

**Importance of Organizational Volunteer Retention during the COVID-19 Pandemic when
Designing Extension Program for Local Non-Profit Leaders**

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Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a dramatic shift in how organizations function, and in how individuals work and volunteer. The rise of teleworking and video conferencing present a feasible alternative to previous forms of employment and organizational structure (Bojadjiev & Vaneva, 2021) and change the way organizations communicate and engage with their volunteers. One of the major groups affected by the changes in organizational structure and communication are university Extension services. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed the way Extension programming and services are provided to the public (Narine & Meier, 2020). Extension educators have been forced to adapt the way they provide information to clients, moving largely to web-based delivery, limiting their ability to conduct community needs assessments and communicate directly with clients especially in rural areas. Because of this, during the pandemic, Extension services are more reliant on community volunteer leaders to assist with the communication of important information within their communities and the implementation of Extension programming (Geis, 2021; Jamison, 2021).

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

Due to the relationship between volunteer management practices and volunteer/employee satisfaction (Henderson & Sowa, 2019), several volunteer satisfaction instruments apply the communication practices of volunteer management to improve volunteer/employee satisfaction, and in turn, retention. In the context of volunteers, the relationship between organizational communication and volunteer management is more apparent when examining the most widely used volunteer management models where aspects of effective organizational communication are prevalent. This study used two such volunteer management models, ISOTURE (Boyce, 1971) and GEMS (Culp, III et al., 1998). In ISOTURE and GEMS, each step from the onboarding process onward involves utilizing organizational communication best practices, (e.g., providing important job-related information, training volunteers, providing clear and concise directives and feedback, and recognizing volunteer efforts). This study examined the importance of these best practices in volunteer retention in the context of the changing organizational landscape created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

The quantitative study utilized an online survey administered via Qualtrics to address the study's two research objectives: 1) Describe importance of organizational volunteer retention and organizational volunteer communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. 2) Describe to what extent importance of organizational volunteer retention can be explained by the organization's leader's perceptions about organizational communication during the pandemic.

The target population for the study was 696 nonprofit organizational leaders in Centre County, Pennsylvania. The study used a census approach following Dillman et al. (2014) online data collection techniques. We received 74 complete responses (10.6% response rate).

We developed the one-item *Importance of Organizational Volunteer Retention During the COVID-19 Pandemic Scale* measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (extremely important). The other variable of interest was the 21-item *Organizational Volunteer Communication during the COVID-19 Pandemic Scale* developed

using current literature specifically both the ISOTURE and GEMS models (Boyce, 1971; Culp, III et al., 1998) and with specific scale items adapted from the *Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire* (Downs & Hazen, 1977). This scale was also measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (extremely important). Data was analyzed using SPSS® v.26 with *Importance of Organizational Volunteer Retention During the COVID-19 Pandemic* as the dependent variable and *Importance of Organizational Volunteer Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic* as our independent variable. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the first research objective. For research objective two, we used a linear regression analysis to describe to what extent the *Importance of Organizational Volunteer Retention During the COVID-19 Pandemic* can be explained by *Importance of Organizational Volunteer Communication During The COVID-19 Pandemic*.

Results/Findings

Surveyed nonprofit leaders indicated high *Importance of Organizational Volunteer Retention During the COVID-19 Pandemic* with over 80% of participants classifying it as “very important” or “extremely important”. Similarly, surveyed nonprofit leaders placed a high level of *Importance of Organizational Volunteer Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, with particular importance placed on specific best practices including, “Listening and paying attention to volunteers” and “promoting accurate and free-flowing horizontal communication between employees/volunteers”. Study findings also indicated that *Importance of Organizational Volunteer Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic* explained 63% of the variance in *Importance of Organizational Volunteer Retention During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. *Importance of Organizational Volunteer Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic* was also a significant predictor of *Importance of Organizational Volunteer Retention* ($\beta = .794$; p -value = .000).

Implications and Recommendations

The study makes a unique contribution to the nonprofit leadership and management field by examining the extent to which nonprofit leaders’ perceptions about volunteer communication explain the importance of volunteer retention during times of uncertainty or crisis. The current study adds to existing literature describing the importance of organizational communication practices during non-crisis periods and suggests that the importance of effective organizational communication is maintained across different environmental contexts. Future research may examine specific communication practices to determine highly impactful strategies to improve volunteer retention. Additionally, the examination of antecedents and consequences of communication practices and volunteer retention to identify specific mannerisms and leadership behaviors impacts on communication effectiveness toward volunteer retention. In practice, it is important therefore that Extension and outreach leadership educators play an integral role in educating nonprofit leaders on effective communication practices during times of uncertainty, specifically with respect to creating an atmosphere of receptive volunteers to evaluation and feedback, applying different communication techniques, and utilizing different mediums to engage volunteers, and offering guidance and support to empower volunteers.

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