



VOLUNTEERING AS AN ELEMENT OF BUILDING STUDENTS' PROFESSIONAL CAREERS – THE CASE OF THE PROJEKTOR PROGRAMME

Patrycja Kowalska

ORCID: 0000-0003-1471-1615

Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz

e-mail: patrycjakowalskax@gmail.com

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Abstract. The purpose of the article is to present volunteering as an element of career building. According to students who volunteer in the PROJEKTOR programme, the most important benefit of volunteering is the acquisition of skills necessary for future professional work. Eighty volunteers participating in the student volunteer program were surveyed. The study took a closer look at volunteers' perceptions of volunteering in the context of career building. The diagnostic nature of the survey also made it possible to characterize the group of student volunteers in the PROJEKTOR programme.

WOLONTARIAT JAKO ELEMENT BUDOWANIA KARIERY ZAWODOWEJ STUDENTÓW – NA PRZYKŁADZIE PROGRAMU PROJEKTOR

Słowa kluczowe: wolontariat studencki, wolontariusze, studenci, budowanie kariery zawodowej

Streszczenie. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie wolontariatu jako elementu budowania kariery zawodowej. W opinii studentów, którzy działają jako wolontariusze w programie PROJEKTOR, najważniejszą korzyścią z działalności wolontaryjnej jest nabywanie umiejętności niezbędnych w przyszłej pracy zawodowej. Przebadanych zostało 80 wolontariuszy, biorących udział w programie wolontariatu studenckiego. Badania przybliżyły sposób postrzegania wolontariatu przez wolontariuszy w kontekście budowania kariery zawodowej. Diagnostyczny charakter badania pozwolił również na scharakteryzowanie grupy studentów-wolontariuszy programu PROJEKTOR.

Introduction

The labour market is a dynamic space where changes are occurring increasingly rapidly. Volunteering presents an interesting solution for the professional career development of young people and supports their adaptation to changes – through undertaking a variety of activities.

The activity of volunteers is perceived in society as altruistic. However, it is often overlooked that volunteering offers volunteers benefits such as the development of interests, meeting new people, a sense of belonging, as well as the opportunity to test oneself in various tasks and to verify educational and professional decisions (Kata, 2016, p. 22).

The main objective of the study was to determine how volunteers perceive their volunteer activity and its significance in building a professional career. It was also important to describe the skills acquired during volunteering and to identify which of these are most important for the respondents' professional careers. The above-mentioned elements constitute the subject of this article.

Volunteers and professional career

A volunteer is a person who acts voluntarily and unpaid for the benefit of a chosen organization or community (Act on Public Benefit and Volunteer Work of 2003, Journal of Laws of 2003, No. 96, item 873, as amended). According to the law, volunteering can take place in non-governmental organizations, public administration bodies, and their organizational units (excluding economic activities conducted by them), or medical entities (excluding medical activities). The term *volunteering* does not include helping relatives, family members, and friends (National Network of Volunteer Centers, 2023).

Volunteers often undertake specific actions because they are aligned with their interests, making volunteering a source of personal satisfaction (Sowiński, 2005, p. 96).

Undertaking or ending volunteer work is the choice of the volunteer. It is possible to engage in action-oriented, occasional, or one-time activities, such as participating in selected charitable campaigns. An example of such activity is the involvement of volunteers who collect donations every year for the Wielka Orkiestra Świątecznej Pomocy (Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity). Volunteers referred to as “*mid-distance*” volunteers engage in selected tasks of an

organization and, after their completion, may take on new tasks or resign from volunteering. The tasks of *mid-distance* volunteers last longer and are more complex in nature than the activities of *occasional* volunteers. The last type of volunteers are *permanent activists*, who are permanently associated with a chosen organization and work voluntarily without interruption (Załużska, 1998, p. 113).

The type of volunteer a person engaging in unpaid social activity will be depends on the needs of the organization and the individual themselves. It is the responsibility of both to jointly establish the terms of cooperation and sign a volunteer agreement if the volunteer's activity is expected to last longer than 30 days (Ruszevska, Ruszewski, 2008, p. 25).

However, for researchers studying the topic of volunteering, more important than organizational aspects are motivation and attempts to define the attitudes of volunteers; they focus on the selflessness of this group. In such studies, there is often reluctance to acknowledge the benefits experienced by volunteers, or the value of actions undertaken for selfish reasons is downplayed (Wasilewska-Ostrowska, 2012, p. 48).

More important than the motivation are the effects of the work of volunteers, who share their resources such as knowledge, skills, and free time. In return, they receive a sense of satisfaction, new life experiences, and opportunities for development on many levels. Therefore, more and more young people are choosing volunteering as one of the first elements of building their professional careers. Importantly, the very understanding of a career is changing. The process itself becomes important, focusing on education and gaining experience, rather than, as it was earlier, on climbing the career ladder (Sokołowska, 2014, pp. 110-111). Individuals amid their education, directly before entering the job market, can, through volunteering, gain a broader understanding of available industries, build a network of contacts, assess and develop their skills and competencies (Kata, 2016, p. 22).

Tasks undertaken by volunteers significantly differ from activities carried out in school or during studies. Volunteering allows one to confront ideas and theoretical knowledge with practice.

The experience gained during volunteer work also enables self-discovery, understanding of one's resources and potential. Working in real conditions, taking responsibility for one's actions, and coping with stress prepare for future professional work (Hanyga-Janczak, 2013, p. 151).

Volunteering is a socially beneficial concept, regardless of the motives for undertaking it. The involvement of volunteers in projects for others means that

both society and volunteers can fulfil collective and individual needs. Volunteers are a diverse group – they engage in various activities for different reasons and adopt different attitudes towards their own activity (Górecki, 1999, p. 335). Additionally, social activities are undertaken by people at different stages of life and with varied levels and fields of education (CBOS, 2022). What unites this group is primarily an openness to social problems and a desire to change the existing reality.

The PROJEKTOR programme

The PROJEKTOR programme is one of the most frequently described Polish volunteer initiatives. Currently, the program's name is accompanied by a slogan that illustrates its idea – “Uczysz się od dziecka” (Which means both “You learn starting from childhood” and “You learn from a child”). Volunteer students conduct developmental activities for children and youths from small towns, who have limited access to extracurricular activities. The program's task is to carry out the recruitment of volunteers and schools, connect volunteers with the nearest school, and support both sides in terms of methodological and organisational aspects (Marchel, Rzepińska, 2014, p. 58).

The activities proposed by the volunteers and the PROJEKTOR program are neither tutoring nor remedial classes. Meetings of students with university students focus on presenting passions and interests (within the framework of the Meetings with Passion project), developing critical thinking (within the framework of the Critical Thinking Academy), and discussions on selected topics such as personal happiness, media awareness, or nature conservation within the framework of the Challenge Workshops.

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 caused the activities to be moved to the online space. This posed a significant challenge for the volunteer students in building relationships with the students, but it also allowed them to become acquainted with online tools that activate the group for discussions and collective idea generation.

Currently, students can conduct classes in both face-to-face and remote modes, depending on their personal preferences. Throughout its existence, the PROJEKTOR program has been continuously changing in various respects – a constant element is the fact that the Polish-American Freedom Foundation is the program's sponsor.

In summary, the volunteer students continue to inspire school-aged children from smaller towns to develop interests and passions as well as creative thinking. In addition to supporting the younger generation, the PROJEKTOR programme volunteers develop themselves and their skills, thereby building their own professional careers.

Organisation of the research process

The type of study was defined as diagnostic (Łobocki, 2010, pp. 89-90). The PROJEKTOR programme, by transitioning to a hybrid mode of volunteer work, underwent a change, hence the importance of determining “how it is”. It is also intriguing to consider whether volunteers perceived the change as an opportunity or as an obstacle in building their professional careers. The interpretation and description of the volunteers’ experiences of the respondents and the characteristics of the volunteer group of the PROJEKTOR programme in the context of professional career building are the dominant effects of the research work. In diagnostic studies, the relationships between variables are not the main issue. Diagnostic-type research leaves room for expanding the topic of research with answers to the question “why is it so” and searching for relationships between phenomena.

The main research problem concerns how volunteers of the PROJEKTOR programme perceive their activity in the context of building a professional career. The specific problems included the skills acquired during volunteering, which will be discussed in this article.

Due to the diagnostic nature of the study, no research hypotheses were set. The absence of hypotheses also allows for maintaining an objective view of the data obtained in the study.

During the research, the method of document analysis (mainly legal sources, e.g., acts, statutes) and literature on volunteering, as well as the survey method, which involves asking questions to the respondents, were used. Responses were obtained in writing using the survey technique (Łobocki, 2009, pp. 243, 259). The choice of technique stems from the need to collect responses from volunteers across Poland. The research tool was independently constructed based on the analysis of the literature and the set goals and research problems. Due to the complex nature of volunteering, respondents could provide several answers to most questions. The survey questionnaire was made available in closed

groups gathering PROJEKTOR programme volunteers on the social networking site Facebook.

Research report

The study covered 80 student volunteers from the PROJEKTOR programme. Among the respondents, representatives of educational fields (from various specialities) and psychology students were predominant. Interestingly, there were also individuals from fields not related to working with children or the programme's activities (such as administration, finance and accounting, PR and marketing, and management).

The surveyed volunteers are most often about halfway through their studies, so they have already experienced the initial phase of student life and are accustomed to the study work mode. Among the respondents, second-year undergraduate students (27.5%), third-year undergraduate students (17.5%), and second-year master's degree students (13.75%) dominate. This does not mean that first-year students and those in their final years of study were absent – there were simply significantly fewer of them.

Among all respondents, 83.75% participated in 1-2 editions of the programme. PROJEKTOR programme volunteers can be described as *mid-distance volunteers* who undertake one project for a few months and, after its completion, engage in the next edition or return after some time or completely resign from volunteering.

None of the respondents reported spending 16-20 hours per week volunteering in the PROJEKTOR programme. Among those surveyed, 71.3% believe that volunteering takes them 1-5 hours per week.

The questionnaire opened with the question: *What does volunteering in the PROJEKTOR programme mean to you?* From 11 possible answers, respondents could choose up to 3 that they considered the most important. The most frequently chosen were: *a new life experience* (42.5%), *the opportunity to help others* (40%), *self-fulfilment* (32.5%), and *the development of skills related to future professional work* (31.25%).

Based on the four most frequently mentioned answers, it can be concluded that the surveyed volunteers find many benefits for themselves and their professional careers in social activity. Helping others is also important to them (in the case of the PROJEKTOR programme – helping children from smaller towns develop passions, talents, and interests). In the context of the research

topic, the last answer mentioned above is the most crucial; volunteers are aware that volunteering gives them a chance to develop skills related to future professional work.

According to the respondents, volunteering facilitates the building of a professional career. The way in which volunteer activity supports the careers of those undertaking volunteering is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Factors that make volunteering a facilitator in building a professional career, according to volunteers

No.	Answer	Number of respondents	%
1.	Opportunity to test oneself in various situations	39	48.75
2.	Through gaining teamwork skills	36	45.0
3.	Acquisition of practical skills in line with employers' expectations	36	45.0
4.	Entry in CV confirming experience consistent with employers' expectations	35	43.75
5.	Evaluation of one's predispositions and preferences	35	43.75
6.	Establishing a network of contacts	23	28.75

Source: Own research.

From the analysis of the table mentioned above, it can be concluded that volunteering is a space where volunteers test and develop skills they deem necessary for their future professional work. During their volunteer work, respondents can assess their own predispositions and preferences in real situations, such as: collaborating with another volunteer, interacting with a teacher, and ultimately – leading sessions for a group of students.

While completing the questionnaire, participants were asked to select the skills they developed during their volunteer work in the programme. The most frequently mentioned were: *interpersonal communication* (47.5%), *time management and organization* (47.5%), *the ability to apply selected methods and techniques of working with a group* (43.5%). Other skills mentioned by respondents include: *using online work tools* (36.25%), *public speaking ability* (36.25%), and *collaboration with others* (35%). All responses are included in Table 2.

Table 2. Skills developed by volunteers of the PROJEKTOR Programme

No.	Answer	Number of respondents	%
1.	Interpersonal communication	38	47.5
2.	Time management and organisation	38	47.5
3.	Ability to apply selected methods and techniques for working with a group	35	43.75
4.	Use of online work tools	29	36.25
5.	Public speaking skills	29	36.25
6.	Collaboration with others	28	35.0
7.	Quick decision-making	23	28.75
8.	Problem-solving skills	19	23.75
9.	Other (which?) <i>In my opinion, I only developed some skills (thanks to conducting sessions with other volunteers, i.e., I could see how they lead and add something to my toolkit); I believe that the training sessions were not substantive and well-made, hence they did not enhance skills;</i>	1	1.25

Source: Own research.

The use of online work tools is a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which changed the nature of volunteer work. When students were unable to meet with pupils in person, they conducted sessions remotely, a task requiring knowledge of educational platform management, as well as skills in establishing relationships and activating groups. Currently, the mode of conducting classes depends on the preferences of the volunteers.

PROJEKTOR programme coordinators prepare various forms of training to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to conduct sessions with children. Trainings, workshops, and webinars cover a range of topics – from an introduction to the subjects of the sessions to coping with stress during public speaking. According to the respondents, they learn the most from: practice – *sessions with children* (58.75%), *cooperation with another volunteer* (46.25%), and *training/workshops* (40%). An important fact is that students learn from each other. This was very clearly highlighted by one of the respondents, who, when asked about the skills acquired in the *Other (which?)* section, wrote (the original spelling of the response is preserved): *In my opinion, I only developed some skills (thanks to conducting sessions with other volunteers, i.e., I could see how they lead and add something to my own toolkit); I believe that the trainings were not substantive and well-made, hence they did not enhance skills.* The volunteer criticizes that

the conducted trainings do not enhance skills, but leading sessions and cooperating with other volunteers definitely do. In their statement, the respondent talks about being inspired by the actions of the volunteers they worked with. Other respondents claim to value the content provided during workshops and trainings. Table 3 details the respondents' answers about the forms of skill acquisition they value most in the PROJEKTOR programme.

Table 3. Forms of skill acquisition by volunteers of the PROJEKTOR Programme

No.	Answer	Number of respondents	%
1.	Practical sessions with children	47	58.75
2.	Collaboration with another volunteer	37	46.25
3.	Training/workshops	32	40.0
4.	Sharing experiences with other volunteers	30	37.5
5.	Consultations with a mentor	15	18.75

Source: Own research.

Consultations with a mentor were found to be the least useful in skill development (18.75%). The reasons for this could vary, such as learning from the experience of a fellow volunteer with whom one collaborates, the clarity of content presented in trainings, or a preference for learning through action.

The results presented above show that during their volunteering in the PROJEKTOR programme, student volunteers develop a variety of skills through diverse forms, which are required by potential employers. Chart 1 displays the volunteers' responses to the question regarding the skills that are most useful in building their own professional careers.



Chart 1. Skills deemed most useful in building a professional career according to surveyed student volunteers.

Source: Own research.

The most frequently mentioned responses were: *interpersonal communication* (53.75%), *problem-solving skills* (52.5%), *collaboration with others* (47.5%), and *time management and organization* (45%).

Respondents recognize that the skills important to them in developing a professional career primarily require action. It is possible to learn the theory of communication, problem-solving, collaboration, or time management, but without interacting with others, undertaking tasks, and taking responsibility for them – it remains just theory.

Based on the respondents' answers, it can be concluded that experiences gained through volunteer activities are an important element of building a professional career. The conducted research also showed that volunteering is not the only activity undertaken by the respondents to build a professional career, but it is the most frequently mentioned one – 73.75%. The actions taken by the surveyed volunteer students for the purpose of developing their own professional careers also include:

- learning at post-secondary schools – 6.25% of responses,
- studying in postgraduate courses – 7.5%,
- participation in international programmes like Erasmus – 8.75%,
- participation in vocational qualification courses – 12.5%,
- meetings with a career advisor and learning about the biographies of successful individuals in similar fields and following their path – each 16.25%,
- discussions with close ones about building one's own career – 18.75%,
- taking up part-time jobs, whether related to professional plans or not – each 20.0%,
- studying a second major – 22.5%,
- undertaking internships and practical training in institutions where respondents would like to work – 32.5%,
- involvement in student organizations (student government, scientific clubs) – 53.75%,
- participating in courses and training; attending workshops – 58.75%.

Conclusions

Volunteers of the PROJEKTOR programme take advantage of the opportunity to include their activities in recruitment documents, but for them, volunteering is a space to test themselves and their preferences in real conditions and to acquire skills useful in future professional work.

The surveyed student volunteers are an active group. In addition to volunteering, they undertake other activities to build their own professional careers. It can be said that participating in courses and training, engaging in student organizations, or undertaking internships, traineeships, or part-time employment are standard activities undertaken by the respondents.

Interpersonal communication, time management, problem-solving, or the application of specific techniques in group work are the skills most often learned through practical actions. This article is an abridged version of a master's thesis titled *The Importance of Volunteering in Building Students' Professional Careers – The Case of the PROJEKTOR Programme – Student Volunteering*. In addition to the research excerpt presented above, the thesis attempts to characterize a broader circle of volunteers, assess their sense of agency and approach to the future, and their understanding of professional careers.

The article has highlighted what volunteers gain from social activity in the context of building their own professional careers and serves as a guide

for those coordinating volunteer work to better meet the needs of their charges. One of the goals of this text was also to show volunteers as individuals who recognize social problems and want to solve them, but who also, in their actions, see opportunities for personal development.

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