

A perspective of the benefits of volunteering: personal and professional development

Volunteering is the activity of offering one's time, skills and energy to help others or a cause without receiving monetary compensation.

From social volunteering to the recently introduced virtual volunteering, the ways of collaborating with society are diverse. According to the data reported by Salamon and Sokolowski in their research on the European third sector¹, there are 29.1 million people working in the sector, 55% of them unpaid: more than 16 million volunteers across Europe.

Although the main goal of volunteering is to give back to society, it has been proven that volunteering also offers several benefits to the volunteer, including personal and professional development. This article will explore the benefits of volunteering, especially at a time when both personal and professional experiences are increasingly in demand to enable us to present ourselves in the working world prepared, able to react quickly to unforeseen events and overcome any obstacles.

Indeed, the professions and skills sought by employers today reflect changes in society. People who lose their jobs, want to change careers or return to work after a long absence need new qualifications and skills. Volunteering offers participants the opportunity to develop professional skills that are transferable to the labour market, thus improving their employability.

Thanks to volunteering, a competitive labour market and social solidarity is increasingly being created, and besides being a way to offer new learning opportunities to vulnerable groups, it offers individuals the opportunity to acquire skills, work in teams, manage resources, communicate, network and manage projects.

Furthermore, volunteering is considered a creator of social capital because it builds a network of contacts that can be useful in one's professional activity. The European Voluntary Service is a programme that promotes the non-formal learning, personal, educational and professional development of young Europeans and makes it easier for them to integrate into society. Literature supports the link between volunteering and professional development. Students involved in volunteering acquire various skills applicable to various situations, such as the ability to make sudden decisions, to respond to unforeseen events, leadership, creative thinking and strategic planning.

In this situation, academic papers and real-world evidence² suggest that many individuals engage in volunteering to acquire a range of skills important for securing employment, such as

¹ Enjolras, B., Salamon, L. M., Sivesind, K. H., Zimmer, A., Salamon, L. M., & Sokolowski, W. (2018). The size and composition of the European third sector. *The third sector as a renewable resource for Europe: Concepts, impacts, challenges and opportunities*, 49-94.

² Thomas, 2001; Jones, 2005; Cook and Jackson, 2006; Brook et al., 2007; Lough et al., 2009.

communication, persuasion, flexibility, adaptability, problem-solving, proactivity, organisational skills, leadership and time management.

Other authors, increasingly interested in the reasons for volunteering, have analysed the link between volunteering, social networks and employment³. They concluded that individuals participate in voluntary activities to improve their social connections with others who have similar career interests, hobbies, backgrounds or real-life associations, which can then be used to find a job.

The decision to volunteer can therefore be motivated by several factors. There are many reasons why people decide to invest their free time in a cause that benefits everyone and from which they receive no financial return.

Below is an analysis of the main benefits of volunteering for personal development:

1. Sense of purpose and realisation

Volunteering can help people find a sense of purpose and fulfillment. It offers the opportunity to contribute to a cause or organisation in line with one's values and beliefs. According to a study published in the *Journal of Happiness Studies*⁴, volunteering is positively associated with happiness and life satisfaction.

2. Increased social connections

Volunteering offers the opportunity to meet and interact with people from different backgrounds and cultures, thus expanding an individual's social network. This can help build social bonds, create new friendships and foster relationships. Research has shown that social support is positively associated with mental health⁵. Therefore, volunteering can have a positive impact on mental health by providing opportunities for social connections and support.

3. Improving mental health

Volunteering can have a positive impact on mental health. According to a study published in the *Journal of Health Psychology*, volunteering is associated with lower levels of depression and higher

³ Carlin, 2001; Gunderson and Gomez, 2003; Katz and Rosenberg, 2005; Ziemek, 2006; Ellingsen and Johannesson, 2007; Hustinx et al., 2010.

⁴ Aknin, L. B., Dunn, E. W., Sandstrom, G. M., & Norton, M. I. (2013). Does social connection turn good deeds into good feelings?: On the value of putting the 'social' in prosocial spending. *International Journal of Happiness and Development*, 1(2), 155-171.

⁵ Cohen, S., & Wills, T. A. (1985). Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological bulletin*, 98(2), 310.

levels of life satisfaction⁶. It can also provide a sense of achievement, increase self-esteem and help counteract the effects of stress, anger and anxiety through the aspect of social contact, helping and working with others.

4. Skills development

Volunteering offers the opportunity to develop new skills or improve existing ones and thus advance one's career. For example, volunteering in a leadership role can help people develop their leadership and communication skills. According to a survey conducted by Deloitte, 92% of employers believe that volunteering improves employees' professional skills⁷.

In fact, such an experience provides the opportunity to try out a new career without committing oneself to it for a long time. This helps to understand whether the path one has taken is actually the one one one wants to follow later in life and provides a chance to change should one realise one wants to change one's path.

The main benefits of volunteering for personal development are discussed below:

1. Networking opportunities

Volunteering can increase the likelihood of having contacts with people working in a specific field, providing opportunities to learn and acquire sector-specific knowledge. This can also lead to new job opportunities, professional growth and mentorship.

According to a study conducted by LinkedIn (2017), 41% of professionals consider volunteering as valuable as paid work when evaluating job candidates. Volunteering can offer a way to network with people who share similar interests and goals.

2. Improved Curriculum

Volunteering can enhance a person's CV by demonstrating their skills, interests and commitment to community service.

According to a study by CareerBuilder (2016), 82% of employers prefer candidates with volunteer experience.

This highlights the importance of volunteering to enhance an individual's employability by demonstrating their skills and commitment to community service.

⁶ Piliavin, J. A., & Siegl, E. (2015). Health and well-being consequences of formal volunteering.

⁷ Deloitte (2017). Volunteerism Survey.

3. Development of professional skills

Volunteering can offer the opportunity to develop professional skills, such as leadership, project management and teamwork.

According to a survey conducted by UnitedHealth Group (2013), 76% of volunteers said that volunteering helped them develop their organisational skills.

4. Exposure to new sectors and fields

Volunteering can provide exposure to different sectors and fields, which can broaden an individual's knowledge and skills. This exposure can help people explore new career paths or move into new areas.

As a conclusion, volunteering is not only beneficial to the community or cause being served, but also offers several personal and professional development benefits to the volunteer. These benefits include a sense of purpose and fulfillment, increased social connections, improved mental health, skills development, networking opportunities, curriculum enhancement, professional skills development and exposure to new industries and fields. Therefore, volunteering is an excellent way to grow personally and professionally and to make a contribution to society.