

Briefing Paper 100

Does volunteering improve employability? Evidence from the British Household Panel Survey

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Introduction

Various volunteering initiatives have been launched by both New Labour and the Coalition with enhanced employability as at least one of their goals. These programmes and the wider policy agendas within which they fit have assumed that volunteering increases employability and can act as a pathway into employment. Evidence supporting these assumptions remains scarce.

Our analysis explores whether volunteering can help people improve their position in the labour market. We used data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) to explore the link between volunteering and employability in terms of movement into work, job retention, and progression in wage levels.

Background

Current high levels of unemployment in the UK are set against a work focused welfare state, within which labour market participation is viewed as the solution to social and economic exclusion. Employability has been a key concept within policies addressing these issues.

It has been suggested that employability consists of three sets of factors: individual; personal circumstances; and, external (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). Employability is the capability: to gain/move into initial employment; to maintain employment; to obtain new employment; and to improve the quality of employment (Hillage and Pollard, 1998). Within policies, however, the focus has predominantly been on individual factors (supply side) and the move from unemployment into employment (Peck and Theodore, 2000).

Volunteering has featured as one of a number of mechanisms thought to enhance employability, and existing evidence gives clues as to why this might be so (full references can be found in the Working Paper). Several studies have found that some volunteers are motivated by the prospect of employability-related gains. Others have found that volunteers believe that volunteering has increased their employment prospects.

Volunteering has been found to help with maintaining or developing 'hard' skills, and with 'soft' skills. It may help to develop 'work attitudes' and behaviours, and increase confidence and self-esteem. Claims are also made for the role of volunteering in building social capital, which may in turn have employability benefits.

A few studies of specific volunteer-involving organisations or initiatives suggest a positive link between volunteering and employment. Various other studies have found a link between volunteering and employability among certain groups of the population: women; refugees; gap-year participants; and young people. Research amongst disabled people presents a more complex picture.

Only a handful of studies have explored the link between volunteering and employability more broadly. A comparative study of volunteering and employability in Britain and Germany, found that volunteering had a positive effect on re-employment chances in Britain, particularly amongst young men, but that there was less of an association in Germany (Strauß, 2009). Another study found that while unemployed volunteers in England felt that their participation had improved their self-confidence and gave them an opportunity to use their skills, very

seldom was the link between volunteering and employability or employment made (Gay and Hatch, 1983). Meanwhile, research amongst Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) claimants found that those who had volunteered were not, overall, more likely than those who had not volunteered to move off JSA (Hirst, 2001).

Overall then, it is hard to find statistical evidence of a direct link between volunteering and employability or employment. The remainder of the paper sets out to address this gap by using longitudinal data from the BHPS.

Methods and data

The BHPS is a panel study with data available from 1991 through to 2008/09. Since 1998 the survey has included, on a biennial basis, a question on unpaid work – the measure of volunteering used for this paper. The most recent BHPS volunteering data (2008) shows that 23% did some unpaid work.

We used the BHPS data to create a longitudinal dataset taking the seven waves in which the volunteering question was asked. We used data on current employment status and from one year before, and consider how far the association between the two is mediated by reports of volunteering over the previous year. We carried out a series of regression models focusing on: moving into work; remaining in work; and wage levels. In each model we controlled for education and for other socio-economic characteristics, and included a set of time and regional dummy variables. Full details can be found in the Working Paper.

Results

Entry into work

Having controlled for differences in education we found a significant, but weak, effect of volunteering on entry into work. Overall, volunteering on a monthly basis had a positive effect on the chances of people not in work one year ago moving into paid employment. However, those volunteering on a weekly basis or a yearly basis had lower than average chances of moving into paid work.

We found the effect of volunteering varied according to different demographic characteristics, including age (Table 1). Volunteering had a positive effect on the chances of moving into work for people aged 45-60 years old when undertaken on a monthly or slightly less frequent basis. We found no positive effect of volunteering on young people's (16-25 year olds) employment, no matter how much they did.

The effects of volunteering on moving into work also varied according to the reason why people were not in employment (see Table 2). For those who were unemployed, volunteering on a weekly basis had a negative effect on the chances of moving into employment, while volunteering several times a year had a positive effect; monthly and yearly volunteering had no significant effect. For those out of work due to family caring responsibilities, while volunteering on a weekly basis had a negative effect, taking part on a monthly basis had a positive effect. Amongst students, any amount of volunteering had a

Table 1: Abridged logit results for entering in employment – all sample and age group

Dependent variable:	<i>All sample</i>	16-25	26-44	45-60
Entering employment				
<i>How often: Do voluntary work?</i>				
<i>Never</i>	base	base	base	Base
<i>At least once a week</i>	-0.235** (0.099)	-0.258** (0.152)	-0.225 (0.157)	-0.171 (0.296)
<i>At least once a month</i>	0.247* (0.126)	-0.114*** (0.211)	0.296 (0.200)	0.746** (0.363)
<i>Several times a year</i>	-0.004 (0.109)	-0.488** (0.158)	0.256 (0.184)	0.695** (0.342)
<i>Once a year or less</i>	-0.205** (0.103)	-0.331 (0.130)	-0.154 (0.183)	0.451 (0.396)
<i>Rho</i>	0.256	0.098	0.292	0.227
<i>N. Observations</i>	17282	5978	6004	4160
<i>N. Individuals</i>	8482	3751	3078	1942

Notes: * = significant at 10% ** = significant at 5%, *** = significant at 1%.

Table 2: Abridged logit results for entering in employment – all sample and status

Dependent variable:	<i>All sample</i>	<i>Unemployed</i>	<i>Family care</i>	<i>Students</i>	<i>Disabled</i>
Entering in employment					
<i>How often: Do voluntary work?</i>					
<i>Never</i>	base	Base	Base	Base	base
<i>At least once a week</i>	-0.235** (0.099)	-0.574* (0.322)	-0.003 (0.179)	-0.348** (0.153)	-0.604 (0.727)
<i>At least once a month</i>	0.247* (0.126)	0.391 (0.420)	0.436* (0.226)	-0.089 (0.203)	0.707 (0.829)
<i>Several times a year</i>	-0.004 (0.109)	0.633* (0.340)	0.405 (0.222)	-0.535*** (0.157)	1.322* (0.739)
<i>Once a year or less</i>	-0.205** (0.103)	-0.063 (0.315)	-0.149 (0.250)	-0.381*** (0.130)	-0.388 (0.926)
<i>Rho</i>	0.256	0.561	0.045	0.000	0.84
<i>N. Observations</i>	17282	2667	5392	4641	3195
<i>N. Individuals</i>	8482	1986	2459	3169	1461

Notes: * = significant at 10% ** = significant at 5%; *** = significant at 1%.

negative effect, with the exception of monthly volunteering which had no significant effect. Amongst disabled people, volunteering several times a year was found to have a positive effect on the move into employment, while doing more or less than this had little effect either way.

Retention

Overall, we found no particularly strong effects of volunteering on job retention (remaining in paid employment), with the exception of volunteering several times a year which had a positive effect. Again, however, results varied according to age and other demographic factors. For those aged 26-44 years old volunteering several times a year had a positive effect on retention (more or less frequent volunteering had no effect), whereas volunteering had no effect on employment retention amongst those aged 45-60 years old, no matter how frequently they participated. Amongst 16-24 year olds, while volunteering once a year or less was found to have a positive effect on job retention, volunteering at least once a month had a negative effect; weekly volunteering had no effect.

Progression

Our analysis suggests that, if anything, volunteering has a negative effect on wage levels. Very regular (weekly) volunteering and infrequent (several times or once a year) volunteering has a negative effect on wage rates, while the effect of monthly volunteering is not significant. According

to this analysis, volunteering doesn't appear to help people get on in their career – at least in terms of earning more – and if anything it might have the opposite effect.

Discussion and conclusions

Our analysis of the BHPS found that volunteering has a weak effect on employability, in terms of moves into employment, job retention and progression. Volunteering can assist the move into employment, but only if done at the right frequency (not too frequently, not too infrequently) and for certain people (older people and those with family caring responsibilities). Volunteering has a weak effect on job retention, and has little effect on earnings. As such we are left with a bit of a puzzle. Policy and practice discourses have put great store on the link between volunteering and employability. Evidence to date has largely substantiated these claims. Our findings run somewhat contrary to this. We offer several ideas which may go some way towards an explanation.

Survey limitations

The BHPS has a couple of specific limitations for this analysis. The volunteering question is very narrow. We know very little about the nature of volunteering that is being undertaken, yet from previous studies we know that this makes a difference to employability outcomes (Hirst, 2001; Rochester, 2009).

Further, the time period within which the BHPS data was gathered may influence the results, as might the timing of the survey and the treatment of time within our analysis. For example, we have explored the effects of volunteering one year on moves into employment the following year; we might find different results if we explored longer term effects.

Neglect of the demand side of employability

The concept of employability found within policy discourses has been subject to critique for its over-emphasis on individuals' skills and abilities (see for example Peck and Theodore, 2000). Supply side approaches may be insufficient to tackle unemployment as they make little impact on the structural causes of inequality. It may be possible that volunteering adds to the supply side (as other studies have suggested), but does little to address demand side issues.

Volunteering is about more than employability

Looking at the concept of volunteering we find another set of possible explanations. Despite the attention that has been paid by policy makers and practitioners to the potential link between volunteering and employability, only a minority of volunteers claim to be motivated by employability-related factors (see for example Low et al., 2007).

Further, as others have argued, rather than being a route into work volunteering may act more as an alternative to work, or as an addition to work (see for example Hardill and Baines, 2008; IVR, 2004). Indeed, treating volunteering as work is only one way to conceptualise it: it can also be conceptualised as a leisure, service, or caring activity (Rochester et al., 2010).

Reclaiming volunteering

Our analysis has found that volunteering can have a positive effect on the likelihood of people moving into employment. Whether it does or not, however, depends on who you are, why you are out of work, and how frequently you participate. Overall, volunteering does not appear to have as strong or

as positive an effect on employability outcomes – on moves into employment, on retention and progression – as suggested in both policy rhetoric and in some previous research. While volunteering may enhance an individual's skills and may help to build their CV and their contacts, it is unlikely to affect the demand side of the labour market and therefore any employability gains are muted. The true value of volunteering, arguably, lies elsewhere.

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