

STUDENT VOLUNTEERS – THE POTENTIAL OF HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT IN RUSSIA

Anna Kuzminchuk – Maria Pevnaya

Abstract

Volunteers have a certain knowledge, abilities, skills which meet the needs of regional society. Stimulating volunteer activity of Russian population, regional government develops human resources, thereby increasing the economic potential of the country. There is a need for accurate identification of the target audience for more productive state support of this section. In the article student volunteers are considered as a progressive community capable to act as the leading force in the development of the region. Researches on young volunteers show that leadership skills, social self-confidence, such skills as critical thinking and conflict resolution are inherent for volunteers what proves efficiency of the state investments in development of volunteering and favourably affects characteristics of the national human capital. The article shows the results of Russian nationwide representative online poll of young volunteer activists (N=930, 2015). The results of the poll demonstrate engagement of student volunteers into social, civil activities, their concern for solving civil problems. Specific characteristics of student volunteers as a promising community are: active use of social networks, high level of life satisfaction, self-confidence and healthy self-esteem, positive attitude to life, temporal activism. The specified features define the need and the nature of government support for volunteering.

Key words: volunteering, human capital, Russian youth, national policy

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Introduction

Student volunteering is an important socio-cultural trend. Volunteering as one of the types of extra-curricular activities is growing in popularity. Handy et al. notice that in 2010 86,2% of students from India, 84,5% of Chinese students, 79,7% of Canadian and 78,8% American students, 71,4% of young Belgians studying at universities as well as 63,3% of students from England worked as volunteers (Handy et al., 2010). According to statistical reports of huge

events, 88% of volunteers, who have taken part in the Olympic Games in Sochi (2014), are young people under 30 years old.

Student volunteering is one of the most government-supported types of volunteering in the world. According to Justin Davis Smith, promoting youth volunteering is a strategic form of government support for volunteering (Davis Smith, 2000). Besides, popularity of student volunteering can be explained by the fact that volunteering while at university is relatively easy. Universities offer a good opportunity to get involved in volunteering, student volunteers benefit from the training and support provided by their institution (Brewis & Holdsworth, 2011).

Some researchers note that young volunteers participate especially in new types of volunteering. Career motivation is typical for the majority of them, they do voluntary work because they can put such experience in their CVs (Handy et al., 2010). This new type of volunteering is more consciously planned, eventually more organized and can be described in terms of reciprocity and growing professional approach; it is less spontaneous and is not driven by customs but rather driven by interests and experience. Such features become especially relevant in the context of increasing socio-economic risks and nonlinear nature of social time. It determines the need of stimulating and promoting student volunteering acting as the leading force, the potential for territorial development.

1 Theoretical background

Nowadays student volunteering is an object of numerous researches. The considerable part of such researches is dedicated to the issues of volunteer motivation (altruistic, egoistic, mixed) and to the personal, organizational and institutional factors causing it (Simha, Topuzova & Albert, 2011; Fényes & Pusztai, 2012; Ghose & Kassam, 2014).

There is also a great number of investigations dedicated to the analysis of interrelation between volunteering and youth's human capital indicators. Wilson and Musick construct an integrated theory of volunteering based on the premises that volunteer work requires human capital, social capital and cultural capital (Wilson & Musick, 1997).

Volunteers as a social community possess a certain capital (economic, social, cultural, symbolical). Social capital of a volunteer is gained due to social contacts and communications, public approval, experience. Cultural capital of a volunteer includes wealth of knowledge and experience, significant values, the quality of education. Symbolical capital of volunteers implies their recognition by society, respect, gaining status advantages.

Volunteering has manifested positive effects on the experiences of linkage to the community, positive social relationships, and social capital, volunteering has posed positive effects on social responsibility, social relatedness, responsibility motive, and endorsement for prosocial norms (Cheung, Wing Lo & Liu, 2014). The larger social capital increases volunteering, but there is an inverse effect as well, as voluntary activities also increase social capital of the volunteer.

Numerous empirical studies prove that many students engage in volunteering activities to improve their employment prospects by increasing their human capital, expanding their social contacts, which may be used to get better jobs or sending a positive (volunteering) signal to employers (Handy et al., 2010; Roulin & Bangerter, 2013; Forbes & Zampelli, 2014).

Astin and Sax have found that «students who volunteer are more likely than non-volunteers to have leadership ability, social self-confidence, and skills in critical thinking and conflict resolution» (Astin & Sax, 1998).

Simha, Topuzova and Albert noticed student volunteers emphasising that they developed certain skills related to leadership while participating in volunteer activities. The participants agreed that volunteer experiences helped them “become a leader through actions not words” and “refine leadership skills” (Simha, Topuzova & Albert, 2011). The second skill that participants reported they learned as a result of their volunteer experiences was how to support people, to be a role model and a mentor, improving their ability to connect with people and develop relationships. Other leadership qualities included patience, compassion, self-awareness, confidence, humility, and gratitude.

What leadership skills do Russian student volunteers possess? Can they be compared to the results of researches conducted in other countries? Is there any country specific? How to unlock the potential of student volunteers for solving social problems within a certain territory? Such an analysis is a research gap for the present study to address.

2 Data and methods

The article represents the results of Russian nationwide representative online poll of young volunteer activists (N=930, 2015, random sampling). Students of federal universities and leading higher education institutions from 14 Russian regions took part in the poll. All the respondents are members of thematic communities in different social networks joining together active youth, young men and women who participated in various volunteer

programmes and projects, members of youth non-governmental organisations. The sampling includes only those respondents who have voluntarily rendered free assistance to strangers for the last year. 18% of the sampling are young men, and 82% are young women. The proportion of young people aged from 16 to 19 years old among the interviewed volunteers is 44%, the percentage of respondents aged from 20 to 24 years old equals 50%, and only 6% of people aged from 25 to 30 years old took part in the poll.

3 Results

Active use of social networks

Modest 11,8 % of student volunteers have never used social networks. The most popular social network among students is V Kontakte. 99% of students consider themselves to be active users of this network. This figure for all Russian Internet users equals 61% (Tab. 1). Nonetheless, more than half of student volunteers (62,2 %) are not as active in using Facebook international social network although they visit it more often than other Internet users.

Tab. 1: Active use of social networks

Social network	Student volunteers, %	All Internet users, %
Vkontakte	99	61
Facebook	37,8	16

Source: author's calculation; the results of the poll held by Public Opinion Foundation "Online practices of the Russians: social networks" (January 15–19, 2016). Access mode: <http://fom.ru/SMI-i-internet/1249> (accessed date: April 6, 2016)

Ahmad, Mustafa and Ullah found out that intensity of using social media was positively associated with formation of bonding and bridging social capital (Ahmad, Mustafa & Ullah, 2016). For student volunteers active using of social networks is connected with the need to organise smooth communication between members of the community. It indicates their progressiveness, active participation in communication process including Internet communication what definitely increases their social capital.

High level of life satisfaction

84,5% of student volunteers who took part in the survey are satisfied with their lives. Meier and Stutzer (2004) provide a robust evidence to support the premise that volunteers are more

satisfied with their lives than non-volunteers are. Pavlova and Silbereisen (2012) detected high level of life satisfaction among young volunteers in Germany.

Taking part in volunteer projects, students provide their own mental well-being. Volunteer work allows them to reduce stress, to avoid depression, to raise self-esteem and their life satisfaction level. Pro-social behaviour is an important factor of ensuring life satisfaction, and nowadays it is considered one of key components of positive mental health (Veerassamy, Sambasivan & Kumar, 2014).

Mogilner, Chance and Norton determined that spending time on other people promotes the feeling of time sufficiency and even increase in its amount due to cumulative feeling of personal efficiency. According to the conclusions reached, the authors speak about a possibility of getting rid of time pressure (stress caused by lack of time) due to dedicating personal time to others (for pro-social purposes). In other words, they explain the need to be engaged in volunteer activities for the feeling of self-efficiency and perception of time sufficiency what is important under modern conditions of nonlinearity and mobility of social time (Mogilner, Chance & Norton, 2012).

Healthy self-esteem

Self-esteem was found a strong predictor in the formation of bonding and bridging social capital (Johnston, Tanner, Lalla & Kawalski, 2013). By self-esteem we meant two aspects: self-confidence and positive attitude to life. 80% of student volunteers among those who took part in our survey are absolutely self-confident and sure of their actions. 73% of the respondents notice that recently they have had a positive mood. This figure is much higher than the average across Russia. Almost half of Russian people (46%) remark that anxiety is prevalent mood among the people around (“FOMnibus” poll by Public Opinion Foundation).

The findings of the research carried out by Thoits and Hewitt show that volunteer work enhances such aspect of well-being as self-esteem and, conversely, people who have greater self-esteem invest more hours in volunteer service (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). The focus on well-being offers a preventative approach to public and personal health, with important economic consequences.

Temporal activism

Every second student volunteer considers time as a resource for their personal and professional development (52%). 44% of respondents think that volunteering helps them improve their time management skills in general. Volunteers experience strong positive

emotions under the conditions of growing nonlinearity and rapid changes. 41% of respondents feel confident in such situations. Being under the conditions of temporal uncertainty, every third respondent patiently waits and hopes for the best. Student volunteers focus on purposeful rational and effective actions under challenging temporal conditions. According to their words, if they have little time for completing particular tasks, they will try to do it faster to meet the deadlines (59%). 41% of respondents reported their life line to be multidirectional and poly-temporal.

Therefore, we defined the type of student volunteers' temporal strategy as active temporal optimism which is characterised by the following: active using of time opportunities and resources; aspiration and ability to manage their personal as well as others' time time in the optimum way; ability to create relevant temporal world view taking into account the nature of social time nonlinear dynamics; ability to control the speed and rhythm of time at their disposal; temporal activity aimed at the future and the present combined with positive time experience (Ambarova, 2014).

Volunteer community can be classified as leading (innovation-focused, advancing) community involved in social and civil activities, not indifferent to solving social problems. It proves volunteers' activeness, considering them as the leading, driving force for the society, positive nature of volunteers' behaviour strategies, approved behavioural models promoting development of civil society in Russia.

Conclusion

Student volunteering is a very contradictory phenomenon. In some countries the number of student volunteers is increasing, it is decreasing in the other; in some countries young volunteers are guided mainly by egoistical motives, in the other – by altruistic motives what is caused by national context, history of development and traditions.

Specific features of student volunteers studied in the article demonstrate that student volunteers are considered as a progressive community capable to act as the leading force in the development of the region.

Governments have a role to play in promoting volunteering among young people by, for example: promoting volunteering within the education and youth services; developing specific programmes to encourage youth volunteering; working with the media and other stakeholders to present a more attractive, up-to-date image of volunteering.

In our opinion, the leading role in the development of student volunteering certainly belongs to universities. Their part in stimulation and development of student volunteering can include the following: free training during participation in volunteer activity providing certain skills needed for their employability profile, giving recommendations for graduate volunteers; universities could formally credit students for voluntary activities, grant remission of tuition fees for student volunteers; universities could also give awards and some bonuses to student volunteers, provide special grants and scholarships.

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Contact

Anna Kuzminchuk

Ural Federal University

620002, Ekaterinburg, Mira st., 19

a.a.kuzminchuk@urfu.ru

Maria Pevnaya

Ural Federal University

620002, Ekaterinburg, Mira st., 19

m.v.pevnaya@urfu.ru