

Have you ever wondered why people volunteer their time as an unpaid leader or served on a Board of Directors? Or wondered why they donate hundreds of hours of their time... and to what end?

Is It Worth It?

A Study on the Career
Benefits and ROI of
Volunteer Leadership in a
Professional Talent
Development Association

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The ROI of Volunteer Leadership in Professional Talent Development Association

A descriptive study was conducted in 2015-2016 to identify the career benefits and calculate the ROI of volunteer leadership in a professional industry association. In addition, it was the purpose of this study to identify the perception of past association leaders regarding the return on investment of their time as an unpaid volunteer leader. The definition of career benefits was adapted from Hirschi's Career Resources Model, which includes: social capital, human capital, career identity and psychological resources (2012). Additionally, this study used the ROI Institute's ROI Methodology™ to identify and calculate the costs and benefits of volunteer leadership to determine the ROI of time served as an unpaid volunteer leader (2013).

There were 43 individuals in the study population, both an on-line survey and individual interviews were conducted. The response rate was 93% (40 individual responses) to the survey, and a total of 30 individuals opted-in to participate in the semi-structured interviews, 27 of whom completed the interview. The criterion for the study sample was as follows, participants must have served:

- as a local Chapter President for at least one year
- on the NAC between 2010 to 2015
- as a volunteer leader for at least 5 years
- at both the local and national level

Using these criterion, the entire population of NAC leaders from 2010 to 2015 became the purposive sample population; with multiple years of local and national level volunteer leadership were good sources of information regarding the career impact of volunteer leadership.

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Based on the analysis of the results from the survey and interviews regarding the career benefits and ROI of volunteer leadership, there are a number of implications and recommendations for individuals, associations and corporations.

The data demonstrated a very positive overall ROI of 246% for the experience as a volunteer leader, which means that for every \$1 invested in time and money as a volunteer leader, there was a return of \$2.46 in net benefits, after costs are covered. The BCR is 1:3.46 which means that for every \$1 invested, \$3.46 was returned. This data alone makes a compelling case for the value of volunteer leadership, but there is more to it than simply a positive ROI.

Below are the implications for individuals, associations and employers which emerged from this study.

Implications for Individuals:

1. The benefits of volunteer leadership in a professional association are clear.
2. The ROI from the investment of time and money toward the role as a volunteer leader is well worth it. Not only is there a financial gain, the live learning opportunities in leadership provide a level of professional development only gained through hands-on experience. The experience afforded to volunteer leaders aligns with informal learning experience of the 70-20-10 research from the Center for Creative Leadership, which demonstrated the importance of real-time experiences in the professional development of leaders (CCL, 2014).

3. When an individual is working in the role as a leader at work as well as a volunteer leader, their rate of leadership development is accelerated because they are gaining twice as much experience while serving as a leader in two separate organizations. In his book *Outliers*, Gladwell (2008) states “the idea that excellence at performing a complex task requires a critical minimum level of practice”, and that a person needs 10,000 hours of practice to become an expert. If we apply this concept to leadership development, the experience gained as a volunteer leader when partnered with serving in the role of a leader at work, essentially allows someone to “double-dip” and accelerate their leadership development more so than someone who is only in a leadership position while at work.
4. The experience of volunteer leadership facilitated the transformational change from manager to leader. The challenge of a being a volunteer leader who leads other volunteers requires an individual to learn how to motivate and inspire followers towards action. There is a belief in volunteer organizations that “you can’t fire a volunteer”. As a result, leading volunteers means that a volunteer leader has to learn a hard lesson: that leadership is not about themselves, but rather about the team they lead. A volunteer leader must learn to listen, respect and embrace differences, nurture relationships and build a solid team; in doing so they transform from a functional manager to a true leader.
5. Not every impact measure can be converted into a financial measure (Phillips, 2012). The most important intangible benefit relevant to volunteer leadership that was identified by study participants was the incredible value of personal and professional

relationships they gained. Hirschi (2012) classified social capital as an important career resource construct. Creating positive professional relationships is a key aspect of proactive career development and plays an important role in building the social capital resources of a professional network.

Implications for Associations

1. Professional associations provide leadership development through volunteer leadership opportunities at the local, national and international level (Bowers, 2012). However, many associations struggle to attract volunteers and compete with other volunteer opportunities (Coerver and Byers, 2011). Associations need to understand the motivation of volunteer leaders, as industry professionals are motivated by both altruistic and instrumental reasons. The top reason found as to why one becomes a volunteer leader was the altruistic factor, “to contribute to the talent management profession”. Three additional top rated reasons to become a volunteer leader were to gain new skills and experience, develop leadership skills, and expand their network.
2. In today’s competitive environment, associations must understand and clearly communicate the value of volunteer leadership. “Professionals expect value and companies demand return for their investment” (Coerver and Byers, 2011). The ability to communicate both the tangible and intangible value of the experience as a volunteer leader would demonstrate that the association not only understands, but also values the role of volunteer leaders.

3. ATD can specifically benefit from nurturing volunteer leaders, as the learning experiences contribute to the human capital development of talent development professionals. Volunteer leadership contributes to the development of the foundational competencies of ATD Competency Model: Business Skills, Interpersonal Skills, Personal Skills, Global Mindset, Industry Knowledge and Technology Literacy. Volunteer leadership also enhances skill development in the AOE of Coaching.
4. Both formal and informal learning opportunities contribute to professional, career, and leadership development (Berger, 2014). Associations can leverage the power of informal learning that is inherent in volunteer leadership. The learning and skill development that occurs through the experience of volunteer leadership has great impact on the individual and enhances their human capital. Hirschi (2012) highlighted the importance of developing human capital, such as the skills and competencies needed for career development and continuous employability.

Implications for Employers

1. Although most employers understand of the importance of informal learning, they do not know how to leverage or utilize this kind of learning to enhance individual performance (De Grip, 2015). Employers need to maximize the value of informal learning for leadership development, by supporting employees to volunteer their time as a chapter leader. In fact, employers that have a limited budget for leadership

development could utilize volunteer leadership as a source for helping employees to develop leadership skills.

2. Many corporations have embraced the idea of corporate social responsibility as a way to engage employees, contribute to the local or global community and develop new skills. A recommendation to specifically encourage employees to volunteer as a leader in an association, would kill the proverbial two birds with one stone; it would provide a service to the association, as well as, develop leadership skills for employees.

Ultimately there is a paradox of volunteer leadership - often the main motivator volunteers get involved is to give back to their industry, however what they receive is so much more. Many study participants mentioned this paradox when reflecting in the interviews. The dedication and commitment to the profession, the association and the local chapter over many years results in a life-changing experience on a deep personal and professional basis across the four critical career resources of human capital, social, psychological resources and career identity.

There was one simple question that begged for substantiating data that drove this research, *“Is it worth it to be a volunteer leader in a professional talent development association?”* The research has clearly demonstrated the huge value and benefit of serving as a volunteer leader. Yes. It is worth it!