

NEW ZEALAND LEADERS OF VOLUNTEERS  
MAKING THE DIFFERENCE IN VOLUNTEERING.

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## Role and Identity in Volunteer Management

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LINKING PASSION WITH OPPORTUNITY,  
EVERY DAY.





## Challenges of an emergent profession

- Often invisible - poorly understood, under-valued and under-developed
- A role 'without boundaries'
- Varied pathways into role and limited career progression
- Precarious work



## Volunteer management and 'role'

Moving 'Role theory' from...  
role as 'a formal, sequential, staged process  
of socialisation into an occupational or  
societal position'

To...

role as an 'inherently incomplete and  
emergent intermediary in identity  
construction' (Simpson & Carrol, 2008)

**What are the processes by which  
volunteer managers negotiate  
their role and construct their  
identities?**

## Identity work

a concept which emphasises the  
"dynamic aspects and on-going struggles  
around creating a sense of self and  
providing temporary answers to the  
question 'who am I' (or 'who are we') and  
what do I (we) stand for?"

(Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1164)



## Methodology: Exploring narrative and identity work of volunteer managers

- Life history interviews
- Exploring 'Identity work' (see Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).
- 27 paid managers of volunteers whose main – or only – role in the organisation is volunteer management (10 FT, 17 PT).
- Working in health (17) and tourism (10) sectors
- Not-for-profit organisations (18), public sector (6), and 3 council-linked not-for-profit trusts
- 25 women, 2 men, average age 50+

## Experiences of the volunteer management role

- A complex, multi-dimensional and ambiguous role
- Fuzzy boundaries between tasks and responsibilities
- Isolation and often solitary nature of role
- Lack of recognition and understanding of the role
- Low pay levels and limited training.



## The pivotal role of volunteer managers



'Actually, I see it [volunteer manager role] like a sort of giant octopus at the centre of it, with tentacles going in all directions because it's like an integral part of every bit of the organisation' (Anne).



'I can see the bigger picture and I can see how things can work and how people gel together, and how pieces of a jigsaw will fit. But, I'm not necessarily the, a jigsaw piece. I don't, I'm not a jigsaw piece. I'm more of the board underneath, I'm more of the platform carrier'.



'It is a hard role, sometimes it is unsupported and it's a highly productive role. We're dealing with emotions of people and families, more than the average employer ever has to do. And because we're basically a one stop shop, as I said earlier, we are educational, we are statistics, we are HR, we are the lot. I think there needs to be an appreciation also the fact that people are paid to do the job [and] should be respected' (Charlotte)

'[The volunteer manager role] is a bit like an airline stewardess if you like, an airline stewardess is there - I don't think they get called that any more do they? - but they're there to act in an emergency situation to make sure everybody gets off the plane and to know where the [life boats] are, to be able to deploy the slides, all of those things. But the public perceives them as a smiling face in a pretty uniform with a nice tray of food and a big smile, and I think that a volunteer manager is perceived in much the same way' (Robyn)



## Professionals guided by values & essential moral selves



I guess the way I was brought up I had a, like my nana, so the next generation had a lot of influence, as did, who I referred to as aunties, the, that in a Pakeha sense are not aunties, you know? And a lot of people, so I developed this real sense of what felt right in my puku, you know, trust my puku radar, what's right is right and what's not is not (Sam).



Annie had a long career as a teacher but had become dissatisfied with the education system and decided that she needed to:

“do something different and what I need to do needs to be more in line with my values”



‘It really made me reassess just some basic things, and basic values in my life. And my career, or my work life, and my perception of equating success to a dollar figure was one of those things that I reassessed at that point. I went, “What am I doing? This is not actually me”. I worked for all these years as a teenager about social change, and I have quite a large social conscious, and this doesn't play to any of that. And I'm, I use the words soul sucking, that's what I kind of felt that environment did to me, was suck and chip away at my soul. So I thought: Right, change. Right. Reassess, we're going to get, a new approach.’ Betty

‘It's more a career choice from the heart than the pocket’ (Stella)



## Summary

- Interviewees were explicitly engaged in ‘identity work’ to contest what it means to be a volunteer manager
- Interviewees positioned their role as pivotal in organisations in the context of perceived undervaluing and misunderstanding
- Narratives which highlighted continuities *and* discontinuities between the volunteer management role and culturally inscribed values set up an evaluation of career in quite different terms than traditional markers of success: altruistic values, connection to service, giving and personal morals were prioritised

## Future research

- Further investigation of the marginalised status and lack of recognition of the role
- Exploration of gender relations in and around the volunteer management role
- Exploration of the variations between individual accounts of volunteer managers to tease out opportunities for better support and development of the volunteer management profession.

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	Frequency	
<b>Sector</b>	Health	17
	Tourism	10
<b>Type of organisation</b>	Not-for-profit	18
	Public	6
	Not-for-profit alongside public organisation	3
<b>Job title</b>	'Volunteer' in job title (e.g. manager of volunteer services)	16
	'Volunteer' plus another role in job title (e.g. volunteer and office manager)	4
	Other job title	7
<b>Employment hours</b>	Full-time	10
	Part-time	17
<b>Gender</b>	Female	25
	Male	2
<b>Age</b>	Under 35	1
	35-49	6
	Over-50	20