

Valuing Volunteer Management Skills Research Summary

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Valuing Volunteer Management Skills

There are almost 17 million people in England volunteering with a great range of organisations¹, and the task of managing them is clearly considerable and complex. The question of how to ensure that their contribution is fully utilised, acknowledged and sustained has received increased attention over recent years. In this context the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) was commissioned by Skills - Third Sector to examine volunteer management in the voluntary sector. In particular we explored the skills gaps of people who manage volunteers, their access to training and learning and the remaining barriers to professional development.

This research bulletin offers a summary of the key findings from the research as well as outlining some of the main implications for policy, practice and research identified on the basis of discussions between IVR, Skills - Third Sector and Volunteering England.

17 million
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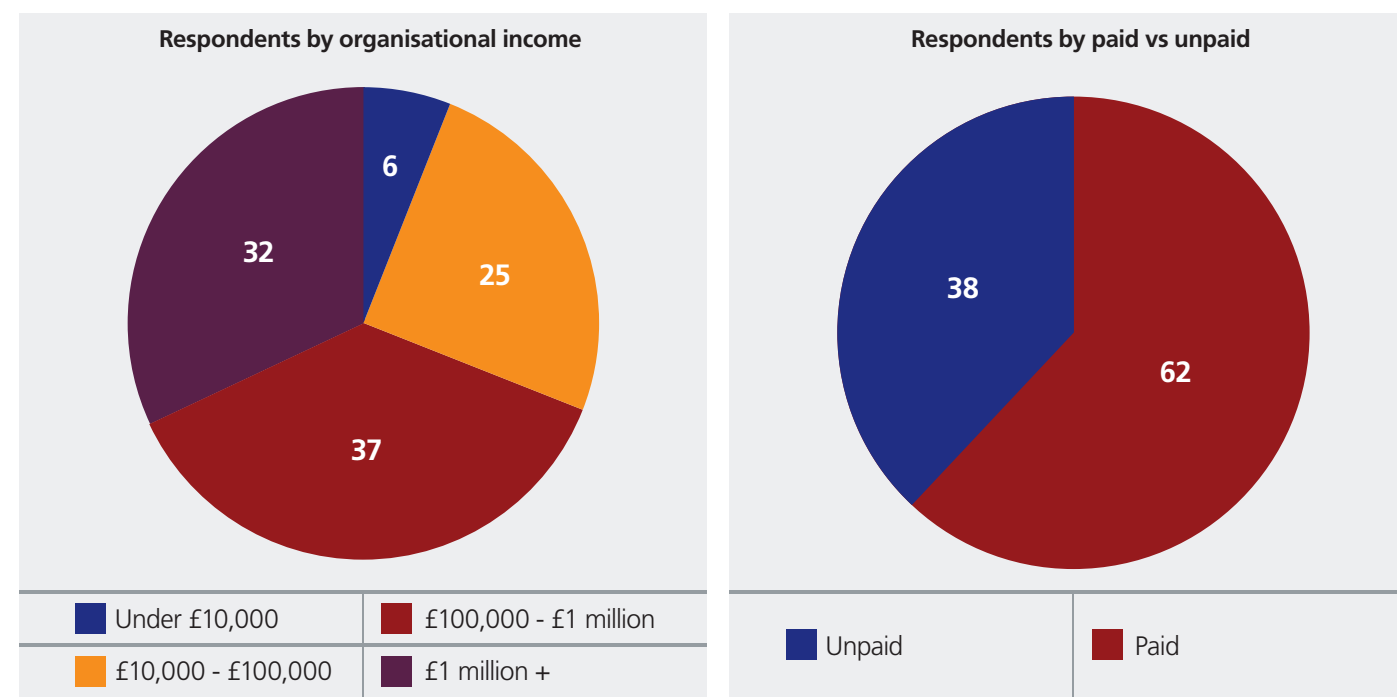
What did we do?

The research project used a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods. The main element was a telephone survey of 1,004 people who manage volunteers in the voluntary sector². In addition to this quantitative survey, ten biographical interviews were undertaken with people who manage volunteers. This qualitative element enabled an in-depth exploration of career journeys, skills development and remaining needs.

Who did we speak to?

The voluntary and community sector in England is large and diverse. Equally, people who manage volunteers are a diverse group that includes not only those with 'volunteer manager' as their role title but many who undertake this function alongside other activities within an organisation. The sample was designed to capture as diverse a cross-section as possible of organisations to help us understand how different organisational characteristics affect the ways in which volunteers are managed. Figure 1 illustrates two particularly important dimensions – the annual income of the organisation and whether the person managing volunteers was paid or unpaid.

Figure 1: Breakdown of sample by organisational income and paid vs unpaid



Base: All respondents (1,004).

Who are the people who manage volunteers?

The survey confirms the earlier findings from IVR's 2008 study Management Matters that the role of volunteer management is likely to be a part-time function of a more general manager³. Fifteen per cent of respondents are in roles classified as 'volunteer coordinator' or 'volunteer manager' compared to 40% whose roles can be classified as general managers. Thirty-eight per cent of the respondents are unpaid, including some based in high-income organisations. For most respondents volunteer management is only a small part of their role, with just 22% spending the majority of their time on it.

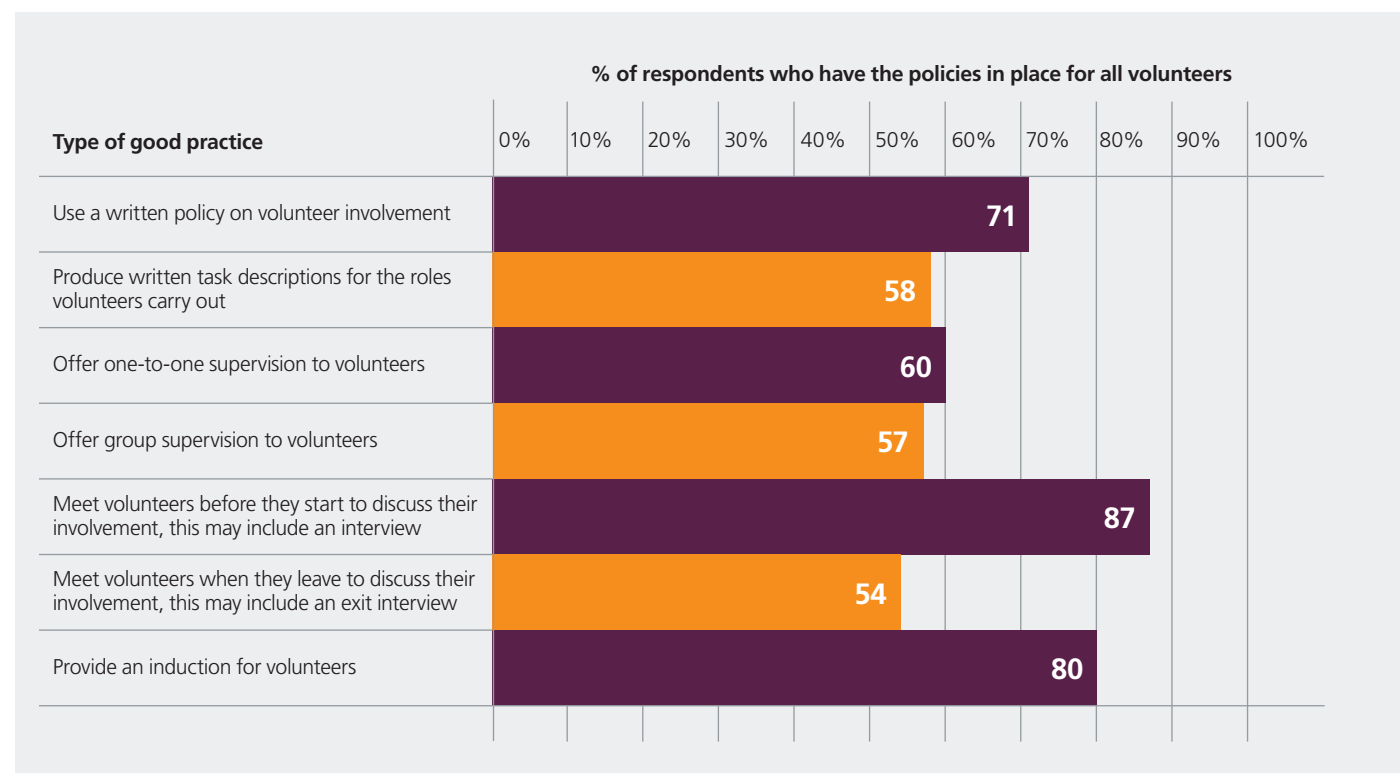
Many respondents brought a significant amount of experience in managing volunteers to their roles, with 65% having managed volunteers for over five years. Respondents were generally positive about the added-value of volunteers, believing that they bring specialist skills that the organisation cannot acquire elsewhere.

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What is good practice in volunteer management?

The National Occupational Standards in the management of volunteers identify a number of good practices, and overall there is a relatively high level of observance across all sizes of organisations in the sector. The majority of organisations have reached a basic level such as providing an induction (80%) and having a written policy in place (71%) but there remains a significant minority who don't offer even the most basic practices.

Figure 2: Volunteer Management Practices (for all volunteers)



Base: All respondents (1,004).

Organisations with larger incomes tend to have more of the good practice indicators in place. For example, 68% of respondents in organisations with an annual income under £10,000 use an induction compared to 93% of those with an income of over £1 million. Likewise paid respondents are more likely to carry out these practices than those who are unpaid. 83% compared to 51% have a written policy on volunteer involvement, 83% compared to 40% produce written task descriptions for the roles volunteers carry out, and 60% compared to 44% carry out exit interviews.

However, this may be a factor of the different scale and nature of volunteering in these smaller, volunteer-led organisations and we must be aware

of the risk that 'formalisation and professionalisation might crowd out more informal types of volunteering and limit the inclusiveness of volunteering'.

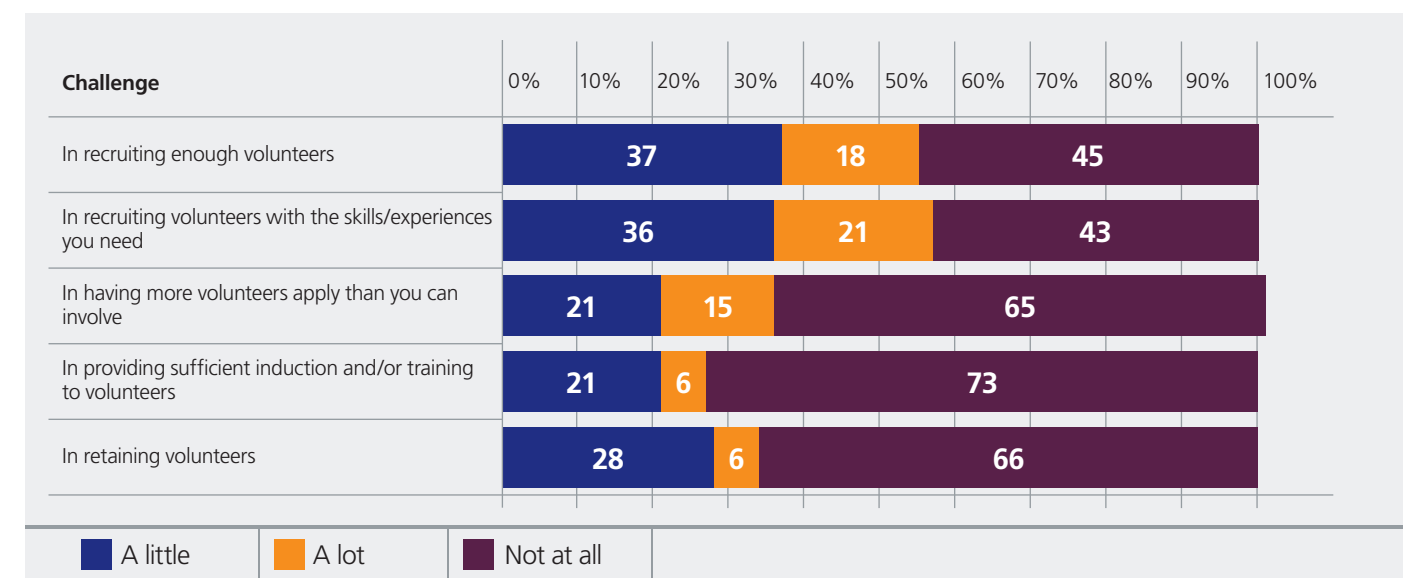
57%
have difficulties recruiting
volunteers with the right skills

What are the key challenges in volunteer management?

Across the sector difficulties remain around recruiting volunteers, particularly those with the skills or experience organisations need (57% overall). This challenge is faced particularly by people who manage volunteers in organisations with incomes under £10,000 (66%) and those who are unpaid (63%). Respondents have particular difficulties recruiting volunteers for roles in campaigning, IT support, fundraising, handling money, leadership/project roles, research and policy work.

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Figure 3: Challenges in volunteer management



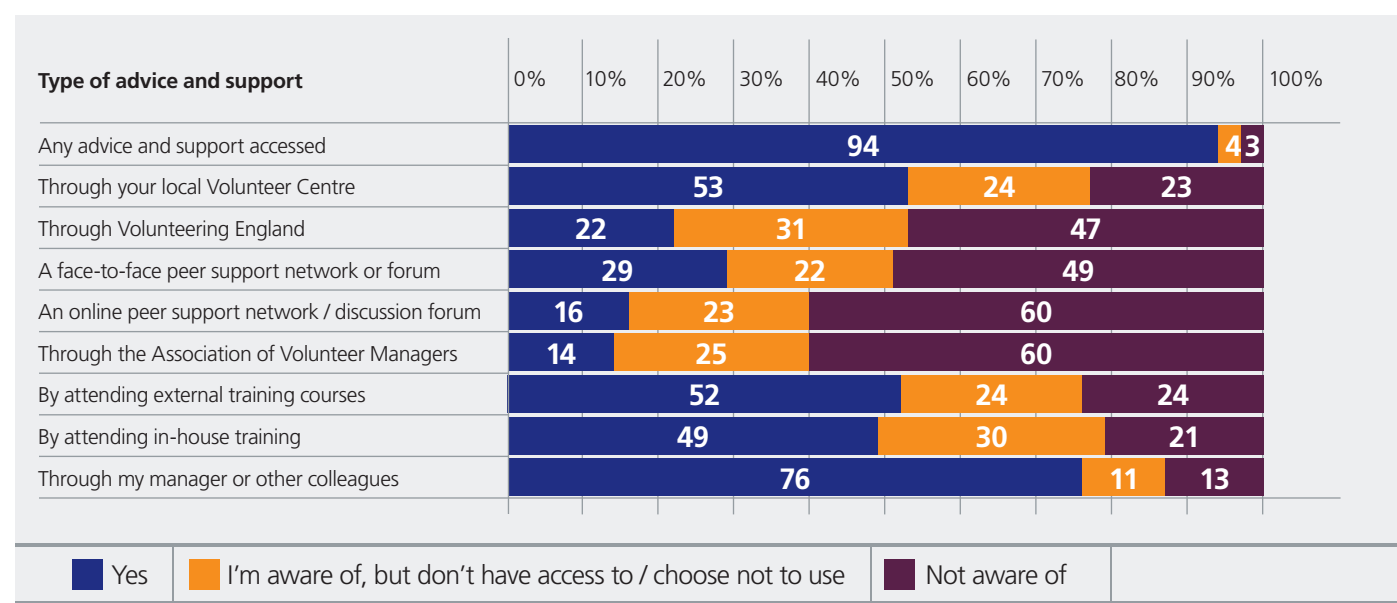
Base: All respondents (1,004). Due to rounding up, rows may not add up to 100%.

What support exists for people who manage volunteers?

The main source of support and advice in volunteer management comes through respondent's managers or other colleagues (76%). However, while people who manage volunteers may work in supportive environments, they also rely greatly on the local and national volunteering infrastructure for advice and support, particularly on local Volunteer Centres. People who manage volunteers in organisations with higher incomes are considerably more likely to access these infrastructure services.

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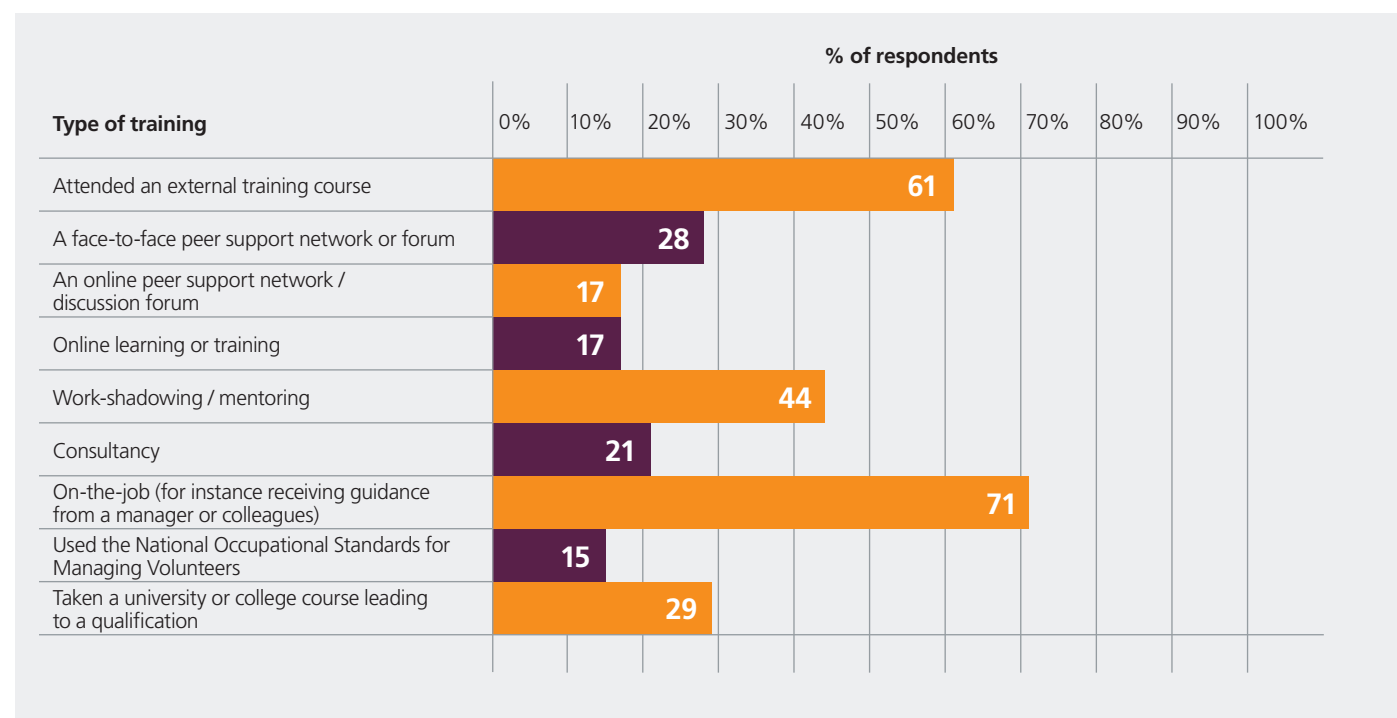
Figure 4: Type of support and advice accessed



Base: All respondents (1,004). Due to rounding up, rows may not add up to 100%.

Fifty-eight per cent of people who manage volunteers have received some form of training that has helped in their work with volunteers. When asked about types of training or development, by far the most popular form of training was on-the-job (71%). Surprisingly, whether the respondent was paid or unpaid and organisational income are not important predictors of receiving training.

Figure 5: All types of learning, personal development and training accessed



Base: All respondents (1,004).

In general, most of the skills needed to manage volunteers are learned by doing as much as by formal training or learning.

'In a way I'm almost like the generation before the volunteer managers who have these opportunities open to them. And it's really my experience and whatever skills I have, have come from on the job rather than by being taught.'

What is the role of networking?

The appetite for additional training is generally high and one of the most significant findings is the positive reinforcement that occurs between involvement in volunteer management networks and respondents' desire to undertake training. Although there is a relatively low level of membership of volunteer management networks, those involved in networks are more likely to have taken part in training and to desire further training. This suggests the central place of face-to-face and online networking in embedding learning and also points to the potential for local infrastructure to support and facilitate such groups. The research confirms that very small organisations (with low incomes and few members of paid staff) often exist in isolation from other organisations. It is striking that people who manage volunteers in such organisations often don't feel a need for training or good practice support and advice. Qualitative analysis suggests two possible reasons for this. On the one hand isolation may limit the awareness of how they might develop within their role.

On the other hand, this perceived lack of need for training might also be a reflection of the different skills required in a smaller organisations. Other research on small, volunteer-led groups has found that they 'often felt strongly that imposing more formal systems of volunteer management on them would be inappropriate and ineffective'⁵.

As might be expected, awareness of the National Occupational Standards in management of volunteers, at a level of 40% for the whole sector, is lowest among unpaid volunteer managers (32%) and those in smaller organisations (31% for those in organisations with incomes under £10,000). This raises questions about the need for local and national infrastructure to take a greater role in sharing information about the relevance of the National Occupations Standards for smaller, volunteer-led groups.

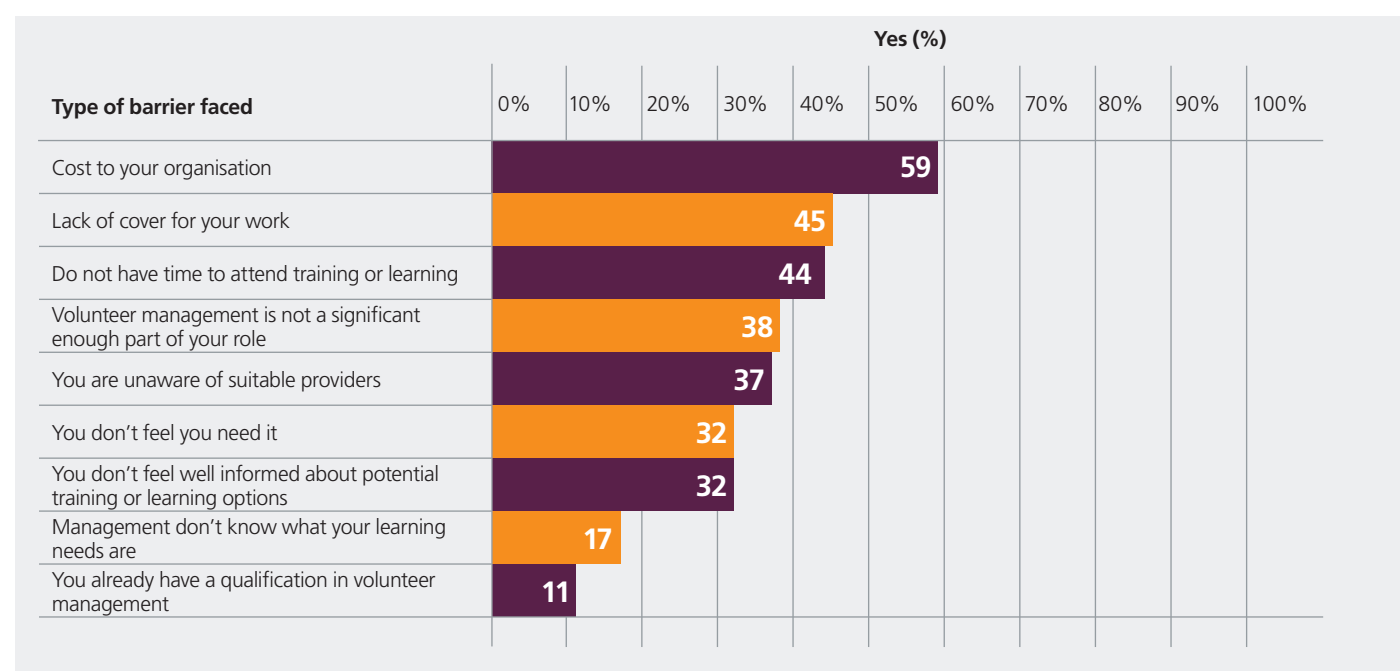
'I can't think of anything specific that I would want training on, but I would like to be able to access, go to training and learn more. I can't really define for you what it is I feel I don't know... I'd just like to be part of something that I feel is developing me personally and therefore actually helping my organisation.'

'I've got all of that [the National Occupational Standards] in a file, that's my bible and I was very pleased when that was published...I think that's a really useful tool and it's very useful for me to take to the Chief Executive and to the trustees and say, these are the national standards and this is the way we should be working.'

What are the barriers to training and learning?

The barriers to accessing learning and training for people who manage volunteers are shown in figure 6. Overall, the biggest barrier is cost (59%), followed by lack of cover for work (45%) and time taken to attend (44%).

Figure 6: Barriers to accessing training



Base: All respondents (1,004).

There are important differences in barriers faced by respondents from different sized organisations. People who manage volunteers in organisations with higher incomes are more likely to see cost as a barrier (68% for organisations with incomes over £1 million compared to 56% for organisations with incomes under £10,000). There are also key differences between paid and unpaid respondents. Paid volunteer managers are more likely to face at least one barrier to learning or training (96% compared with 85% of unpaid respondents).

In particular, those in paid positions face greater resource barriers such as cost (67% compared to 46%), time (51% compared to 31%) and lack of cover (54% compared to 30%). Unpaid respondents are considerably more likely to feel that they don't need further training or learning. This difference raises a number of questions including whether such respondents are more effective at their job, are unaware of their training needs or are simply less likely to try to access the training that is available.

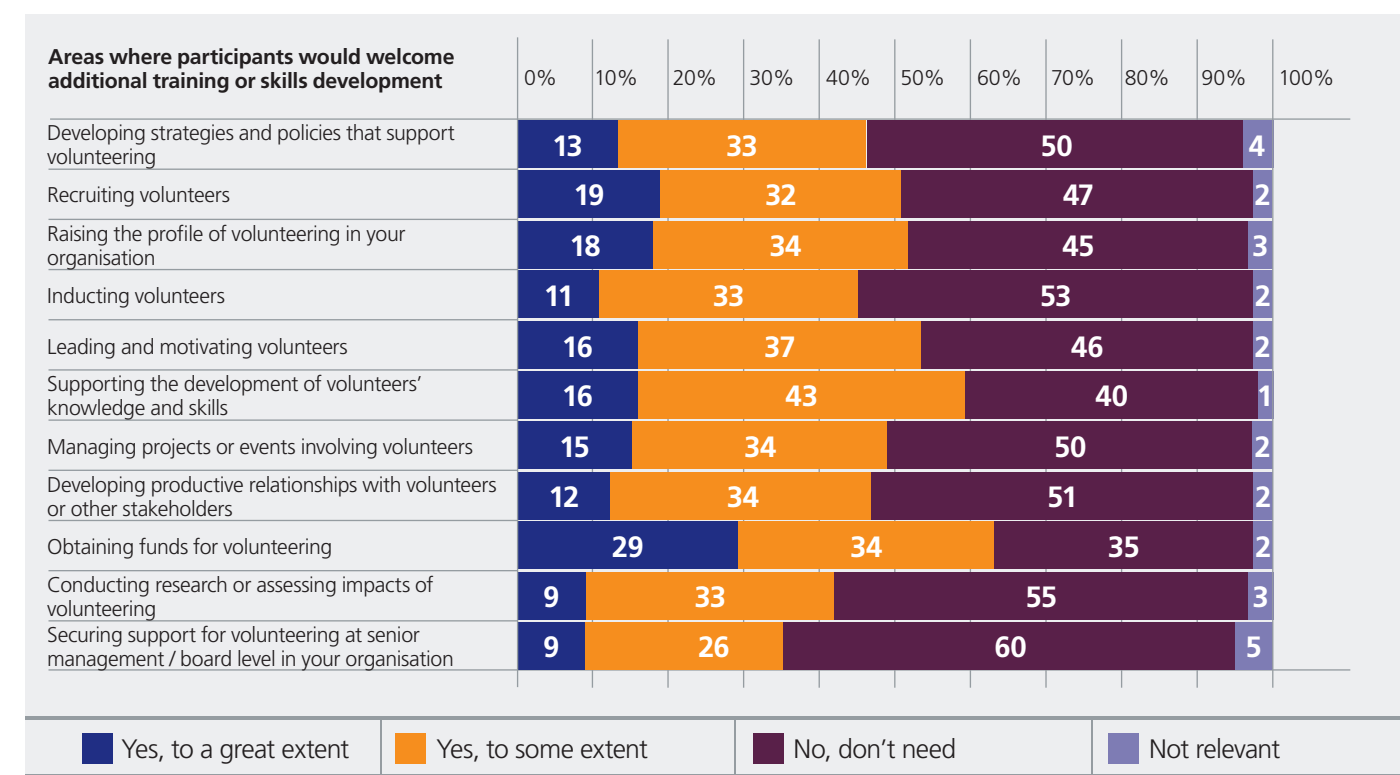
42%
of people who manage volunteers have not received any training or learning that would help in their work with volunteers

What are the needs for further training and learning?

Obtaining funds for volunteering is the area where respondents would most welcome additional training, with recruitment, raising the profile of volunteering in their organisation and leading and motivating volunteers also being significant areas for skills development.

'I think the status of volunteer managers within a lot of organisations is fairly low...There are a very large number of volunteer managers [that] have volunteer management bolted on to the end of an already busy job.'

Figure 7: Areas where additional training would be welcomed



Base: All respondents (1,004).

Priorities for further training depend greatly on the type of organisation and whether the respondent managing volunteers is paid or unpaid. Those in paid positions feel a greater need for training than those who are unpaid. Developing expertise in 'obtaining funding for volunteering' is more important for those in a paid role (32% saying that they would to a 'great extent' welcome such training, compared to 24% for unpaid). Those in paid positions also see a greater need for further training in

'securing support for volunteering at senior management / board level' (12% welcome this to a great extent, compared to just 5% for unpaid). Likewise, people who manage volunteers in organisations with an income over £1 million see it as more of a priority (24% compared to the overall average of 10%).

What are the implications for policy, practice and research?

The skills and development needs of people who manage volunteers must remain an issue high on the policy, practice and research agendas in the light of the continued push by government to get more people involved in their communities. Moreover, while this study has illuminated some areas of volunteer management, it also raises further questions, or opens new horizons as we seek to understand the landscape of volunteer management better.

Policy

Volunteer management is a widespread and necessary function across the voluntary sector. However since the role of volunteer manager is likely to be a part-time function of a more general manager and rarely the sole responsibility of one person within an organisation there can be no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to volunteer management. This should be better reflected in the training, support and advice available to those who manage volunteers. In particular:

- The study shows that groups with lower incomes and fewer members of staff do not access the information and support that larger organisations do, raising questions for policy makers about how such small, volunteer-involving groups might be brought together, perhaps focussed around the areas they are most interested in, such as gaining funding for volunteer programmes;
- National and local volunteering and voluntary sector infrastructure bodies need to develop information and advice services on volunteer management in general and the National Occupational Standards in particular that are more relevant to small groups and do not deter people by language that is overly formal.

No 'one-size-fits-all' approach

Practice

The findings suggest considerable scope for continuing the recent development of volunteer management practice around formal training, encouraging networking and the roll-out of National Occupational Standards. However, there are clear differences between those who manage volunteers in different size organisations. In particular:

- It is important to explore what kinds of specialist support volunteers who manage other volunteers may need. This study found that unpaid respondents were less likely to implement good practice compared to those in paid roles. This is closely related to unpaid respondents' lack of access to training and support and advice from both the local and national volunteering infrastructure. It may be that the support currently offered is inappropriate to their needs;
- National Occupational Standards are an important tool for those in paid positions seeking to raise the profile of volunteer management as a profession comparable with, yet distinct from, human resources management. As such they need to be further rolled out;
- One way to raise the profile of volunteer management within the voluntary sector would be to ensure it is considered at Board level. This may take the form of a 'volunteer champion' sitting on a management committee or Board;
- Lack of formal training or learning is not necessarily a negative thing as long as those who manage volunteers are aware of how to access support and advice should they need to;
- The research confirms that membership of a volunteer managers' network can bring benefits to individuals such as support, advice and access to information about training. People who manage volunteers (whether paid or unpaid) should be strongly encouraged to form or join such groups and be supported in doing so. Local volunteer centres may be best placed to facilitate such networks and to encourage individuals in unpaid positions and those based in very small organisations to form support groups. It is important to recognise that membership of such a network is not a substitute for adequate support within an individual's own organisation.

Research

This study, based predominantly on a quantitative survey and drawing exclusively from the perspectives of people who manage volunteers, could be further built upon by both expanding the qualitative element and also diversifying the respondents. The views of volunteers could be particularly illuminating – what support do they feel they need and what do they perceive to be the skills and training needs of those who support and manage them? In particular, the results point to a number of issues which we know to be critical but which require further exploration, including:

- The growing trend to utilise volunteers to manage and support other volunteers. Such involvement may bring potential benefits for all parties, but there are associated challenges in ensuring the quality and consistency of management and also implications for paid staff as they deal with delegating to and equipping volunteers who will take on that management role;
- Distinctions between the skills set required for managing volunteers at a larger scale compared to coordinating volunteers in a very small organisation. The results suggest that people who manage volunteers in smaller organisations feel less need for training, but what is not clear is whether this is due to the specific nature of such roles or a lack of awareness of good practice and the potential benefits of networking and training;
- How far do the types of role of volunteers or the area of operation of an organisation (e.g. health, education, sport) affect the skills people who manage volunteers need and their training and development needs? We know some roles are more difficult to recruit for, particularly campaigning, IT support, fundraising, and leadership and management roles, but we don't know the implications for ongoing supervision and support. Volunteers fulfilling more skilled functions would most likely require a higher level of support, but how exactly that shapes the volunteer management role is still yet to be explored.

Further detail is available in the full report – Georgina Brewis, Matthew Hill and Daniel Stevens (2010) *Valuing Volunteer Management Skills*, London: Institute for Volunteering Research and Skills-Third Sector.

This is available to download from IVR's website www.ivr.org.uk and from Skills-Third Sector's website www.skills-thirdsector.org.uk.

¹ Department of Communities and Local Government (2010) *2008-09 Citizenship Survey. Volunteering and Charitable Giving Topic Report*, London: Department for Communities and Local Government, p. 71.

² The questionnaire was modelled on that used as part of the 2008 Management Matters study in order to allow some comparison. Following completion of fieldwork, the data were weighted by income band and Government Office Region to ensure a representative sample of the population (using statistics provided by GuideStar). All tables and figures in this bulletin show weighted data, however base sizes are unweighted.

³ Joanna Machin and Angela Ellis Paine (2008) *Management Matters: A national survey of volunteering management capacity*, London: Institute for Volunteering Research.

⁴ Romayne Hutchison and Nick Ockenden (2008) *The impact of public policy on volunteering in community-based organisations*, London: Institute for Volunteering Research and the Institute for Voluntary Action Research, p.10.

⁵ Nick Ockenden and Mark Hutin (2008) *Volunteering to lead A study of leadership within small volunteer led groups*, London: Institute for Volunteering Research, p. 2.

Volunteer management is a widespread and necessary function across the voluntary sector

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