Volunteer Management in Business Events

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This bachelor-level thesis examines the importance of proper volunteer management at business events. The aim of this thesis is to help event managers understand the importance of proper volunteer management in business events as well as highlight the key aspects of human resource management in business events and inspect potential risks of lack of volunteer management and training. This thesis is a research oriented thesis done using qualitative methods. Research questions are as following: Why is volunteer management so important? How do the volunteers affect the success of the event? And how to ensure maximum volunteer efficiency? The data has been collected using various theoretical frameworks and the empirical part consists of interviews with industry professionals.

Events have a long history and the more popular they have become in recent years, the more complex the event industry has become as a working environment. As the events grow, so does the need for additional forces. Volunteers have always been a big part of the event industry and they can essentially make or break the event experience for the attendee. For this reason, it is important to examine the role and importance of volunteers in business events to prevent any possible human resource risks leading to further problems such as bad publicity or even loss of revenue.

Research findings indicate that volunteer management can crucially affect the outcomes of an event and further success of the hosting company, mainly due to the importance of customer service aspect as clients are very likely sharing good and bad customer service experiences to not only their friends but people online as well. Furthermore, to guarantee maximum volunteer efficiency, the managers should ensure the volunteers feel valued and motivated and that they are given tasks they enjoy. As volunteers are often unpaid, it is important to find other incentives to use than payment. In addition, adequate training guarantees volunteers they aren’t intimidated and feel comfortable enough to perform to their best abilities and ensure the success of the event.

**Keywords**

volunteers, business events, employee management, human resources, employee motivation
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1 Introduction

Events have a long and rich history and they are becoming increasingly popular nowadays. They are an essential part of our culture as people have always celebrated important milestones and happenings in life such as birthdays, weddings and other ceremonies and cultural traditions (Bowdin et al. 2006, 4). As the event industry has expanded rapidly during the past decade, it has also become more complex as a working environment. It comes as no surprise that according to CareerCast.com (2017) the role of the event manager is one of the most stressful jobs. For this reason, as well as many others, it is important to study the event planning process, executing the event and finishing it. This thesis focuses on the process of recruiting and managing volunteers at business events.

This thesis is a research oriented thesis with the aim of helping the reader to understand the importance of volunteers and their management at events and how to avoid any potential risks in that field. This thesis will describe the importance and role of volunteers in delivering the best possible event for the company as well as how to mitigate possible risks such as poor training of staff that could potentially result in affecting the public relations of the event as well as the hosting company. This thesis will also explain the importance of proper and adequate training of volunteers, sense of belonging and rewarding them.

This topic was chosen because of personal interest towards the subject. I have worked and volunteered at various events and find it very interesting how different managers motivate and train employees including volunteers. With this thesis, I am hoping to deepen my existing knowledge on event staffing as well as reflect it on my own experiences. I believe HR is always relevant in business life, especially in events. I am also looking to bring a more current relevance to the topic by focusing only on business and corporate events.

Throughout this thesis the term ‘volunteers’ is used to refer to the employees working at the event that are hired, but not necessarily paid. The term ‘employees’ refers to not only volunteer but paid staff members as well.

1.1 Main objectives

The main objective of this thesis is to research and understand the role and importance of proper management of volunteers at business events. Other objectives include
showcasing the importance of proper training of the volunteers and examine potential risks of inadequate training and management of the volunteers.

The main research questions are the following:
- Why is volunteer management so important?
- How do the volunteers affect the success of the event?
- How to ensure maximum volunteer efficiency?

The aim of these research questions is to examine and understand volunteer engagement but narrow it down to business event industry only. The theory is that volunteer management is crucial for the success of the event in regards of not only customer service but also delivering the event successfully.

As furthermore stated in chapter 1.2 thesis methods, these research questions were examined using theoretical framework, empirical studies as well as reflections on personal experiences. The aim of the framework part is to examine the theories related to volunteer management whereas the purpose of the empirical part is to investigate how these ideologies are adapted into real business events in Helsinki area.

1.2 Thesis methods

This thesis is a research oriented thesis done using qualitative methods. The framework of the thesis consists largely or academic material such as books on event management and human resource management as well as research on customer service and insights on various event management company blogs.

Qualitative research methods were chosen for this thesis to fully comprehend how and why the volunteers need specific kind of management, as opposed to a quantitative research. Due to the small number of interviewees, a qualitative research seemed more appropriate as opposed to a quantitative study with multiple people answering questionnaires.

The empirical part of the thesis in chapter five consists of interviews conducted with both the head of volunteers at Slush event as well as the customer service specialist at Nordic Business Forum. These are some of the most prestigious business events in Finland that are known to utilise the help of volunteers in their events, which is why they were approached for this thesis research. A representative from both event organisations agreed to answer questions. The interviews were conducted in English using email during the period of September, October and November 2019.
1.3 Thesis structure

This thesis consists of seven chapters. Chapters from two, three and four offer framework, theories and insights on previous researches and literature. The first chapter explains the thesis and its topic and research methods. The second chapter provides insight of the industry of event management as well as the importance of business events in specific. Chapter three dives more thoroughly into the human resource aspect of event management and offers insight on the process of recruiting volunteers. Chapter four focuses on the key factors in volunteer management such as motivation and adequate training. Chapter five consists of the empirical part with interviews with event industry professionals and analysis of said interviews. Chapter six consists of thoughts on the future of the volunteering and how it might change in the future. Chapter seven then provides discussion and conclusions on the research and data as well as evaluation of the thesis and the author’s own learning reflections.
2 Event management

The objective of this chapter is to showcase the meaning and importance of events in business life as well as the importance of volunteers in especially business events. According to Getz (2007, 18) an event is an exceptional occurrence at a specific time and place. Events always have a beginning and an end and are usually carefully planned in detail well in advance. As there are a large number of various types of events, this thesis only focuses on the side of business events to narrow down the topic.

2.1 The importance of business events

The term business events usually suggests conferences and congresses, corporate events, incentive travel and exhibitions and trade shows. These industries are often referred to as MICE (meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions). (Bowdin et al. 2006, 20.)

These types of events have always had a special ability to bring like-minded people together. In recent years, this has also been recognised by the corporate sector to not only improve company relations and business procedures, but to also profit from sales. Companies may choose to use events internally to simply staff members or externally, aimed towards clients and potential customers. These external events (such as grand openings, launches, exhibitions, sales promotions, conferences and publicity events) are highly valued in the business industry for their ability to reach clients and customers directly and adequately. This also helps companies in preserving their position in the markets amongst competitors. (Allen et al. 2008, 46-48.)

As Bowdin et al. (2006, 14) states, it was in the 1990s and 2000s that the business world discovered the power of events in regards to marketing and public relations. Corporations began finding mutual interests and began partnering to sponsor major events. The importance of promoting a brand, a product or a service and increasing market share became more and more obvious to companies looking for a return of investment.

According to Van der Wagen (2015, 5) the main difference between managing a business company and managing an event is that there usually is only one chance to get it right. An event cannot be repeated the following week, whereas a product can be sold for a discount the week after. For this reason, it is crucial to plan the event process and to have the right staff and volunteers working on the event.
Planning and organising business events

When planning any type of events, key considerations include:

- event concept (the purpose of the event and needs of the client),
- event location (in regards of accessibility, capacity, reputation and availability)
- budget (ticket prices, location rent prices, break-even point),
- delivery (such as audio-visual equipment, access to electricity, stage management, catering etc.)
- risk management (identifying hazards and minimising the risk)
- clients and stakeholders (such as host community, sponsors, media, participants),
- marketing mix (typically identified as the 4 P’s; product, price, place and promotion) and
- feasibility study (measurable aims of the event) to name a few. (Robinson, Wale and Dickson 2010, 20-29.)

Event planners and managers as well as possible host organisations are often the ones behind the planning process of the event. As the event managers have many responsibilities not only before and during, but also after the event, it has become increasingly popular and beneficial to hire volunteers to help at events. As the event managers are overseeing the big picture of the event and making sure everything runs smoothly according to plan, volunteers are able to help with more detailed tasks such as customer service, cloakroom, parking, ticket sales and load-in and load-out.

The role and importance of volunteers

Human resource management for events is especially challenging due to their “pulsating” style meaning the need for staff highly increases when approaching the event, then decreases even more rapidly after the event. Therefore, more and more companies rely on the help of volunteers to ensure the smooth running of events. The use of volunteer labour is well established and volunteers are considered a key component in the success of major events. The scope of the volunteer workforce is often the most visible elements of events, not to mention the element the event attendees often interact with most. (Baum & al. 2009, 181-183.)

The volunteers are often the first thing the event participants notice; therefore, their first impression can be a key element in regards of the event success in the participants’ mind. As well as the first impression, the volunteers are often in charge of the event attendee’s final impression when they are exiting the event. Event participants rely on the help of volunteers from opening doors, to guiding to the restroom, to helping with lost coats and helping them find the nearest taxi station. Customer service is extremely important in event industry and as volunteers play a key part in customer service, it is crucial they work and portray themselves according to the event organizers and company’s standards.
Essentially, a volunteer can make or break the overall event experience for not only the attendee but a potential stakeholder as well. A negative customer experience can affect the event and its potential future tremendously, even to a financial loss extent as stated further in chapter 4.1.

As Robinson, Wale and Dickson (2010, 115) states, the role of an employee, paid staff member or volunteer, is much more important than just providing manpower. A thorough selection of volunteers and/or staff members contributes in furthermore conveying the idea and concept of the event. The human resource strategy of the event requires the volunteers to meet the requirements in order to cooperate with the objectives and legal necessities of the event.

Not only do motivated volunteers and employees perform better in regards to the event experience for the attendees, but improving volunteer productivity can decrease the number of volunteers needed which can drastically lower the event costs (Robinson, Wale and Dickson 2010, 115). Even though volunteers are often unpaid, the reduced event costs could be seen in providing the volunteers with food, water, clothing and other equipment. However, too few volunteers and/or staff members can severely affect the quality and outcome of the event, not to mention cause legal issues regarding fire and security qualifications (Robinson, Wale and Dickson 2010, 115).
3  Human resource management in events

The purpose of this chapter is to familiarise the reader with the human resource management in events and how it differs from regular human resource management. This chapter explains the process and importance of recruiting, interviewing, selecting and training volunteers.

The human resource aspect of events is as crucial as any other task in planning and managing events. Event planners and managers must ensure that the event is adequately staffed with the right kind of people with the correct mind-set to provide the best possible event experience for not only attendees but stakeholders as well. As Allen & al. (2008, 233-236) states, human resource management is not a list of tasks to be done, but a long process that goes hand in hand with the event’s mission, strategy and objectives. The ladder one may include for example:

- **Cost containment**: to improve volunteer productivity and to reduce absenteeism
- **Improved quality**: to better volunteer recruitment and training as well as to offer better rewards and benefits
- **Improved effectiveness**: to improve job designs, organisational structures and relations within the company or staff
- **Enhance performance regarding specific responsibilities**: to improve and enhance tasks through training and group exercises

Event industry human resource management is especially challenging due to the integration of multiple different on-going projects, which are all related to human resource management such as staffing, developing policies and procedures, managing the training and performance and planning recognition as well as rewards. While these projects go hand-in-hand, they do have very different and specific demands. For instance, training must be arranged to all teams while some teams such as built-in must start much earlier than for example cloakroom, catering or info teams, resulting in very detailed schedule planning. (Robinson, Wale and Dickson 2010, 117.)

3.1  Recruiting volunteers

The event managers need to make crucial decisions on how many volunteers or staff members they need to deliver the best possible outcome for the event. Not only is it important to plan how *many* volunteers are needed, but also what *kind of qualifications and expertise* are to be expected and when in the event process are these volunteers needed as for example, only for the load-in or shutdown parts of the event (Allen & al. 2008, 236).
Screening is a process of identifying viable and non-viable ideas regarding an area if the event such as marketing, operations, finances or human resources. Screening can identify areas of risk and increase the chances of an event success. The human resource process of screening is often used to reduce less suitable applicants and altogether eliminate unsuitable applicants in favour of those applicants who match the job specification better.

There are a few key questions to consider:

- What kind of training is required?
- How many volunteers are needed?
- How are the volunteers sourced?
- What skills should the volunteers possess?
- How much will recruitment cost?
- What tasks should be grouped together to create a specific position?

Not only is screening vital for many parts of the event planning, but it is also used to demonstrate to stakeholders and sponsors detailed plans on how to reach the target audience and other event goals. (Nolan, 9 February 2018.)

Nowadays a lot of events utilise students as volunteers in events such as Slush and Nordic Business Forum. It is an easier and more profitable option for companies to work in close relations with local universities who might be able to provide not only volunteers but also locations for training purposes. Due to the pulsating style of the event industry, students and other part-time employed personnel are likely to be suitable for event volunteers for short periods of time.

3.2 Interviewing and selecting volunteers

The recruitment and selection process of both paid employees and volunteer is similar. There are however a few key differences. For example, when hiring a full-time paid employee, the interview process might be more thorough to ensure the right candidate is hired. Whereas in hiring multiple volunteers for an event usually takes places on a much greater scale due to the high number of volunteers required (Robinson, Wale and Dickson 2010, 121-124). Bringing in volunteers and/or other staff members can often be done through the Internet (such as the event’s own website, online job platform site or using local universities), newspaper advertising or in local places such as colleges, universities, associations and clubs. While advertising on the Internet might seem like the easiest and most fool-proof option, it might add issues regarding the overwhelmingly large volume of applications. Once enough applications have been received, the next step is the selection process of the volunteers. Selections can be done using a variation of methods, such as group or individual interviews, personality testing, team-working exercises and presentations. As with the entire recruitment process, the selection process needs to
reflect the organisational strategy of the company towards their employees. One of the aims of the selection process is to predict the candidate’s performance at work. Decisions of the volunteers are not only based on the qualifications of the candidates, but also the attitude and approach to working life. (Robinson, Wale and Dickson 2010, 121-124).

3.3 Training process of volunteers

To ensure the success of any event, it must be carefully planned from start to finish. This consists of every member of staff and volunteer knowing their job description and the tasks included. Event management is extremely hectic especially leading up to the event, which often leads to recruiting and training volunteers being seen as more of an ad hoc task with little to no interviews, background checks or proper briefing for the task (Baum & al. 2009, 127-128). In the event industry, proper training is crucial as the success of the event usually highly depends on the high-quality experience of the event attendee. The service quality and volunteer knowledge should be priorities especially in larger events.

To furthermore ensure success in high quality customer service, the volunteers should be made clear of the code of conduct and what is expected of them. A code of conduct usually varies in different organisations and events. The code of conduct should establish that every volunteer and staff member know how to act in different situations and around different people in manner that is according to the event company’s values. Matters to consider for the code of conduct are for example:

- **Verbal communication** – How are attendees greeted? How should the speakers be spoken to? How to act when the volunteer is unsure of what to do in a difficult situation?
- **Non-verbal communication** – How to ensure volunteers look approachable? Is smiling encouraged? What is the dress code?
- **Outside working hours** – Are smoke breaks allowed? Can volunteers visit the business event themselves? Are they representing the event on their break times as well?
- **Conflict situations** – How to act in case of conflict? How to handle an intoxicated event attendee? How to treat a client wanting a refund for a product or the event itself?
- **Unacceptable behaviour** – What kind of behaviour will not be tolerated? What is the company protocol in case of harassment? Are photos on social media allowed? Is there a punishment for alcohol use? (Barker, 2018.)

In order to ensure proper behaviour from the volunteers, the code of conduct, as well as punishment for breaking it, should be made clear in the training sessions to avoid any confusion. The volunteers should also be made aware why the code of conduct is set in place to furthermore give them a sense of importance and value to the event.
3.4 Dividing the workforce

To ensure maximum productivity and engagement of the volunteers, it is important that they are given tasks they enjoy. For instance, some volunteers want more work experience, whereas some volunteers are just interested in meeting new people. Creating roles to suit different volunteers and their skillsets and interests is recommended to fully engage the volunteers in their jobs. Some possible volunteer roles might include ticket sales, cloakroom, info desk, roaming customer service, parking director and ushers. As furthermore examined in chapter 4.2, it is important for the volunteers to get a sense of achievement and to not feel overwhelmed by their workload.

When planning and deciding the role descriptions, some key ideas to consider may include:

- Specific title of the role
- Purpose of this role
- Key tasks and duties
- Main skills and qualities
- Amount and type of training needed
- Location of the role at the event

As the event volunteers are only hired for a project, or this case an event, there aren’t legal necessities to have a written job description, but it is highly recommended as knowing what is expected of the volunteers can be very useful. (Brannen, 2016.)
4 Key factors in volunteer management

According to Getz (2007, 259) the leaders at an event are crucial in regards to vision, strategies and goals as well as inspiring all staff members to work together to achieve said goals. It is the leaders task to empower their staff members, but to also take responsibility for decision making. As important as the technical skills and being future and goal oriented is, one of the most crucial skills for managers is problem solving and people-skills. Managers are also expected to have some knowledge on event and business theories.

To ensure volunteers have a positive working experience and engage well in the event, the managers can focus on incentives that are in managerial control, such as the quality and frequency of communication with volunteers, matching volunteers with tasks that interest them, avoid burn out with excessive workloads and providing enough mentoring and training for all volunteers. (Baum & al. 2009, 186-187.)

4.1 Possible risk factors

As with any business investment, poorly executed events offer a number of risks varying from bad publicity to loss of important stakeholders and financial value to jeopardising the entire company’s future. The more overworked and undervalued and trained the staff members are, the more likely the risk of poor event quality is (Allen & al. 2008, 233).

As stated previously in chapter 2.3, volunteers and other employees are often the first contact the attendees have with the event, therefore it is crucial they deliver to their best abilities. Unmotivated and poorly trained volunteers present a range of possible risk factors in regards to not only the event performance, but also the organisation behind hosting the event. Poor customer service skills and overall work quality can affect the business in numerous ways. According to a customer service survey by Dimensional Research (2013, 4-9), 95% of the responders stated they share bad customer service experiences with other people and 45% of responders would also share bad customer service experiences on social media. Of those responders that had experiences positive customer service from a company, 83% reported that their behaviour towards the company change as a result. 52% of these people stated that they started purchasing more from said company. This study also stated that 88% of respondents said online reviews have affected their decision to purchase. Therefore, it can be affirmed that positive customer service experience can be directly linked to increase of sales not to mention the brand of the hosting company.
4.2 Motivating volunteers

As volunteer positions are often unpaid and short-term employments with only few or no career development opportunities, it is crucial to find other tangible and intangible incentives to use. According to a research article by two Harvard Business Review editors, there are four main reasons as to why employees lose their motivation for work:

1. Value Mismatch
2. Lack of self-efficacy
3. Disruptive emotions
4. Attribution errors

Value mismatch refers to when an employee doesn’t connect with a task they usually won’t be motivated enough to do it. They might feel as though the task doesn’t contribute to their value. This is often caused by managers assigning tasks that motivate themselves and assuming the employees are motivated by the same things. There are multiple different values managers can tackle on. The first being interest value, referring to how intellectually stimulating the task is. It is important to give tasks the employee finds interesting. The second one is identity value which involves the employee’s self-conception and how central the skill set of a task is to it. The managers should point out how a task draws on a talent the employee considers an important role, such as teamwork, problem solving or working under pressure. The third value is the utility value. This measures the cost of achieving the task versus the larger benefits of achieving. Manager should find ways to prove how a task contributes to not only the company’s but the employee’s own life goals as well. Lastly how important a task is, is called the importance value. Employees thrive when they’re feeling valued and important so it is essential for managers to highlight how crucial a given task is to the team or to the company and its mission. (Clark & Saxberg 2019.)

Furthermore, according to an online Forbes article, a few of the most common factors for demotivational employees is the lack of confidence in company leadership as well as the lack of support for poor performance. When employees feel like their work isn’t being rewarded and recognized properly, the work starts becoming very mediocre. In addition, when employers don’t deal with issues with performance they are at risk of bringing the average work motivation down for everyone in the team (Hedges, 2014.)

According to “Motivating at Work” by Twyla Dell there are five key steps to workplace motivation that spell the word LEARN as shown in Table 1. The first one being learning to lead. A manager must show they are able to lead people. It is done two ways: by not only
being efficient but also teaching employees to think for themselves. A manager needs to be competent, skilful and productive. A manager cannot be inefficient, disorganised, inconsistent nor inattentive. A manager is unable to think for everyone else therefore employees and volunteers need to be trained to think for not only themselves but for the organization as well.

The second step is to examine the expectations. Employees often like to see the end result of their efforts to make their work more exciting and interesting. This step is oftentimes overlooked upon. Not knowing what is expected can create a feeling of inefficiency which can lead to low productivity. It is also crucial for managers to ensure the employees feel involved with the end product and the company itself.

The third step learning to care about your employees. Caring is often shown by listening to others. Listening to employees’ ideas and tips on what to do better. This created a better two-way connection and can result in higher productivity. If employees are denied of being listened to, they lose their interest. Managers are to treat employees as professionals, not judge their opinions as well as to “read between the lines” meaning listen to what is not being said, such as a need for recognition or a need to blame others.

Respecting employees is the fourth step. This implies treating employees with respect and offering recognition for a job well done. Providing a professional atmosphere is a key component to making employees feel and act accordingly. Furthermore, it is crucial for managers to treat everyone equally, include employees in decision making, emphasising team spirit as well as offer training to improve job performance. Recognition and reward must be given for true accomplishments, not superficial gain. It must fulfil the goals and values of the organisation. It must be done in a public way to inspire others to strive for the same.

The fifth and final step in successful people management is to never suppress personal growth. It is the leaders and managers job to provide the opportunity to grow in both understanding and skill development. To create an atmosphere of innovation, there must be a positive attitude, committing to innovation as a core value of the organisation and setting ground rules, such as being flexible, being open about feelings, be encouraging and to have fun. (Dell 1993, 41-79).

Table 1. LEARN key steps to workplace motivation (Dell 1993)

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<td>Respect all employees</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>Never suppress personal growth</td>
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4.3 Training volunteers

Starting a new job, whether it’s a full-time job at an office or a short-term job volunteering at an event, can be intimidating for new employees. Until the employee becomes familiar with the surroundings and feels comfortable in this new position, it is very likely to affect job performance and focus. For this reason, it is crucial for the company to organise proper orientation and ensure adequate training towards the job description. Unfortunately, many companies and event managers don’t realise the benefit of a successfully trained and prepared employee. The orientation and training sessions not only set the tone for the relations between the employer and employees, but also help the company to showcase their commitment to the workforce and its well-being. As stated in the previous chapter of motivation, employees want first and foremost to feel welcome in their new surroundings. This is an excellent opportunity for the company and the event managers to demonstrate how great it is to work for your event. (Arthur 2005, 289-293.)

During the orientation days, employees often have a lot of questions in mind they might be too nervous to ask out loud therefore it is the employers job to write down and answer the questions event volunteers often think of such as:

- **Clothing**: What kind of attire are volunteers wearing at the event? Are heels expected of females or are flats appropriate? Does the organising company provide clothing? Do men wear ties? What coloured shirts are appropriate? Should volunteers have a small handbag on them?
- **The event**: What is the purpose of the event? Who are the key speakers? Where are the customers and visitors from? Who are the stakeholders?
- **Event location**: How to arrive on location? Is parking provided? Are there assigned parking spaces? What entrance are employees using? Where are the bathrooms? Are there specific bathrooms for employees? Where is the employees break room? Where can employees leave their belongings? Where is located the cloakroom, the emergency and the info point?
- **Supplies and equipment**: What equipment is needed? How are radio phones used? Where are notebooks and pens held? Where are water bottles stored? Where is the cleaning equipment? (Arthur 2005, 294.)

During these orientation and training days it is crucial to have a walk-through of the event site with the volunteers in order to familiarise them of their work environment and to ensure volunteers know where everything is located in case needed. If volunteers are unsure of their surroundings and their job description they are less likely to have full focus on serving the customers’ needs.

The training sessions should also familiarise the volunteers with the event concept, idea and design. The volunteers are expected to showcase the event concept through their actions as well as physical appearance. If the event is produced towards a younger audience, the apparel might be more informal whereas in more professional conferences
suits and polished manners might be more expected. These are key considerations to be made aware to the volunteers from the very start.

4.4 Managing volunteers post-event

After the event and its shut-down, it’s important to get together with the volunteers and to go through the event process. Rewards and compliments should also be given during the event, but most importantly afterwards.

Though the event is done and volunteer motivation is no longer a key factor to create a successful event, it still should not be overlooked. Post-event statistics such as volunteer satisfaction surveys alongside with positive word of mouth can be a crucial selling point in regards to next year’s event and new volunteers. Statistics on volunteer satisfaction can be gathered verbally or written on feedback forms online or on paper. Feedback should be given as soon as possible after the event, while the event is still in fresh memory. Event managers should come up with the feedback survey questions well in advance to get the best possible information out of them. Questions may include:

- How would you rate your volunteer experience?
- Do you feel that you were given enough training for the position?
- Do you feel that your shift duration was adequate?
- Did the experience meet your initial expectations?
- What would you improve for next year’s event?
- Did the supervisors encourage your learning?
- Do you feel that you had an adequate amount of responsibility?
- How likely are you to volunteer for the event in the future?
- Would you recommend volunteering for this event?

Shorter surveys tend to have a better response rates than longer ones. If the survey is conducted right after the event, the volunteers might be exhausted from long days of working and therefore not prone to answer lengthy surveys. Page breaks and progress bars as well as radio button and dropdown answer lists (as opposed to open question formats) are recommended to make the survey more convenient. (Mueller 22 November 2017.)
5 Interviews

To furthermore examine the process of recruiting and training volunteers, interviews with event professionals were conducted in regards to volunteer management in business events. The email addresses and invitations to answer thesis questions were acquired using mutual connections by the author.

Questions asked from the interviewees were as following:
- What channels do you use to recruit volunteers and why have you chosen that/those specific one(s)?
- How do you ensure the growing event is always adequately staffed?
- How are you making sure the volunteers are motivated and enthusiastic enough?

These questions were chosen specifically to examine the recruitment and training of volunteers as well as to study the themes behind motivating volunteers in large business events. The aim of these interview questions was to examine the similarities of the theories in relation to actual events and how they manage volunteers compared to the theories. Due to the hectic schedule of both Slush and Nordic Business Forum events and their organisers, both interviews were conducted using e-mail and in English language to mitigate any possible translation errors. Interviewees were given the option to write as much or as little as they felt the need to.

5.1 Bikash Gurung, Head of Volunteer at Slush

Bikash Gurung works as the head of volunteers at Slush which is a business event marketed towards technology professionals and start-ups. They state on their website that they are looking to change attitudes towards entrepreneurship. Over 25,000 attendees are expected to attend the Slush Helsinki event in November 2019. (Slush.com, 2019)

Gurung stated that to recruit volunteers they utilise a tool called “Talent tool” which they have created themselves at Slush. To ensure a sufficient number of applicants as volunteers, they promote the application using email newsletters, social media posts as well as visiting students in universities around Finland to pitch about the event. Gurung said that they have found this to be the best possible way to target the correct audience that are excited to join the event as volunteers.

In regards to the second question of ensuring the event is adequately staffed from year to year, Gurung stated that they ensure this by doing two things; firstly, they keep data on volunteer numbers to determine if it was adequate enough or not, and secondly, they collect information and suggestions from each team leader as they often are the ones who
truly know the demands of the tasks and the number of people needed. After every event the team leaders write reports on how they and their team carried out the tasks during the event. Depending on the team leaders’ answers, the event planners know whether the number of volunteers was enough or if they need more the upcoming events.

Gurung also stated there are multiple key steps they take at Slush to ensure the volunteers are motivated enough at the event; firstly, they always make sure to thank the volunteers for their time and acknowledge their efforts on helping creating the event. Secondly, the managers and team leaders make sure the volunteers have been provided with all the important and practical information regarding their roles, shifts and other activities. Thirdly, Gurung stated that they have a very open feedback policy at Slush and that volunteers are encouraged to contact managers and team leaders in regards to any questions about volunteering. Lastly, the engagement of the volunteers is being kept high by arranging events and training sessions such as “talkoot”, “volunteer’s day” and “leadership experiences” where the volunteers can get to know each other, meet new people, learn new skills as well as receive training and tools needed in their volunteer roles. (Gurung 25 September 2019.)

5.2 Sabrina Singh, Customer Service Specialist at Nordic Business Forum

Sabrina Singh currently works as the customer service specialist at Nordic Business Forum, also referred to as NBForum. They organise business conferences in Finland, Sweden and Norway. Their 2018 Helsinki conference hosted over 7,500 attendees and according to the feedback summary the customer service was voted as 5.58 out of the maximum 6.00 as well as 97.2% of attendees willing to recommend the event to others (Nbforum.com, 2018). It is safe to state the event is very prestigious and highly valued.

Singh stated in her email that because the Nordic Business Forum student volunteers receive credits towards their university studies for working at the event, they aren’t technically considered volunteers, but as this thesis covers the management of unpaid seasonal employees, it fits the category of volunteers and will be referred as such.

In regards to how they recruit volunteers Singh stated that at Nordic Business Forum they work closely with Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences to find the best possible students to volunteer at their event. They have partnered with Haaga-Helia some years ago and are very happy with the smooth co-operation with the university. It also has mutual benefits since the students are able to use their work experience in their studies by getting study credit points. She furthermore stated that the teachers at Haaga-Helia have
been very supportive of students participating to Nordic Business Forum event, even if it takes some time away from studies.

Singh stated that in order to ensure the event is adequately staffed every year, they look into the volunteer numbers after each event to plan it for the next year as it takes a lot of careful planning. Because the application period for the students is rather short, they often start recruiting students as soon as they return from their summer holidays. They are however always looking into new ways to find the most suitable students for their event.

When asked about ensuring the volunteers are motivated and enthusiastic enough Singh said that they have a strong belief that when volunteers are given the freedom to make their own choices, for example in a difficult customer case, the volunteers’ creativity also grows. Singh stated that they highly encourage volunteers to be themselves and bringing their own personalities to the customer service has even resulted in volunteers receiving job offers from customers. Furthermore, to guarantee the success of the customer service aspect of the event, they want to give the volunteers all the possible information they might need in delivering the best possible event. They ensure this by carefully planning each training session to include all the information and tools the volunteers need to build a strong and united team. Singh also explained that every single volunteer play a big role in the event and it’s crucial for the event managers to take care of the background to give the volunteers the possibilities and tools to do their work properly. (Singh 6 November 2019.)

5.3 Interview conclusions

Regarding the question of volunteer recruitment, Slush uses many different channels to promote the volunteer recruitment such as social media posts, newsletters and visiting universities to pitch about Slush, whereas Nordic Business Forum has decided to partner with Haaga-Helia University of Applies Sciences in regards of volunteer recruitment. Both events rely heavily on the help of university students as volunteers at their events.

Concerning the second question on how to ensure the event is always adequately staffed, Slush keeps data on volunteer numbers for each team using the team leader’s help, as they are the ones who know if the number of volunteers has been adequate in regards to the workload. The team leaders also help deciding the amount and length of each volunteer’s work shift. Singh from Nordic Business Forum didn’t specify the protocol used to estimate the number of volunteers needed, but stated that it does require carefully planning and reflections from previous year’s events.
In regards to the third question on volunteer motivation, Bikash from Slush explained how they make sure every volunteer has been provided with important and practical information regarding their roles as examined in chapter 4.3. He also stated how it’s important that they have an open feedback policy and how the staff must remain easily approachable for volunteers to come ask any questions. They also offer events and training session to ensure maximum volunteer engagement. Singh from Nordic Business Forum furthermore emphasized the importance of proper training session to ensure a good team spirit. She also mentioned how they believe the volunteer creativity grows as they are given more freedom to make their own choices in difficult situations.

Overall, the answers were to be expected and supported the theoretical part of the research. Universities and colleges are likely partners of these kinds of business events utilising volunteers to deliver the event. Furthermore, both interviewees stated the importance of a good training and giving the volunteers the best possible tools to deliver the event. However, the representative of Nordic Business Forum didn’t mention about advertising the recruitment process, whereas Slush informed they utilise newsletters and social media marketing to boost the recruitment process. On the other hand, it is more crucial for Slush event to market the event towards possible volunteers, as Nordic Business Forum works solely with Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences to scout for volunteers.
6 Future visions for business events volunteering

The rapid growth of technology has been seen in recent years in the events industry for example in the use of virtual or augmented reality, partnerships with phone apps, artificial intelligence and scanning QR codes. In the past few years we’ve seen these trends being applied to business events as for example Nordic Business Forum in Helsinki using a 360 degree camera on stage allowing attendees to experience the stage through virtual reality goggles. It seems that VR is a key piece in the future of business events. It allows the participants to enjoy the elements of an event from the comfort of their own home. More and more events are selling licenses to event livestreams to various platforms. It seems that the event industry is heading towards the tipping point of the virtual reality element and it begs the question of how will it affect the human resource management of events? Is the amount of volunteers expected to stay the same or are events focusing more on the virtual element and reducing the size of the event alongside with its staff?

For instance, major music festivals such as Coachella have already started incorporating RFID (for radio frequency identification) wristbands for event attendees. They are electronical wristbands that can be used to track data, pay for food and drinks and allow access to specific areas. Event managers often use the data on the RFID wristbands to track what the attendees are doing as well as when and where. As these wristbands make entrance to the event area much smoother and faster, it is expected there isn’t a large need for volunteers or staff members at the event entrance checking tickets. The event attendee simply shows the wristband to a scanner and is granted access to the site. (Bowler 30 December 2016.)

6.1 Safety risks

Geopolitics have always had a major impact on the event industry. It is one of the key aspects to think of when planning an event. Sadly, the amount of terrorist attacks has gone up in recent years across the world, partly due to the geopolitical tension in the world. Event managers everywhere are looking into risk management and security differently. Special attention should be given to event exterior area, entrance and exit areas and bottleneck zones especially when leading to transportation hubs. Every volunteer and staff member has a part in preventing potential terror attacks. Staff members should be taught to stay vigilant and to always report suspicious behaviour to a manager or security. Every member of the event organising community need to be aware of their role in the unlikely case of a terror attack. Immediate reaction to anything odd could potentially save lives. Possible things to keep an eye for are for example someone
taking lots of photos of nothing particular, unattended luggage, an attendee asking unusual questions about event arrangements, a car parked in a curious location or someone pacing around nervously. (Solaris 17 March 2019.)

6.2 Recruitment

The increased security measures at events also begs to question the process of recruiting not only volunteers but staff members as well. Oftentimes background checks aren’t conducted when recruiting volunteers, which can be a pose massive security threats as volunteers generally have access to nearly all areas of the event. Due to not only the potential security risks of hiring unknown volunteers, but also the amount of work required to market, interview, recruit and train volunteers and other staff members, more and more event management companies are starting to use recruitment companies to ease with these tasks. Event recruitment companies such as Alliance Recruitment Agency and Live Recruitment specialise in this process. Not only can recruitment companies help identify skilled and qualified volunteers for events, but also help eliminate potential security threats by doing background checks of all volunteers. Association Management Companies – also known as AMC – are also often used for not only recruiting volunteers and staff members, but also to help execute conferences and other business events. They offer a wide variety of human resource management for associations (Smithbucklin.com, n.d.).
7 Discussion

The objective of this thesis was to research the importance of proper volunteer management in business events and how the lack of it might affect the event as well as look into the process of recruiting, interviewing and training volunteers at business events.

Many of the findings of the theoretical framework supported the thought that volunteer management is crucial because it can essentially make or break the event experience for the attendee and result well in increase of clients and sales or potentially end with a bad customer service experience and loss of clients and sales. In addition, the empirical study furthermore emphasised the importance of volunteers from the point of view of event industry professionals.

7.1 Conclusions

The conclusions and result of this research based thesis will be discussed in this chapter. As stated in the introduction in chapter one, the main research questions were the following:

- Why is volunteer management so important?
- How do the volunteers affect the success of the event?
- How to ensure maximum volunteer efficiency?

Data was collected by researching theories and other framework, conducting interviews and reflecting on own experiences. To furthermore examine each research question separately;

*Why is volunteer management so important?*

The theoretical discoveries indicated that volunteer management can directly affect the success of the business event and the host company. Well-motivated and trained volunteers are more likely to affect the event and the attendees positively thus likely resulting in increasing sales and decreasing bad customer experiences that could potentially decline further business relations. Volunteers are often the event attendees first touch to the event thus their first impression need to be excellent. Oftentimes they are also the last ones to guide the attendees out and in charge of the lasting impressions as well. If the event attendees are left with a negative customer service experience, they are likely to report those to friends and family and potentially even social media which could potentially result in losing customers and sales revenue. Furthermore, well-trained and
motivated volunteers can improve productivity which can then lead to lowering to event organising costs as less volunteers are needed when their productivity is maximised.

**How do the volunteers affect the success of the event?**
The research pointed out multiple ways volunteers can affect the event and its success. As stated in the previous question, the positive impact the volunteers have on the event and its attendees is crucial. Volunteers can make or break the event experience for the attendee with simply their presence and customer service skills. A negative experience can result the event attendee sharing the negative experience with others for example online. As Singh from Nordic Business Forum stated in chapter seven, by giving the volunteers proper information and tools they are able to deliver the best possible event in regards to for example customer service.

**How to ensure maximum volunteer efficiency?**
To engage the volunteers for maximum efficiency it is important they are being treated right with respect and to get the feeling they are being cared after and listened to. Screening process is highly recommended when recruiting volunteers to scope the best possible applicants and rule out potentially unsuitable applicants. During training sessions, it is important to ensure the volunteers know exactly what it expected of them to maximise the productivity and erase any feelings of doubt. As the volunteer positions are often unpaid with no career development options, these incentives are especially crucial to ensure the volunteers are motivated enough to perform their tasks. In addition, it is essential that the volunteers are given tasks that they themselves enjoy. One of the key reasons for lack of motivation is uninteresting job tasks, lack on confidence in the company and not feeling values and appreciated. Therefore, it is highly beneficial to showcase the importance of the tasks given to the volunteers as they often like to see the concrete result of their efforts. However, volunteers should not be overwhelmed with the amount of work they are given.

7.2 **Evaluation of the research process and outcomes**
Most of the research was done using academic sources, such as classic event management theory literature, and various event management blogs. Many of them supported the idea that volunteer management is crucial and offered concrete examples on how to motivate them, what incentives to use and how to ensure every volunteer knows their tasks. The initial research process for this thesis was begun in autumn 2018, which has given plenty of time to find appropriate literature regarding event management.
To not only use academic literature, many blog posts and company websites were also researched and used as reference especially in relation to the future visions chapter.

The empirical part of the thesis was implemented using written interviews with two industry professionals from Slush and Nordic Business Forum, both leading business events in Finland. Both interviewees received same questions written in English to ensure minimal translation errors. The answers have not been altered in any way. Since only two industry professionals were interviewed, it could be argued that the results aren’t inclusive enough to be considered reliable enough of a research. If the research is to be re-done, it would be advisable to conduct more interviews to obtain a larger sample size to collect more data and insights on volunteer management and its practicalities. Furthermore, interviews could have been conducted in person to ensure longer and more thorough answers to questions, as well as possible explanations in a more conversational manner.

However, it was a thought-out decision to only utilise email in the interviews to ensure the questions were precisely the same and not potentially altered or emphasized differently when talking face to face. Email interviews also ensured that the respondents had the opportunity to take time to form an answer and to possibly run it by their public relations team if needed. In addition, both Slush and Nordic Business Forum events are held annually in the autumn, therefore it was no surprise that the interviewees were extremely busy during the time period of this thesis research, and both agreed that an email was more suitable to their schedules. E-mail interviews also enabled the conversation to go off-track and to stay in the means of simply volunteer management in business events.

To conclude, the research outcomes very much aligned with the original theory that volunteer management matters highly and can affect the event positively or negatively depending on how well the volunteers are managed. Poorly managed and trained volunteers are likely to affect the negatively, even as far as loss of clientele. Poor management of volunteers include the volunteers being unmotivated and unvalued, volunteers not having clear tasks and volunteers feeling intimidated in the team. Whereas well managed volunteers know what is expected of them, feel as though they are a valued member in their team and have the confidence to perform even in difficult customer service situations.

Although this research is about volunteers at business events, many of the concepts and ideas can also be applied to full-time staff members and to other types of events as well. Many of the motivation theories and customer service ideology can also be applied to a so called regular 9 to 5 job, whereas some aspects are more suitable to the pulsating style of
the event industry. This research can potentially also be used to furthermore examine workplace motivation linked with employee satisfaction especially in the event industry.

7.3 Learning reflections

I made the decision to not work with a commissioning party to be more in control of what I write about. I made the decision to write this thesis for myself and to reflect my own learning through these years instead of simply working for a company. I speculated having more freedom to work on this thesis would allow creative process to run smoothly, as it did.

Writing and working on this thesis has taught me a lot of project management and research skills. Planning the thesis process was a pleasant task as I had previously worked in various both business and culture events and gained knowledge on how volunteer management works, but keeping in date with the project plan was more of a difficult undertaking. When the concrete idea of the thesis plan came along I started researching event management material I had used before such as Getz and Van Der Wagen. The more I researched the topic and the research questions I had, the more ideas I had of what should be mentioned as well such as the future of volunteers and lack of adequate training as well as possible risks of not managing volunteers properly.

This thesis project has deepened my knowledge on event management and the human resource aspect of it. As I had previously worked as a volunteer I had some knowledge of what it meant for the event, but I learned much more of the process of recruiting and training volunteers as well as what they actually mean in the large scope of the event. I was able to enforce my own experiences and learning as reflections on many of the thesis chapters and I personally very much enjoyed the thesis project. While doing my exchange in England I learned the importance of proper source using as well as writing in a more academic manner. I believe that helped a lot during the writing process of this thesis.

At times, there was a struggle finding a coherent theme throughout the thesis. The topics seemed to jump from one to another without a rational idea behind it. However, the more I wrote the more I managed to find that trace of thought in keeping the HR aspect of event management a consistent idea all through the thesis. In addition, I found the project management process to be a challenge as well as there is a lot to consider when writing a thesis and interviews must be planned and a schedule should be put into place.
References


Gurung, B. 25 September 2019. Head of volunteers. Slush. E-mail.


Appendices

Appendix 1 Interviews

Bikash Gurung, Head of Volunteer at Slush

1. What channels do you use to recruit volunteers and why have you chosen that/those specific ones?

Recruitment of the volunteers happens in the Talent Tool. It is a Volunteer recruitment and management tool built by our own Product team. To promote Volunteer application process, we send out newsletters, make posts on Facebook pages, visit different cities and universities in Finland to pitch Slush to the students. These are the best ways to target the right audience who are excited to join Slush as a volunteer.

2. How do you ensure the growing event is always adequately staffed?

We ensure it by doing these two things.

a. Every year, we keep the data on the volunteer numbers required for each team. This makes it easy for us to roughly determine the volunteer amount needed for the following year.

b. We collect suggestions from previous year’s Team Leads since they are the ones who truly know the demand of the tasks. Every year after Slush, Team Leads write their testaments on how they carried out their tasks during Slush. One of the sections discusses about their volunteers’ shifts and if they had optimal number of volunteers to execute their tasks. Depending on their answers, we make the necessary changes for the following year.

3. How are you making sure the volunteers are motivated and enthusiastic enough?

a. Always thanking them for their time and acknowledging their effort on helping us build up the event.

b. Making sure they have been provided with all the important practical information regarding their roles, shifts and other volunteer related activities.

c. Having an open feedback policy, they can always contact us anytime if they have any questions regarding volunteering at Slush.

d. Through events such as Talkoot, Volunteer’s Day, Leadership Experiences and team specific training sessions, we try to keep the volunteers as engaged as possible. They get
to meet new people, learn new skills and receive required training & tools needed to succeed in their roles.

**Sabrina Singh, Customer Service Specialist, Nordic Business Forum**

1. **What channels do you use to recruit volunteers and why have you chosen that/those specific ones?**

   We at NBForum work closely with Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences every year to be able to find the most amazing students to help us out at our event. Haaga-Helia has been our official partner for many years now, and the co-operation has really been smooth and energizing. Through Haaga-Helia we have found an inspiring group of students year after year to deliver the best customer service and experience to our guests at our flagship NBForum events. Our cooperation with Haaga-Helia has been a great one, since our students are able to use their work experience from NBForum in their studies by getting study credits for their studies. These credits are often used as a part of their internship or their optional studies. The teachers in Haaga-Helia have been lovely in supporting the students in being able to participate in NBForum, even if it takes some time away from their studies. The support of Haaga-Helia has been invaluable for us, and we are so grateful for that!

2. **How do you ensure the growing event is always adequately staffed?**

   Thanks for asking! It's a great question. This is something we have to plan carefully and look into after each event to see how it was in the previous event. It takes some careful planning and thinking of our learnings for the next years. The application window for the students is indeed quite short since we often start recruiting the students as soon as they come back from their summer holidays. We are always looking into new ideas and ways of working and finding us the perfect students to work at NBForum events.

3. **How are you making sure the volunteers are motivated and enthusiastic enough?**

   We believe that when people get the freedom to make their own choices in e.g. difficult customer cases or at some other situations at our event, their creativity also grows. We want our students to be themselves and bring their personality into the customer situations and interactions. Being themselves and bringing in their own personality to the
customer service has resulted in multiple job offers at the events from customers to students.

We want to give our students all of the information they would possibly need to succeed well in customer service situations at NBForum events. We carefully plan each training session for them to include all the necessary information they would need and to build a strong and united team that works well together. We also want them to understand that each and every one of them has been chosen for a reason, and without them the event would not be complete or successful. Everyone plays a big role in the event, and could make a huge difference. Our students are the heart of our events!

We are lucky to have such positive and motivated students with us year after year. It is important that we take care of the background work to give them the possibility and tools to do their work well.