

# Retention of Millennials in the Voluntary Sector: How Can Organizations Not Only Engage but Also Retain This Emerging Generation?

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## Abstract

Why do emerging generations stay active in a voluntary organization? The number of volunteers is increasing in Hungary, one reason is the obligatory community service in secondary schools. There is an emerging generation who has experience in volunteering, however there is a little knowledge about why they sustain voluntary work. Although previous studies elaborate on the retention of volunteers from a general perspective, further research is needed in this specific area. This study aims to examine younger generations' (Millennials, GenY) retention in nonprofit voluntary organizations by conducting a single case study at Amigos for Children Foundation, in Hungary. Adopting a grounded theory approach, the study aims to build theory on the topic by combining two streams of literature with primary data: sustained volunteerism and expectations of younger generations towards their workplace. Based on prior literature review and qualitative research, findings suggest that organizations should focus on two main areas to keep younger generations motivated. (1) Organizational factors in which volunteering happens are flexible framework for daily operations, flat organization, involvement in decision making and opportunity for shaping the organization. (2) What the volunteer gets in exchange for the prosocial activity: positive feedback, recognition, strong community, opportunity for social and professional development, autonomy, responsibility, mutual trust. An important finding of the study is that younger generations are conscious about the values and the organization itself they work or volunteer at. Further, one of the most important factors for them is the community they do prosocial activity with. Overall, the current study develops propositions on organizational factors to retain younger generations in voluntary organizations.

**Keywords:** nonprofit sector, volunteer retention, Millennial generation, management

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## 1. Introduction

Volunteering is becoming more popular as people discover the happiness and well-being that volunteering brings (Vecina and Chacón, 2013). But the question why volunteers, especially of generation Millennial, remain in a particular charity organization, continues to be unanswered.

First, there is an increasing attention towards volunteerism (Carpenter and Myers 2010, Aydinli et al. 2014, Geiser, Okun and Grano 2014) second, generational differences between X, Y (Millennials) and Z generations, is also becoming a relevant and an interesting topic (Smith 2010, Twenge 2010, Aruna and Anitha 2015) and third, there is a significant body of research about the expectations and needs of Millennials regarding their workplace and career development (Broadbridge et al., 2007; Luscombe et al., 2013; Aruna and Anitha, 2015). However, the combination of these fields is still underdeveloped.

*The aim of this paper is to conduct research on why volunteers of generation Millennial sustain their voluntary work in one organization for more than a year.* In order to build a solid theoretical understanding of the main research question, the researcher aims to answer what motivates people in general to engage in voluntary work and further on to sustain it? Further, what are the needs and expectations of Millennials to stay motivated at their workplace? Finally, which organizational factors can make Millennial volunteers motivated for longer than one year?

The current study will first elaborate on two main streams of literature: (1) volunteering and sustained volunteerism, further (2) Millennials' characteristics and their expectations towards the workplace. After reviewing existing literature, by the combination of a case study and the grounded theory approach, using empirical data the study aims to build theory on what organizational factors can retain Millennials at a voluntary organization. The study focuses on Millennials who are university students. The case study was conducted within the Amigos Foundation. As a result of the research, propositions will be constructed to have a deeper understanding of why Millennials sustain their voluntary work, additionally, avenues for future research and limitations will be discussed.

## **2. Theoretical background**

### ***Volunteering***

There are many different academic definitions for volunteering. According to Smith (1994), if helping others happens without remuneration, the action is called volunteering. Penner claims that “volunteerism involves long-term, planned, prosocial behaviours that benefit strangers, and usually occur in an organizational setting” (Penner, 2002, p. 448). Further, Timms, N. and Timms, R. (1982) claims that “a volunteer undertakes unpaid work, but (...) may be said to earn moral credit” (p. 209). Despite all different definitions, we can conclude that volunteering happens without any financial compensation (Smith, 1994) and it is done for others to benefit, not the one who conducts the voluntary work (Omoto, 2005).

### ***Millennials***

There are different names for the people who were born between 1982 and 1999 (e.g., GenY, nGen, GenMe or Millennials, (Twenge, 2010), in the current paper the researcher will use the terminology Millennials. Millennials are youngsters who are optimistic with civic duty, sociable, however, influenced by instant messaging and they get easily bored according to Bennett (2012). This generation has different values and expectations compared to other generations (Westerman and Yamamura, 2007). Twenge (2012) claims that Millennials are the least work centric generation compared to the elder ones and leisure values are more important for Millennials than for the other generations. Finally, according to Rai (2012), Millennials mainly learn, socialize and make friends at their workplace.

### ***Incentives for engaging in voluntary work***

The phenomenon for which people engage in voluntary activity without any financial compensation has become a popular topic among researchers in the past few decades. (Unger, 1991; Clary et al, 1998; Carpenter and Myers, 2010) According to these researchers there are many different motivations for someone to engage in a prosocial activity, such as family traditions, religiosity, altruism, recognition, positive image, making social contacts, improve skills, develop career, etc. To understand the incentives for volunteering, Clary et al (1998) developed the Volunteer Function Inventory (VFI) model with six potential functions served by volunteerism which are the following: (1) value expressive function; (2) serving a knowledge function; (3) social adjustive function;

(4) career developing or utilitarian function; (5) protective or ego-defensive function; (6) enhancement function.

### ***Needs and expectations of Millennials towards the workplace***

Scholars mainly agree that Millennials have different expectations towards their workplace and they suggest managers to pay attention to this emerging question in order to be able to retain youngsters. (Broadbridge et al., 2007; Luscombe et al., 2013; Aruna and Anitha, 2015) But what are these needs and expectations, how can organizations motivate Millennials at the workplace? Broadbridge et al. (2007) suggests four different fields for understanding Millennials: (1) employment terms and conditions; (2) management approach and culture; (3) personal career development; (4) personal values.

Altogether, based on prior literature Millennials are characterized by the extreme need for flexibility, inclusive style of management and autonomy, they are highly interested in self-development and crave responsibility while they aim for work-life balance and contributing to society.

## **3. Methods**

### ***Research design***

Since there is little research about the incentives for voluntary work among Millennials, this study takes an inductive approach and aims to combine the two fields: motivations for volunteering with the expectations and needs of Millennials at their workplace. This research is based on a real-time, single instrumental case study (Blumberg et al., 2005; Creswell, 2007). In this cross-sectional case study (Blumberg et al., 2005), the aim is to gain a complex and detailed understanding of the attitudes, reasons and motivation among Millennials to sustain their voluntary work in one organization by taking the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1999 [1967]). The area of the study was confined to a Hungarian charity organization, Amigos Foundation. Amigos has been operating since 2014, helping children suffering from chronic diseases. During the trying times spent in the hospitals, children tend to fall behind their school responsibilities and drift apart from their peers, both contributing to a lack of motivation. The Amigo volunteers encourage and motivate them on the road of recovery by teaching foreign languages in a playful manner. The organization operates in Budapest, Szeged, Debrecen, and Szombathely, but they aim to grow national, then international. Considering the fact that volunteers spend 20 months in the organization on average (Amigos Foundation, 2018), Amigos serves as a proper case to answer the research question: which organizational factors can make

Millennial volunteers motivated for longer than one year. By the adaptation of a grounded theory approach, the research focuses on the individuals who currently do voluntary work in Amigos and aims to build theory for the retention of Millennials in charity organizations. Additionally, at this point the researcher would like to mention that the organization was founded by herself in 2014, therefore she has access to data and volunteers within the organization.

### **Data collection**

The researcher uses two different approaches to data collection in order to have diverse and comprehensive knowledge and plenty of information about volunteers and the organization. In detail, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted and access to archival data was obtained. To select participants for the interviews, first the diversity of the interviewees was needed. To guarantee this, a matrix of two dimensions was elaborated based on the Amigo Performance Document (internal document continuously updated by the Chief Happiness Officer of Amigos, 2018). The dimensions of this matrix were the following: active years in Amigos; performance between September 2017 and March 2018 in Amigos. Participants were university students who have been volunteering in Amigos for at least one year, belonging to the age group of 20 to 25 years. There were students who already have professional working experience (not summer student jobs) and also without any professional work experience.

**Table 1: Overview of interviewee selection**

Active years Performance	Basic performance	Outstanding performance	Extremely active performance
1-1,5 years	3	2	2
2-2,5 years	1	2	1
3-4 years	1	n/a	1

*Source: own compilation*

## **Data analysis**

To analyze data, first, interviews were recorded and transcribed, later shared with the interviewees to secure the factual accuracy of the data. Based on the comments provided by interviewees, transcriptions were corrected, later the new version was used for data analysis.

In line with Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Gioia (2012) the researcher went through three coding stages to build theory. First, to identify initial data categories, in-vivo coding was used to capture interviewees' meanings, sensations about the organization. At this part, many initial categories emerged from data. Second, second-order coding was applied to identify patterns and relationships between concepts emerged from data. This part was considerably iterative, the list of categories continuously changed over time. Third, second-order codes were used to settle aggregate theoretical dimensions.

The main source of data analysis were the semi-structured interviews and archival data served as a basis of knowledge about the organization, processes and background information for the researcher. According to Creswell (2007), in qualitative research, validity of the research design is crucial, also for the sake acceptability in the quantitative world. To increase all the four quality criteria suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) – credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability – this paper used two strategies.

First, to increase credibility, the research material went through credibility checks by interview validation. Second, the researcher relied on peer-debriefing (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). During the research project, a former student played the 'devils' advocate', checked all the research materials, asked about the methods, findings and highlighted negative examples as it is recommended by Creswell (2007).

## **4. Results**

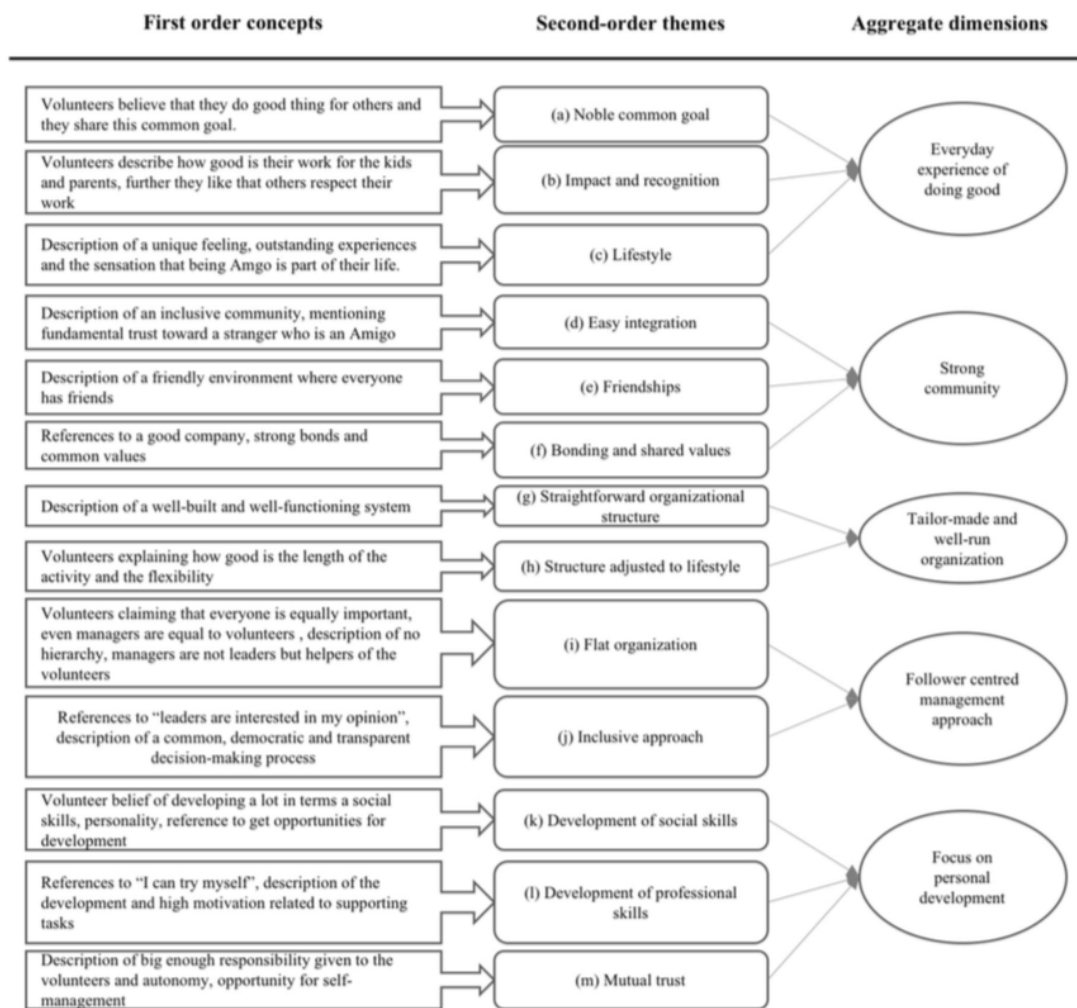
*Figure 1* serves as an orientation for data structure of the findings. Five dimensions emerged from the analysis, which will be reported descriptively, including representative quotes from the volunteers of Amigos Foundation.

The first question in this paper was: what motivates people in general to engage in voluntary work and further on to sustain it. Using theories of volunteerism, it was argued that according to the Volunteering Inventory Function, there are six functions served by volunteerism (Clary et al., 1998) and based on the Three Stage Model of Volunteers'

Duration Service (Chacón et al, 2007), volunteerism can be sustained if a role identity develops.

The second question was about the needs and expectations of Millennials to stay motivated at their workplace. To answer this question theoretically, Broadbridge’s framework was taken (2007) to understand Millennials and it was combined with many other streams of literature. Namely there are four fields that should be approached to understand Millennials motivation: (1) employment terms and conditions, (2) management approach and culture, (3) personal career development, (4) personal values.

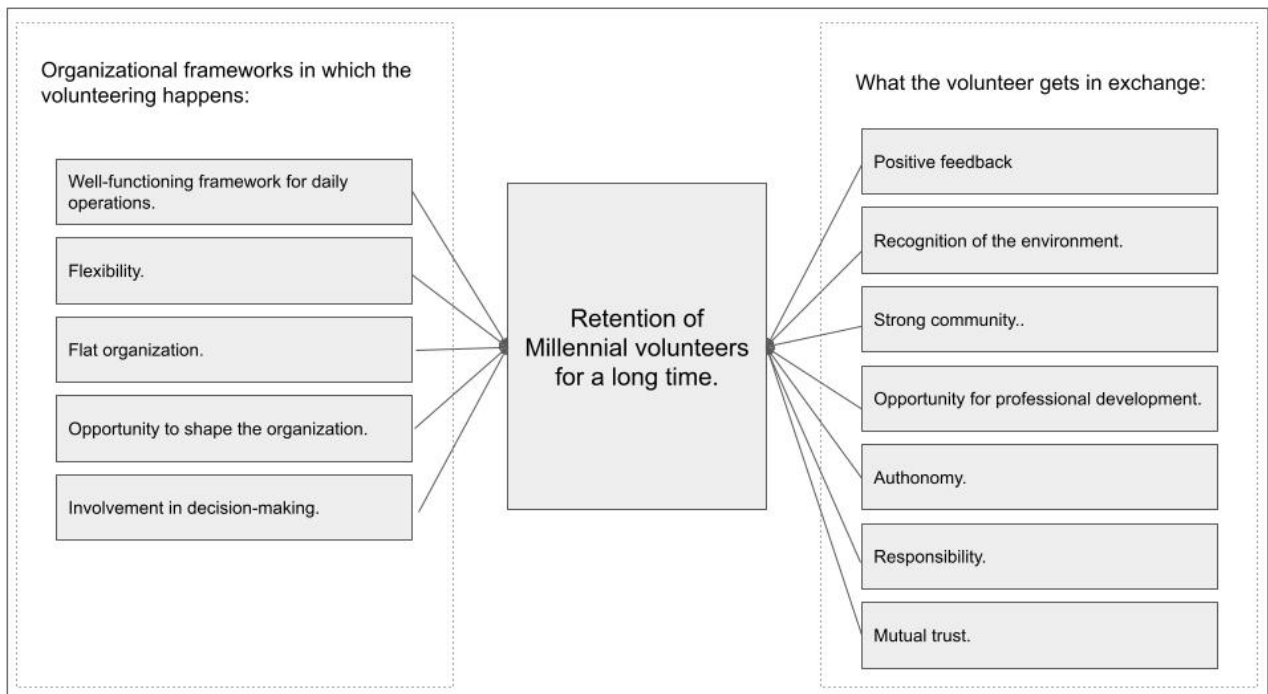
**Figure 1: Data structure**



Source: own compilation

Yet, the current research, combining the two above mentioned areas with the empirical data, found two main areas to focus on in the retention of Millennial volunteers from an organizational perspective. First, for Millennial volunteers, organizational factors seem to be outstandingly important. They care about the organization in which they contribute to society by volunteering, they aim for a well-functioning framework for daily operations combined with flexibility. As reported by interviewees they are motivated to sustain their voluntary work by a flat organizational structure where they feel equal, they seek getting involved in organizational processes and decision making. Second, empirical data demonstrated that for Millennial volunteers there is an important factor in volunteering “What can I get?”. They have a strong need for positive feedback and recognition from the environment. One of the most important factors for them is the community. Furthermore, they seek professional development which is not certainly connected to the main voluntary task, they like it when opportunities are given for trying themselves in other roles as well. Additionally, conforming to empirical data, autonomy, responsibility and mutual trust are essential for keeping millennials motivated for longer than one year.

**Figure 2: What organizational factors contribute to Millennials’ retention at a voluntary place?**



*Source: own compilation*



## 5. Discussion and recommendations

### *Implications for theory*

Twenge (2010) reports that regarding altruistic and intrinsic values there are no differences between generations. If we accept this claim, we can reach two different conclusions. First, if there are no generational differences, we do not have to manage Millennials differently in charity organizations where altruistic values are the main motivation for everyone. Or we can suggest, that if they have the same altruistic and intrinsic values as other generations, we should focus on other aspects that organizations can control to retain Millennials successfully because altruism is not motivating enough in itself.

The findings suggest that Millennials are a conscious generation, they seek many organizational factors to be realized, therefore only a noble goal is not enough for retaining them. It is suggested that organizations should focus more on what they can provide for Millennial volunteers (e.g., community, opportunities for personal development), rather than only take care of the mission of the organization. Previous research on volunteerism has demonstrated that career enhancement, knowledge and skill improvement are two factors served by volunteerism (Clary et al., 1998), however the current study suggests that for Millennials it might be more important than we assume.

Various scholars investigated the development of role identity (Grube and Piliavin, 2000; Penner, 2002; Chacón et al., 2007) and the current study also underpins the importance of it among volunteers. However, the results of this study show that for Millennials one of the most important reasons for sustaining their voluntary work is the community, which has not been emphasized in previous research on volunteerism, but in the literature stream of Millennials. This current study suggests that building a strong community is positively related to Millennials' retention in a voluntary organization.

Further, as Hartenian (2007) suggests, there are two different types of volunteering: direct service and indirect support. As findings show, some volunteers are motivated by the supporting tasks rather than the original mission over time. This implies that the sustenance of voluntary service might be related to the involvement of Millennials in the indirect support, not only the direct service of the organization. However, the degree of involvement in the two different types of volunteering remains a question for future research.

### ***Implications for managerial practice***

The research addresses an important phenomenon, since the number of volunteers is growing, but there is little knowledge on how to motivate the upcoming generations for sustaining their voluntary work. Furthermore, due to the law on 50 hours of obligatory community service during secondary school years, as the criterion of successful graduation, all of the secondary school students get involved in voluntary work, but organizations might not be prepared for retaining these voluntary workers.

The research also suggested some practical implications for managers. As we have seen in the findings section, non-profit organizations should focus more on the organizational factor and on what they can provide for Millennial volunteers and even younger generations. One practical suggestion is the involvement in background tasks as engaging in the daily operations of the organization might increase commitment towards the organization. Empirical data showed that Millennials liked it when they could try out themselves in different roles and they were motivated by supporting tasks as well, sometimes even more than by the mission-related task. Another practical implication is the community building. As interviewees explained, at a workplace they might give up their need for community events and programmes, but at a charity place they have a stronger need for the sense of belonging somewhere, making friends and enjoying teamwork. Therefore, managers should focus on community building and providing opportunity for volunteers to get closer to each other.

### ***Limitations and directions for future research***

The current study focuses on Millennial volunteers, especially volunteers of Amigos Foundation, in Hungary, who are all university students. This implies that the generalizability of the study might be one of the limitations. Additionally, the research was conducted on a small sample size, with 13 interviewees. At this point, the researcher would like to inform the reader that Amigos Foundation was founded by the author of this paper in 2014, which means that on one hand there was a great amount of available information for the researcher but on the other hand, the avoidance of biases was of high priority. Despite all the strategies used for increasing quality criteria (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) (e.g., credibility checks by interview validation, telling the interviewees that the current research is not directly linked to Amigos) confirmability still might be lower since the researcher is the founder of the organization which can cause biases during the interviews and also data analysis. To eliminate biases of the author, peer debriefing (Creswell, 2007) was used.

Future research could be conducted on multiple cases, not only the case of Amigos Foundation, and compare different organizations, motivations of Millennials of different levels of education, not only university students, even in organizations operating in different sectors to get a more generalizable result. Another stream of future research is suggested by the author: the relationship between stewardship or servant leadership and volunteerism. However, this study does not focus on stewardship or servant leadership (Lussier and Achua, 2010) many characteristics of stewardship/servant leadership might be identified in the empirical data (e.g., equality assumption, helping others to discover their inner spirit, earning and keeping others' trust, etc.). The connection between stewardship/servant leadership and Millennial volunteers' motivation to remain in an organization remains still under researched however, this approach towards leadership might contribute significantly to Millennials' retention in voluntary organizations.

All in all, this paper analyses prior literature on volunteerism and Millennials' characteristics, further gives answer to the question which organizational factors can make Millennial volunteers motivated for longer than one year. The research was conducted by taking a combination of case-study and grounded theory approach to build new theory. Additionally, the paper indicates avenues for possible future research and limitations of the current study. All with the aim of helping the development of the non-profit sector of Hungary and even other countries with cultural and societal structures similar to the Hungarian one.

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