

## Engaging with Engagement

By Erin R. Spink



In the last decade, there has been an explosion of interest in the engagement of human resources across sectors. Whether paid or voluntary, there is a need to get the best from everyone on your team. This unique 'people' advantage is what we are told will be the defining competitive edge to enduring success in the future as new technology becomes quickly obsolete. While originally conceived of as the opposite of employee burnout, the social profit sector has not hesitated to apply the concept of engagement to volunteer resources. All despite an utter lack of research quantifying the concept as it applies to volunteers.

The energy associated with embracing new ideas and perspectives is necessary in order to imbue life into what can become stale and rote- equally true in both personal and professional realms. As professionals and as people, we should always have an eye on how we can continue to evolve and grow. However the question must be asked is that when new skills and ideas are adopted, if the goal truly is growth, will that happen through the blind incorporation of concepts that have not undergone rigorous investigation and reflection? It's akin to using shallow shovels to dig an ocean -- you may be like everyone else with a shovel in your hand, but you won't get the outcomes you are hoping for. The overall result of such dogmatic adherence to the 'brand new and improved' is the creation of mindless slaves to trends, caring more about sounding up-to-the-minute than being wise and increasingly skilled. Both the leaders and followers in this scenario lose out because scraping the surface never brings about deep change or learning.

It can be argued that the idea of volunteer engagement has become the latest in a long line of 'silver bullets' sold as the solution to the recruitment, retention and capacity challenges faced by so many non-profits and charities. Perhaps it is, but as committed, capable professionals, should we not have tested that theory before going ahead with it?

Think back to the problems that have arisen since volunteer managers began including monetary equivalent figures to demonstrate the value of their programs. The focus became less about what volunteers contribute and more about how much an organization is getting for free. Although the intention was meant to strengthen understanding of the bottom line impact volunteers have, the results created exactly the opposite effect in many cases. Instead of increasing appreciation of volunteer worth, it made volunteer programs look like a garage sale bargain. To now place the same trust in 'volunteer engagement' could be both premature and false. It may very well be that engaging volunteers has all sorts of positive benefits, but no one stopped to define what engagement meant for our sector, for our reality, for volunteers. In 2008 I conducted academic research on volunteer engagement and the results poke a pretty big hole in one of the key outcomes attributed to engaging volunteers.

Few would argue that people prefer being managed over being engaged, irregardless if they're employees or volunteers. But what are the unexamined implicit promises when considering volunteer engagement? Examples might include increased cognitive commitment, heightened emotional connection between an individual and their work and a decreased intention to quit. These are all fine examples and have been accepted generally for populations of employees, but none of them have been either studied or

proven for volunteers; in fact the last one, less intention to quit, was disproved in my research on a volunteer population. Differences elsewhere in the study also pointed to gaps in engagement results between employees and volunteers.

My research also took a look at the relationship between role and organization engagement and the length of time a volunteer had been in their role and the frequency of their volunteering. I found that frequency of volunteering was positively related to both role and organization engagement but length of volunteering was only related to organization engagement. It's unknown how this compares to employees or under what conditions this finding could change. While the study was robust with several hundred volunteers taking part, more investigation is needed to determine if there are more factors that haven't been considered when defining the engagement of volunteers. With so many variations possible from one volunteer experience to another, as well as one volunteer to another, we can make an informed presumption that the study's results speak broadly to volunteers and volunteering but until it is pursued further, it's still only a presumption.

Does this mean that the validity of volunteer engagement is defunct or that we should start using other terminology? Fortunately, no. It does however shine a light on the opportunity to truly understand what volunteer engagement is about, what it comprises, how to define it and how to create and sustain it. The hard work and deep thought required in the discovery of the answers to these questions will be what genuinely imbues life into stagnant and tired practices and will take the sector to another level both now and in the future.

### **About Erin R. Spink**

Over the past 15 years, Erin R. Spink has been passionately involved as a volunteer, advocate and employee in the social profit sector spanning work with animals, Special Olympic athletes, cancer patients and more. Spink completed an Honours Sociology Degree, including a year spent in France working towards a License de Sociologie, before receiving her Certificate with Distinction in Volunteer Program Management from Conestoga College (Ontario). She later joined the faculty and has been an associate instructor for the past 3 years. Last year, Erin completed an M.A. in Leadership with a GPA of 4.0, submitting a major research project entitled "A Leader's Impact on the Antecedents and Consequences of Volunteer Engagement". Since the completion of her Master's Degree, Erin has been sharing her learnings with others, encouraging rigorous and deep conversations about the future of volunteerism and what role staff who work with volunteers can play.

Spink's interest in volunteers began at the age of six, when she pronounced that while it was wrong to eat animals, hamburgers at McDonald's came from "volunteer cows," and therefore an exception could be made. Spink currently lives in Toronto, no longer believes in eating volunteers and hopes neither is held against her.