteer organizations. This study focuses on social motivation to provide a means for volunteer organizations to more effectively manage volunteer resources. The social motivation relates to “relationships with others. Volunteering may offer opportunities to be with one’s friends or to engage in an activity viewed favorably by important others” (Clary et al. 1998). Social pressures, norms, and expectations define the social function. This function is particularly important in that previous studies have shown that when parents consider community service to be important, their children are more inclined to participate (Wilson, 2000). When one’s friends and important others put a higher value on volunteering, one is more likely to view it favorably and feel inclined towards it. If an individual considers those important others’ opinions to be important, the social function is likely to be more important to him or her. Therefore, new research is needed to investigate how use of OSNs affects volunteers’ organizational behavior.

Importance of Online Social Networks Such As Facebook and Twitter

In 2011, 90% of U.S. Internet users reported they are using online social networks (Elowitz 2011). OSNs offer a cost-effective solution to reduce volunteer labor shortage, but only if volunteer organizations know how to use them. Online social networks have already made significant impacts on society. OSNs represent a unique example of internet-based information technology that thus far remain underexplored, particularly with respect to their use for communicating with and managing volunteers. Considering the growing interest in OSNs to support social change, VOs and employee-based companies alike should be adopting and actively using these technologies within their organizations. To do so effectively, they first need to know and understand the impact they have on their organization’s volunteers.

As OSNs have become further embedded in daily life, their importance has grown significantly to where we cannot imagine life without them (Howard and Jones 2004). OSNs have caused new, unforeseen consequences. For example, Facebook and Twitter were heavily cited in the press as tools for citizens to organize mass revolutions in Egypt and Libya, even though it wasn’t their use that sparked the protests, but rather the government’s decision to abruptly shut them off (Cohen 2011). Because “new media” are so “deeply embedded in people’s lives,” it becomes no easy thing to simply turn them off. They are “personalized, tailored, and user-driven” yet “not exclusive media demanding all of our attention” (Howard et al. 2004). They “coexist with other technologies that save and consume our time in the day,” and they have become “rapidly and deeply embedded in our organizations and institutions” (Howard et al. 2004). It is estimated that time spent on Facebook in the U.S. greatly eclipses time spent browsing the rest of the Internet and this time is growing (Elowitz 2011). Younger users, particularly those under 40, readily expect that organizations are actively using Facebook and Twitter to reach them and it is becoming easier and cheaper for organizations to do so.

However, one place in which they are not embedded is in voluntary organizations, which we suggest negatively impacts recruitment, retention and management of volunteers. VOs are notorious for lagging behind other institutions in updating information systems due to minimal available resources (Lee et al. 2011; Zhang et al. 2010). VOs in general do not have time, money, or personnel to invest in learning about new technologies, how to use them, or how to strategically implement them to recruit and retain volunteers. VOs do not always place as high of a priority on I.T., information or competitive advantage as other types of organizations such as strictly for-profit companies, which may further hinder their adoption of OSNs (Lee et al. 2011; Zhang et al. 2010). This paper presents the first part of a systematic study of how OSNs impact VOs and volunteers. Formal IS research is only beginning to address these questions.

Online social networks in volunteer organizations

OSNs provide a unique, multi-way mode of communication that organizations can exploit to enhance the social benefits of volunteering, as suggested by the functionalist theory of motivations. Therefore, effective, targeted use of OSNs could help VOs to better manage volunteers to reduce volunteer attrition. For example, volunteers can list their interests and skills on their profiles, assisting volunteer managers with matching volunteers to the right jobs. A congratulatory blog posting can be used to recognize important volunteer contributions which get shared with all users. Online discussions can increase training value by bringing together volunteers with different backgrounds to share their experiences. OSNs themselves, like
volunteering in general, are social in nature. Thus, the use of OSN should increase the social motivation of volunteers and increased levels of social motivation, according to the Functionalist Theory, should lead to higher levels of intent to continue volunteering (Clary et al. 1998). Therefore, this exploratory study will also assess the impact of OSNs on social motivation.

RQ5: Does the use of OSN increase levels of social motivation?

Clearly, VOs may benefit from effective volunteer management by reaching volunteers new and old through OSNs, especially when up to 90% of their volunteers are likely to be using it already. The use of OSNs to manage volunteer resources is ripe for investigation. Thus far, the handful of studies conducted in this area have been case studies or general studies of individuals’ use of OSNs. They have not considered how OSNs impact volunteers’ organizational behavior or whether VOs consider them to be effective. It cannot be assumed that employees and volunteers will be affected by OSNs in the same way. OSNs are tools that the VO can use to communicate with volunteers to help them make sense of the organization and their role within it in order to make them feel like a part of the community. Having a sense of community can increase participation and provide an avenue for “individual and community transformation” which are important for sustaining and growing an organization (Peterson Speer Hughey Armstead Schneider and Sheffer 2008). However, OSNs available to the organization vary in type and nature and which initiatives are more effective has not been considered. Therefore, it would greatly benefit VOs to know how OSNs are currently being used and their effectiveness.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

This paper is part of a larger study to investigate how VOs can effectively manage volunteers using online social networks. Being a fairly new area of inquiry, this study is more exploratory in nature rather than confirmatory. Whether OSNs are being used within VOs remains relatively unknown, much less how much they are using OSNs and in what ways (Burt et al. 2003; Lee et al. 2011). As a starting point, this study investigates how much VOs are currently using online social networks to manage volunteer resources, in what ways they are being used, and whether they are perceived effective. The research questions in this paper establish a framework to understand OSN use among a variety of VOs. A qualitative research design is appropriate (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Yin 2009) and will include semi-structured interviews of volunteer managers regarding their organization’s use of social media websites to manage volunteer resources.

Participant Selection and Data Analysis

Volunteer managers from 15 to 20 local VOs will be interviewed individually. Subjects will be selected from local volunteer organizations with at least approximately 250 volunteers in addition to regular paid staff. This size organization is more likely to have a regular person designated to plan and manage the volunteer workforce. Potential managers have been identified through personal and professional contacts. A sample size of 20 should provide enough evidence to answer the research questions as well as to cover a wide variety of volunteer organization types. This sample size will allow generalizability of the results, while still keeping the study manageable (Yin 2009). An interview protocol to address the research questions has been developed to guide the interviews and provide structure. The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. (Strauss et al. 1990). A sample of the interview protocol is provided in Table 1.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Example Questions</th>
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| Research Question 1, Extent of use | • Does your organization have a Facebook or Twitter presence?  
• What does the organization use its social media presence for? |
| Research Question 2, Types of use  | • Are these sites used to communicate with volunteers?  
• In what ways are these sites used to communicate with volunteers directly?  
• What other ways are used to communicate with volunteers? |
| Research Question 3, Effectiveness | • How effective do you feel these sites are for communicating with volunteers, as opposed to other methods?  
• Are they more or less effective?  
• Are they useful? |
| Research Question 4, Anticipated use | • Does the organization have any plans to use these sites in the future to communicate with or recruit volunteers?  
• What sort of barriers do you foresee might prevent the organization from using these sites? |

Table 1. Sample of Interview Protocol

Interview data will be content analyzed to identify major themes in response to the research questions. These questions are designed to solicit rich data to address the research questions. As an additional check, we will also collect data from the VOs’ public websites, preferably their social media sites, if any. This data will provide a control to match organizations based on their level of technology use. For example, a VO with an extensive, highly-programmed website would be a poor comparison with a VO that has a simple HTML web site, or no site at all.
CONCLUSION

We expect to find that very few volunteer organizations are currently using online social networks to manage volunteers but feel that their use would be beneficial. We expect to present results showing that although organizations are not yet using OSNs for managing volunteers, they would like to learn how to do so strategically to increase retention and recruitment. Should we find an organization actively using OSNs to manage volunteers, based on the theory of functionalist motivations, we would expect to find a higher rate of recruitment and participation in the organization since they began using the OSN. Lessons learned here should be relevant for any organization that relies on a volunteer workforce. Future research should investigate whether this model can be applied to for-profit companies that experience high turnover such as call centers. VO’s can use the results presented in this study to encourage volunteers to continue serving the common good.

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