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Personal Benefits of Volunteering

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Personal Benefits of Volunteer Work

Volunteer work clearly has significant benefits to the community, but what many people don't know is that community service work also has individual benefits to the volunteers. I spent 6 hours volunteering for the Eastern Illinois Food Bank in order to identify some of these personal benefits for volunteers. There are several aspects of an individual's life that benefit from volunteering. Community service work can have career benefits, social benefits, and health benefits. Although there are many personal benefits, there are also some perceived negative outcomes associated with volunteering. However, the career, social and health benefits of community service work outweigh the few negative impacts of donating one's time.

I chose to volunteer at the Eastern Illinois Food Bank. I participated in three of the Repack sessions between March 23 and April 7. In each session between 15 and 30 people volunteered for a two hour period in the evening to repackage food products that were donated to the food bank. During the 3 week period that I volunteered, we were working on one large project. Thousands of single serving packages of oatmeal had been inaccurately labeled as gluten free. The company donated the oatmeal with the condition that the oatmeal be removed from the original packaging and properly labeled with the brand name omitted. Our job was to empty twelve single serving oatmeal packages into a larger bag labeled with ingredients and instructions, then boxing the bags and stacking the boxes on pallets. This was a long tedious project that was still far from complete by the end of the three weeks.

Career Benefits

One major area of life that volunteering can benefit is one's career. Community service work can help one to learn new skills and gain work experience (Alspach, 2014). In my experiences, I gained some knowledge in motivation, which is very useful in my academic major of Industrial/Organizational

Psychology. During one of my sessions there was a volunteer who was very active and verbally encouraging to other volunteers by praising our pace and counting down to the nightly goal. On this evening, we accomplished almost double compared to the other two sessions I attended with roughly the same number of volunteers.

Teamwork is a skill needed in almost every career. This project gave me practice in the skill of working as a part of a team. We divided into groups at several tables, and although we completed our own individual work, communication and teamwork were required to ensure we put the appropriate number of bags per box and to keep our supplies refilled. We all did our part and helped each other along the way.

Although our project was not directly related to my career, I did gain some experience and skills which would be useful in other workforces. I learned how to work under certain health and safety regulations. We were not allowed to have any type of food or drink in the Repack room to prevent contamination of the food products. There were also regulations on how you could dress. No jewelry or open toed shoes were allowed and volunteers were required to wear a hat or hairnet and rubber gloves with freshly washed hands. Although experience working with these health and safety regulations is not directly applicable to my current or future career, it would be very useful in managing and working in restaurants or other food service jobs.

Social Benefits

Volunteering can also have social benefits such as intergenerational understanding and awareness of social issues (Morrow-Howell, Hong & Tang, 2009). I definitely received these benefits in my experiences. I worked with volunteers from all places in life including elderly volunteers, middle age volunteers, college students, and high school students. We would discuss our occupations,

hobbies, and what motivated us to volunteer. It was rewarding to hear the stories of others and to learn about their perspectives. Some of the volunteers also donated time to other organizations as well. I was able to learn about the issue of local hunger and the resources available to people suffering from hunger, as well as other community issues which other people were involved in.

Volunteering also gives one a sense of belonging in the community allowing them to feel valued and useful, as well as allowing one to expand their social network in the community (Townsend, Gibbs, Macfarlane, Block, Staiger, Gold, Johnson, et al., 2014). One of the first things I noticed on my first visit at the Food Bank was that a lot of people seemed to be familiar with each other from other volunteer sessions. Many of the volunteers would greet each other and catch up on their lives since the previous session. In each of my returning visits, I began to recognize many of the volunteers from my previous session. Not only was I helping the local community, but I was also becoming a more active member of the community and felt more connected to others in the community.

I was also able to expand my social network at the University of Illinois where I will be attending as a Psychology major next semester. During one of my sessions I was working at a table with a gentleman who happens to work in the Psychology department at the University. It was very useful to make a connection with him, ask questions, and get advice.

Health Benefits

There are also several health benefits associated with volunteering in the community. Some mental health benefits include changes in attitude and increased confidence (Townsend, et al., 2014). Throughout my experience, I developed a shift to a more motivated attitude. Prior to volunteering, I felt somewhat unenthusiastic about giving up my evening. I liked the idea of giving back to the

community, but I had so many other chores to complete. Even after just the first session, I felt compelled to go back. While I was there I felt productive and useful, and I felt as though I was even more productive after coming home. Volunteering increased my confidence as well. Each time I went back I felt more confident in my job and in my conversations with other volunteers. By my third visit, the volunteer director recognized my confidence and asked me to take on a leadership role in making sure the boxes were being stacked properly.

There are also physical health benefits associated with volunteering in the community. According to one study of 401 volunteers ages 51 and older, 20% reported better health since they began participating in the volunteer program (Morrow-Howell, et al., 2009). Based on my limited personal experiences, I cannot confirm nor deny this benefit. Jenkinson even noted a 22% lower mortality rate among people who volunteer compared to people who do not volunteer in a meta-analysis of 5 studies (as cited in Alspach, 2014). Although I did not experience any increase or decrease in health in my time volunteering, at this point I have only volunteered for a three week period.

Perceived Negative Impacts

Although there are many individual benefits to taking part in volunteer work, there are also some perceived negative factors associated with volunteering. One of these negatives is that volunteering creates a time strain (Townsend, et al., 2014). Many people are employed full time and donating additional hours of work to volunteer organizations can seem overwhelming. This was my first reaction to volunteering. Prior to arriving at my first session, all I could think about the giant list of things that I needed to get done other than volunteering. However, even after taking the two hours out of my night to volunteer, I still got everything done on my list because I felt so motivated after. Some feel that the donated time will interfere with the time they spend with family (Morrow-Howell,

et al., 2009). I do not have children, so this was not much of a concern for me. However, I noticed that many volunteers came together to volunteer as a family. I think volunteering can actually be used to spend more quality time with one's family.

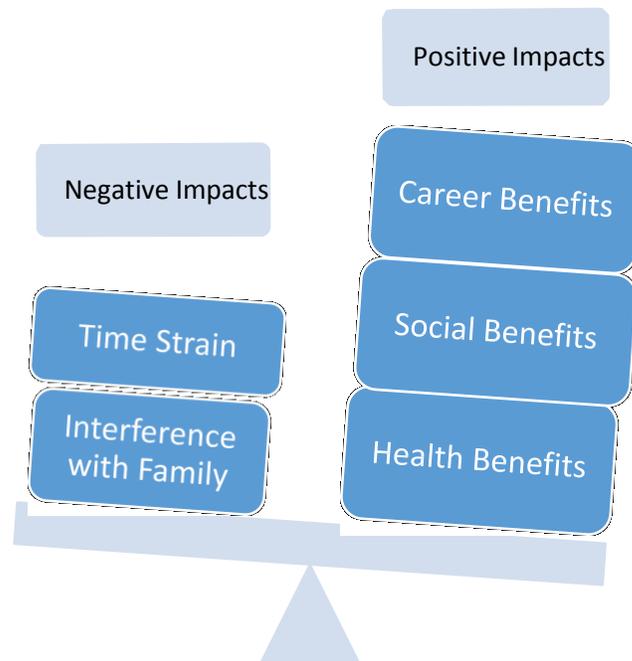


Figure 1. Personal Impacts of Volunteering

Conclusion

Overall, volunteering can have many benefits to an individual. Community service projects can provide career skills and experiences. Participating in these activities can also have social benefits by increasing our social understanding and our social network. Some mental and physical health benefits have also been studied in people who volunteer compared to those who do not. Although there are some perceived negative outcomes of volunteering including time strain and interference with family, **Figure 1** illustrates how these benefits outweigh the negative impacts of donating one's time. With all

of these personal benefits, in addition to the service these projects provide to the community, I recommend that everyone find a place to volunteer. Whether it is for a school project, a job incentive, or just for fun I think everyone can benefit from giving back to the community.

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