

Understanding Employer-Supported Volunteering: A review of the literature

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January 2025

How to cite this paper:

Glover, P., Gray, D. & Bradley-Cole, K. (2025).
Understanding Employer-Supported
Volunteering: A review of the literature.

Understanding the Employer-Supported Volunteering literature: A scoping review

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December 2024

About the scoping review

Aim

- To understand the current scope of the Employer-Supported Volunteering (ESV) literature.
- To identify gaps in the ESV literature to inform future research.
- To provide evidence-based insight into ESV to inform practitioner decision-making about ESV.

Review questions

- How is this type of volunteering defined and conceptualised in the literature?
- How has this type of volunteering been studied?
- What is already known about this type of volunteering?
- Motivations for participation, enablers & barriers, outcomes, benefits & disbenefits.

Method

- This scoping review was conducted between November 2023 and March 2024.
- Both academic and grey literature sources about ESV (and its synonyms) were reviewed; only empirical papers were included (i.e. those reporting data/empirical analysis). All date ranges were included.
- Non-English language sources were excluded, as were papers about international ESV.
- After removing duplicates, and sifting according to the inclusion/exclusion criteria, a final total of 105 papers were included in our review, and underpin the findings reported herein.

What is ESV?

Terminology

In the literature, 15 different labels have been used for volunteering that is in some way supported or enabled by the volunteer's employer. The most commonly used label is 'Corporate Volunteering', but not all organisations that support their employees to volunteer would be considered 'corporates'. The second most common label is 'Employee Volunteering', but in the literature this is also used to refer to regular volunteering by people in paid employment that is not supported or enabled by the person's employer. Whilst used less in the academic literature, our preferred label is 'Employer-Supported Volunteering', which we define as:

When paid employees are supported, encouraged or otherwise enabled by their employer to volunteer outside of their organisation, to the benefit of volunteer-receiving organisations in their community

This label and definition is explicit about the involvement of the employer and is inclusive of any type of employer. ESV is also the label used by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO).

How has ESV been researched?

About the research

- The first paper referencing volunteering that was supported by an employing organisation was published in 1976, about Bell Laboratories in New Jersey, USA.
- The earliest empirical research paper dates to the year 2000.
- Empirical research into ESV has been conducted across the globe, covering Europe, North America, South America, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Australasia.
- 55 papers were quantitative in nature, 34 were qualitative, and 16 used mixed methods. Seventeen different data collection methods have been used to study ESV, the most commonly-used being questionnaires and interviews.
- Most of the literature is cross-sectional, giving insight into ESV at a single point of time. Only five of the studies we found were longitudinal, and only one of these looked at outcomes over a longer time-period.

Variability in how ESV is operationalised

ESV is not implemented the same way in all organisations, yet the type of ESV experienced by research participants is often not reported in the literature. This has potential implications for the generalisability of research findings, since the nature of the ESV may impact on motivations for participation and the outcomes achieved. Examples of the variability seen within the literature include:

Employer-led	Employee-led	Skills-based	Non-skills based
Free choice	Fixed choice	Individual	Team-based
Paid time off	Unpaid time off	One-off	Repeat/regular
In work time	Out of work time	Time	Time plus (e.g. resources/donations)
Recognised in appraisals	Not reflected in appraisals	ESV/CSR team	Just ESV policy
Employees only	Plus retirees...families... customers	Volunteering alongside end beneficiaries	Volunteering away from end beneficiaries

ESV stakeholder groups researched

Seventy studies have reported findings about ESV from the perspectives of the volunteering employer and 41 studies from the perspective of the companies supporting their employees to volunteer. There is much less research from the perspectives of either the volunteer-receiving organisations (VROs) (findings reported in 20 studies), or the broker organisations (intermediaries connecting companies and VROs) (in 6 studies) or end beneficiaries (in 2 studies).

What has been reported about motivations for participating in ESV?

	ESV Volunteers	Companies	VROs
	Do good Helping and social impact As form of organisational citizenship behaviour	Corporate social responsibility Good corporate citizen Addressing negative impact on community/ environment	Do more to help beneficiaries due to more volunteers, donations and resources
	Feel good Feels good/Enjoyable Personal pride The challenge Distraction from own problems	Improve employee morale Fun for employees	
	Get good Develop skills Personal development Career progression	Develop employee skills Enhance teamworking	Access to skills
	Look good Enhanced profile in company Recognition for volunteering	Attract employees Public relations Look good to customers Business development Meet employee ethical expectations	Raise public awareness of their cause
	Connect more Connect with end beneficiaries Enhance social connections Get to know colleagues better	Engage with the local community	Relationships and networks with companies
	Asked By company By colleagues	Pressure from internal/external stakeholders By employees By prospective employees	By companies By VRO leadership

What has been reported as enablers for ESV participation?

			
Having an ESV strategy	Formal communication about ESV	Nature of the volunteering	Company/VRO relationships
Having a dedicated and capable ESV team	Word of mouth about ESV	Work design elements incorporated in the volunteering	Use of brokers
Reward, recognition and incentives for volunteering	Awareness of the benefits of ESV	Flexible working / time off	Existing community connections
Perceived organisational and leader support for ESV			Collaboration between organisations and VROs in ESV design
Organisational endorsement for VROs			Shared and/or understood needs and expectations
Volunteering climate/culture			
Workload and targets that accommodate volunteering			

What has been reported about outcomes associated with ESV participation?

Over 100 different outcomes, benefits or disbenefits have been discussed in the literature, which can be clustered as follows:

	Do good	Social awareness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Of the work VROs do and of VRO needs Of impact of ESV on end beneficiaries Appreciation for what one has 	Social Impact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feeling like are making a difference Increased in-work helping behaviour More volunteers, donations for VROs VROs being able to meet their objectives and help end beneficiaries
	Feel good	Wellbeing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Subjective wellbeing, Psychological flourishing, Mental health Job satisfaction Mixed evidence regarding impact on work/life balance and work/family conflict 	
	Get good	Skills and personal development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Job performance (if using skills relevant to own work) Self-esteem and self-confidence Self-awareness Emotional and social intelligence Prosocial identity Develop VRO staff skills / offer specialist skills Initial evidence for possible workplace deviance 	
	Look good	Attractiveness of employer <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organisational commitment and retention Talk positively about employer out of work Positive view of company in prospective applicants 	Publicity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhanced brand Visibly demonstrate company-community involvement and impact Scepticism if seen to be for PR purposes
	Connect more	Team building <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In own team / With others in own organisation / Outside of own organisation Better team/manager relationships Camaraderie and shared experiences Better trust 	Community connections <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cross-sector partnerships Connections with local community Better intersectoral understanding Companies getting to know their customers in the community

Early evidence of possible downsides to ESV

Whilst, overall, ESV research suggests that it is good for the volunteers, companies, and VROs alike. There is some early evidence to suggest that it also has potential downsides.



Do good

There can be financial disbenefits for VROs if a company does not adequately cover the costs associated with an ESV activity. ESV has the potential to disrupt the support the VRO normally gives its end beneficiaries, and there is also the potential for wasted resources if a VRO agrees to an ESV activity in that is not really needed, because of concerns about saying no to a (potential) corporate partner.



Feel good

There is some evidence of a potential downside for the colleagues of ESV volunteers who need to cover the work while the volunteer is away from work. ESV also has the potential to lead to role overload and reduced work-life balance in ESV volunteers.



Get good

Whilst some ESV volunteers value the learning opportunities afforded by taking part in ESV, there is also some evidence that ESV framed as a learning opportunity can be viewed negatively by some employees.



Look good

Increased social awareness has the potential to result in employees questioning their employing organisation's practices. There is also the potential for VROs to risk damaging their reputation if they partner with certain organisations.



Connect more

There is some evidence of a potential risk of employees who volunteer through ESV feeling a values-mismatch with their colleagues who do not participate in ESV.

Gaps and limitations in the ESV literature



ESV is a 'messy' concept in the literature, due to the variability in labels and how it is operationalised. This potentially affects the ability to combine, compare, or generalise research findings (limitation).



Different stakeholder groups are involved in ESV, but there has been no research into how members of each group label, define and understand ESV (gap - this is the focus of Paula Glover's next PhD research study).



There has been a lack of focus on those who choose not to participate – the non-volunteers or the 'almost volunteers' (gap).



Findings in the literature are often descriptive, with limited efforts to develop the findings into theory (gap).



There has been a lack of insight into how different motivations may combine, or into how the interplay between motivations and enablers/barriers may affect participation (gap).



There is a dominance of cross-sectional research in the literature. The limited presence of longitudinal or before/after research for understanding cause & effect or longevity of outcomes means that assumptions about expected outcomes may not be realized (limitation and gap).



There has been a bias towards researching the positives, but there is some early evidence of possible downsides. More research is needed to understand these potential downsides so that organisations and VROs can seek to mitigate them (gap).



For my current PhD research study, I am looking to talk with those who are involved in employer-supported or enabled volunteering (employees, companies, charities). To find out more, either scan this QR code, visit https://winchesterpsychology.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_23HY7DhVg9FeFy6 or send me an email.

If you would like to find out more about our research into Employer-Supported Volunteering, please get in touch.



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