

# The great (volunteer) resignation: An evidence-based strategy for retaining volunteers

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September 2022



Towards a  
**National Strategy  
for Volunteering**



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The Volunteering Research Papers are an initiative of the National Strategy for Volunteering Research Working Group.

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# The great (volunteer) resignation: An evidence-based strategy for retaining volunteers

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## Key Insights

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- 44 per cent of the global volunteer workforce stopped volunteering over a four-year period, from 2018 to 2021, a loss equivalent to 48 million full-time volunteers.
- To enable more effective turnover monitoring and management, there needs to be a revised definition and measures of turnover that are suitable for volunteer involving organisations. We recommend the following definition of volunteer turnover be adopted — “*Turnover* occurs when a volunteer withdraws their participation with their current organisation out of their own free will” (Forner et al., 2022). To measure turnover, we suggest volunteer involving organisations; 1) calculate turnover rate with organisational data, 2) track volunteer participation – if a volunteer is not present at any event or activity over 1 year, we would consider the person has withdrawn their participation with the organisation, or 3) assess turnover intentions.
- Our systematic review and meta-analysis of volunteer turnover research identified four factors that prevent volunteer turnover; 1) support from paid staff, supervisors, and peers, 2) affording volunteers autonomy, 3) roles where volunteers feel they are contributing productively, and 4) preventing burnout.
- Evidence-based recommendations for key actions that will have the greatest impact on minimizing turnover rates in volunteer involving organisations include:
  - Increase social support – create stronger social connections and encourage support from staff, supervisors, and other volunteers.
  - Improve the experience of autonomy – when possible, grant volunteers decision making authority, and when not possible, provide a clear rationale.
  - Help volunteers feel productive – design volunteering tasks to be stimulating and clearly related to organisational goals.
  - Minimize burnout – regularly check with volunteers if they have enough social, cognitive and physical resources to deal with their task demands.
- This paper is intended to inform and guide the volunteering sector, national volunteering strategy and government policy to address the serious and ongoing decline in volunteer numbers.

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## Addressing turnover in the volunteer sector as a strategic imperative

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The volunteering sector globally is experiencing a significant and unprecedented decline in volunteer numbers, the seriousness of which cannot be overstated. From 2018 to 2021, 44 per cent of the global volunteer workforce stopped volunteering.<sup>4</sup> This is a loss equivalent to 48 million full time volunteers in just a four-year period.<sup>5</sup> In Australia, the steady decline in volunteering over the past 15 years has been further exacerbated by the COVID pandemic and covid-related restrictions and lockdowns that followed.<sup>6</sup> In 2020 the percentage of Australians who volunteered for an organisation or group (25 per cent) was not only lower than in 2019 (30 per cent), but also the lowest rate ever recorded by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Implementing an effective and evidence-based strategy for retaining volunteer workers will be a vital part of strategies to ensure the future sustainability of the Australian volunteer sector, so it can continue to deliver critical services to the community. Such strategies require a clear understanding of the reasons underlying volunteer turnover.

## Defining and measuring turnover of volunteers

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Turnover of volunteers is poorly understood and difficult to measure. Current knowledge about turnover, including turnover theories, models, and definitions, unequivocally reflect the paid work context. For instance, turnover is often defined as an employee's voluntary severance of his or her current employment ties.<sup>7</sup> This definition narrows turnover down to behaviours that an organisation does not control directly (as opposed to being fired from a position), but would like to control indirectly; making it the most vital type of turnover behaviour to understand and manage. However, these traditional definitions of turnover do not transfer well to volunteerism, in part because there is often no formal severance. Volunteers rarely "quit" formally, they simply stop showing up.<sup>8</sup> It is challenging to calculate the annual turnover rate in a volunteering context as it requires access to accurate and up-to-date data about the number of people who have left the organisation as well as the total number of people volunteering during a given period. Challenges with maintaining accurate workforce data and estimating volunteer numbers

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4 Forner et al., 2022

5 United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme, 2018; 2021

6 ABS, General Social Survey Results 2006; 2010; 2014; 2019; 2020

7 Mobley, 1982; Price, 1977

8 Jamison, 2003

are well acknowledged issues in the volunteering sector in Australia and globally.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the volunteering sector needs a way of conceptualising, defining, and measuring turnover that reflects its unique needs and context.

Specifically, we propose that “*turnover* of volunteers occurs when volunteers withdraw their participation with an organisation out of their own free will”.<sup>10</sup> We contrast turnover with retention and “volunteers are considered retained when they recurrently choose to be present at volunteer activities and willingly donate their time to an organisation’s activities and cause”.<sup>11</sup> Having an agreed definition of turnover and retention is important as it provides volunteer involving organisations a way to track their retention and to identify how changes (both targeted and naturally occurring) influence turnover. We offer three suggestions for how volunteer turnover can be operationalised and measured in volunteer involving organisations, in order of preference based on methodological rigour; 1) calculating turnover rate with organisational data, 2) creating organisational data tracking volunteer participation, and 3) assessing turnover intentions.

### **Calculating turnover rate with organisational data.**

Some volunteer involving organisations have access to accurate, up-to-date volunteer records. This is often the case for membership-based organisations that have an annual registration process, such as some sporting groups or Surf Life Saving. If reliable organisational data is available, the traditional turnover rate formula can be applied.

$$\text{Annual turnover rate (\%)} = \frac{\text{number of volunteers who left over the year}}{\text{total number of volunteers over the year}} \times 100$$

### **Creating organisational data – tracking volunteer participation.**

As a rule of thumb, if a volunteer is not present at any event or activity over a year, we would consider the person has withdrawn their participation with the organisation (ie. turnover). We recommend organisations record attendance at each volunteering event or activity, tracking the number of times each individual volunteer participates over the course of the year and comparing it year-on-year. Tracking attendance/participation would enable the organisation to create an accurate register of volunteers and, by comparing data from the previous year, calculate the number of volunteers who left over the period. The approach of tracking volunteer participation would make data available about a) the total number of volunteers over the year and b) the total number of volunteers who left over the year, which are the two pieces of information required to

9 [https://audit.wa.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/report2015\\_17-Emergency.pdf](https://audit.wa.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/report2015_17-Emergency.pdf); United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme, 2018

10 Forner et al., 2022

11 *ibid*

calculate annual turnover rate. It would also provide information about the extent to which volunteers are engaging with the volunteer involving organisation over the year and how this varies.

## Measuring turnover intention

Turnover intentions are frequently used in turnover research as a proxy measure of turnover behaviour. Volunteer involving organisations can get an indication of volunteers' intention to stay or leave through organisational surveys or questionnaires. There are well established measures of turnover intentions from the management literature that predict turnover over time.<sup>12</sup> Examples of the questions that are typically used include, "I often think about leaving [organisation name]" and/or "It is likely that I will leave [organisation name] in the next 12 months". Volunteers can be asked to respond to these questions on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5/7 (strongly agree). Alternatively, the following multiple-choice question may be useful, "Which of the following statements best describes your feelings about volunteering at [organisation name]?" Choices are A, "I want to leave, but I feel like I have to stay", B, "I want to stay, but may have to leave", C, "I want to stay, and can stay if I want to", and D, "I want to leave, and can leave if I want to". To gauge the percentage of people who intend to leave, tally up the portion of people who responded A or D. However, unless all the volunteers in the organisation completed the survey, survey data may only provide an approximate indicator of turnover intentions across the organisation.

## What are the strongest predictors of volunteer turnover and retention?

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Our broader research team (Forner, Holtrop, Bozeman, Slempt, Kotek, Kragt, Askovic & Johnson, 2022) undertook a systematic review and meta-analysis of existing volunteer retention and turnover research. The aim of the research was to delineate the strongest predictors of turnover amongst volunteer workers. In this Volunteering Research Paper, we provide a narrative synthesis of the key findings for industry, summarising what is currently known about turnover in volunteer organisations and which factors are most important for retaining volunteer workers.

Overall, three work-related attitudes were found to be most strongly associated with turnover. These were volunteers' self-reported **engagement**, **commitment**, and **job satisfaction**. Whilst it is not surprising that psychological variables were most closely related to turnover, for the purpose of this policy paper we are focusing on those aspects that organisations can take practical action on – the way volunteer work is designed

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12 For example, Cohen et al., 2016; Van Dick et al., 2004

and the support structures organisations have in place for their volunteers. Following the three work-related attitudes above, the next strongest predictors of retention/turnover of volunteers were; 1) **support**, from paid staff, supervisors and peers, 2) affording volunteers **autonomy**, 3) roles where volunteers feel they are **contributing productively**, and 4) **burnout**. We unpack each of these in more detail.

## 1. Support from paid staff, supervisor and peers

An area that is particularly important to retaining volunteers is the broad area of social support or a role that is rich in relational characteristics. Social support includes both emotional support, such as listening and caring, and instrumental support, such as tangible assistance or practical help with tasks.<sup>13</sup> Support from paid staff and supervisors were amongst the strongest drivers of retention amongst volunteers. For example, quality leadership is a critical factor for supporting volunteers, providing recognition and feedback and creating an overall positive and satisfying volunteering experience.<sup>14</sup> The evidence suggests that support from paid staff and supervisors are strong incentives to stay, and potentially an even stronger factor in volunteers' decision to leave when such support is absent. Tensions between paid staff and volunteers are well documented, and our research provides further evidence of the importance of this relationship.<sup>15</sup> One way that volunteer involving organisations can improve retention is to focus resources on training and developing leaders, whether paid employees or volunteers (see also the Volunteering Research Paper *Without leadership there is no volunteering: The importance of strategic investment in leadership development in Australia* by Kragt et al. for an extensive discussion of leadership in volunteering context).

Supportive peer relationships were also a strong predictor of volunteer retention. Opportunities for social interaction, where volunteers can socialise and engage in quality interpersonal interactions to develop supportive and strong relationships, even friendships, with other volunteers, is an important aspect of the volunteer role.<sup>16</sup> Feeling connected and part of a community of committed volunteers who share similar beliefs and values about the volunteer cause is an important contextual condition that promotes volunteer retention. At the same time, it is important to recognize that this is reciprocal and volunteer involving organisations also play an important role in creating social capital in a community. Social connection therefore is both a key lever for retaining volunteers and for creating a stronger community.

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13 Semmer et al., 2008; Shakespeare-Finch & Obst, 2011

14 Forner, 2019; Henderson & Sowa, 2018

15 Rimes et al., 2017

16 Nencini et al., 2016

## 2. Affording volunteers autonomy

Our findings also show that autonomy and voice were both strong predictors of volunteer retention. This means that volunteers who had more freedom to carry out activities in their chosen way (autonomy) and/or were able to speak up about their views and influence matters that affect them (voice) were more likely to remain with the organisation. Where possible, volunteer involving organisations should seek to empower volunteers and design volunteering work in a way that affords volunteers freedom to make decisions, have choices, provide input, and to have some level of control in how they carry out their volunteering activities.<sup>17</sup> For example, whilst volunteer emergency management organisations cannot allow autonomy in operational tasks, there are many non-operational tasks, including the day-to-day running of the unit, in which autonomy is possible and should be encouraged.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, when there is a need to follow standard operating procedures, meaning a lack of autonomy, the rationale should be communicated and potential volunteer frustrations acknowledged.

Encouraging voice, by providing a platform for volunteers to express their ideas and suggestions, is also an important element of volunteer retention. If volunteers offer suggestions or views on changing some aspects of how tasks are performed, these should be considered. When soliciting feedback, it is important that the organisation communicates how the feedback was taken into account, because not acknowledging solicited feedback can have detrimental consequences for morale.

## 3. Roles where volunteers feel they are contributing productively

Our findings also revealed that the extent to which volunteers feel they are contributing productively during volunteering activities was a strong contributing factor in their decisions to stay or leave. Although volunteers generously give their time to a chosen cause, volunteers' time is incredibly valuable. Volunteering has to be time spent productively. Research and anecdotal evidence suggest that often, due to operational inefficiencies or lack of planning, volunteers 'sit around' waiting to contribute, which leads to their dissatisfaction and turnover.<sup>19</sup> Efforts should therefore be made to design volunteer work to be stimulating and productive, with a clear link to the organisation or group's cause or purpose.

## 4. Burnout

Burnout was strongly associated with more volunteer turnover. Burnout is often considered to be a combination of two underlying factors: exhaustion and disengagement

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17 Forner et al., 2020

18 Muhammad Farid et al., 2020

19 Kragt et al., 2018



or cynicism.<sup>20</sup> When volunteers experience these feelings, they are likely to withdraw from volunteering.<sup>21</sup> Burnout is a known outcome from imbalanced demands and resources,<sup>22</sup> meaning that volunteers who experience great demands and who receive little support are likely to burn out and eventually leave. Following this rationale, providing volunteers with the resources to overcome the demands of their roles can avert negative outcomes and even lead to work engagement.<sup>23</sup>

## Policy and practice implications

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Existing definitions and models of turnover, that have been developed for paid work contexts, do not transfer well to volunteerism. We propose an alternative and more appropriate way to think about turnover in volunteer involving organisations and offer a list of important drivers of turnover to enable more effective turnover management and prediction. Our research findings provide the volunteering sector with an evidence-based framework for retaining volunteers and minimising turnover rates in volunteer involving organisations. By delineating which aspects of the volunteering experience have the strongest impact on intentions to continue or withdraw participation in volunteering activities, our research offers a valuable resource for addressing the serious and ongoing decline in volunteer numbers.

## Recommendations

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Based on the results from our meta-analysis and research, we offer the following evidence-based recommendations for key actions that will have the greatest impact on volunteer retention and minimise turnover rates in volunteer involving organisations.

- **Measure and monitor turnover of volunteers.** Effective measurement and monitoring of turnover is critical to enable organisations to understand and act on retention issues. We recommend the following measures, in order of preference 1) calculate turnover rate with organisational data, 2) create organisational data tracking volunteer participation, and 3) assessing turnover intentions via survey questions.
- **Improve support from paid staff, supervisors, and peers.** Greater clarity on the role of paid staff and volunteer coordinators, and developing positive relationships and attitudes towards volunteers, will drive more consistent and quality support. Focus resources on training and developing those who lead

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20 For example, Demerouti et al., 2008

21 Huynh et al., 2012

22 Demerouti et al., 2001

23 Lesener et al., 2019

and supervise volunteers, including paid employees and leaders who are also volunteers themselves. Creating opportunities for volunteer socialisation to facilitate the development of high quality and supportive relationships between volunteers. The importance of inducting new members into the group is also emphasised. Onboarding provides both the instrumental and emotional support (e.g making resources available, welcome activities, assigning a guide or “buddy”) needed to help the new volunteer socialise and navigate their new team and role.<sup>24</sup>

- **Provide volunteers more autonomy and voice.** Volunteer activities need to be designed in a way that affords volunteers freedom to make decisions, have choices and, where possible, to self-manage their own teams and activities autonomously. At the same time, volunteers need a platform to voice concerns, offer suggestions, and have input in decisions that affect them.
- **Ensure volunteers’ time is utilised productively to make a valuable contribution.** Design volunteer activities to be stimulating and productive, with a clear link to the organisation or groups cause or purpose. Minimise time volunteers spend waiting around, by ensuring the volunteer activity or event is well organised/ coordinated and volunteer time is spent contributing in a productive and meaningful way towards the cause or purpose they are there to serve.
- **Enhance awareness and management of burnout amongst volunteers.** Burnout is a primary contributor to volunteers leaving an organisation, and a major issue amongst active volunteers. Monitoring and managing burnout is critically important to ensure that volunteering activities are not detrimental to the well-being and mental health of people who volunteer. Effective management involves minimising the demands placed on volunteers and, at the same time, providing enough social, physical, and cognitive resources and support. We recommend organisations regularly check in with their volunteers about their well-being and identify opportunities where the organisation can minimise the demands and pressures that volunteers face. Some volunteer positions, by virtue of their task requirements, might be more likely to create feelings of burnout and should be monitored especially closely.

## Knowledge Gaps and Future Research

Existing theories and current understanding of turnover are unequivocally based on research with employees in paid work. A model or theory of turnover that reflects the unique volunteering context has yet to be established. The meta-analytical research of our team is a first step in this direction, however, further theoretical development and knowledge about turnover processes amongst volunteers will be required.

An important but unanswered question is, what is a “normal range” for volunteer turnover rate? We currently lack benchmarking information needed to understand whether an

organisation is doing well or poorly in regard to its turnover, compared to other volunteer involving organisations. Turnover statistics in the Australian volunteering sector are not currently available, in part due to the challenges associated with measuring turnover of volunteers. We recommend that the sector adopt our suggested measures of volunteer turnover, which would enable consistent data to be collected and turnover benchmarking statistics to become possible. Statistics may even differ depending on the type of services an organisation provides (emergency services, sports, education, health care etc.).

Lastly, like other reviews, we observed that many studies of volunteer turnover are based on one-off self-report surveys of volunteers' intentions to leave (ie. cross-sectional designs), rather than collecting data about real turnover behaviour using organisation turnover data.<sup>25</sup> We strongly recommend future research to draw more often upon theoretically sound longitudinal and experimental designs. For example, future research might measure and monitor how factors impact turnover over time (longitudinal designs) and/or evaluate the impact of interventions designed to improve turnover.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, researchers should work closely together with organisations to obtain data on real turnover behaviour that is estimated accurately.

## Conclusion

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Implementing an effective and evidence-based strategy for retaining volunteer workers will be critical to ensure the future sustainability of volunteering. This policy paper offers an 'industry summary' of key findings from our recent systematic review and meta-analysis of volunteer turnover research.<sup>27</sup> These findings provide the volunteering sector with insights about the strongest determinants of volunteer turnover and, conversely, the key levers for retaining volunteers. We offer a revised definition and measures of turnover, with improved relevance and utility for the volunteer context. The recommendations outlined in this paper are intended to inform and guide volunteer involving organisations, the new National Strategy for Volunteering, and government policy more broadly, on how to effectively address the devastating decline in volunteers across Australia and globally.

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25 Kragt & Holtrop, 2019

26 Kragt et al., 2020

27 Forner et al., 2022

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