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### Transforming the volunteer experience in the social service sector

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# Transforming the Volunteer Experience

in the Social Service Sector

Lien Centre for  
Social Innovation

Supported by the National Council of Social Service (NCSS)



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In support of



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# Executive Summary

In Singapore, volunteers play an essential role in ensuring the optimal delivery of services to social service users. According to the Charities Aid Foundation's World Giving Index in 2018, Singapore was ranked as one of the top 20 countries in terms of volunteerism, emerging as one of the biggest risers in the last decade.

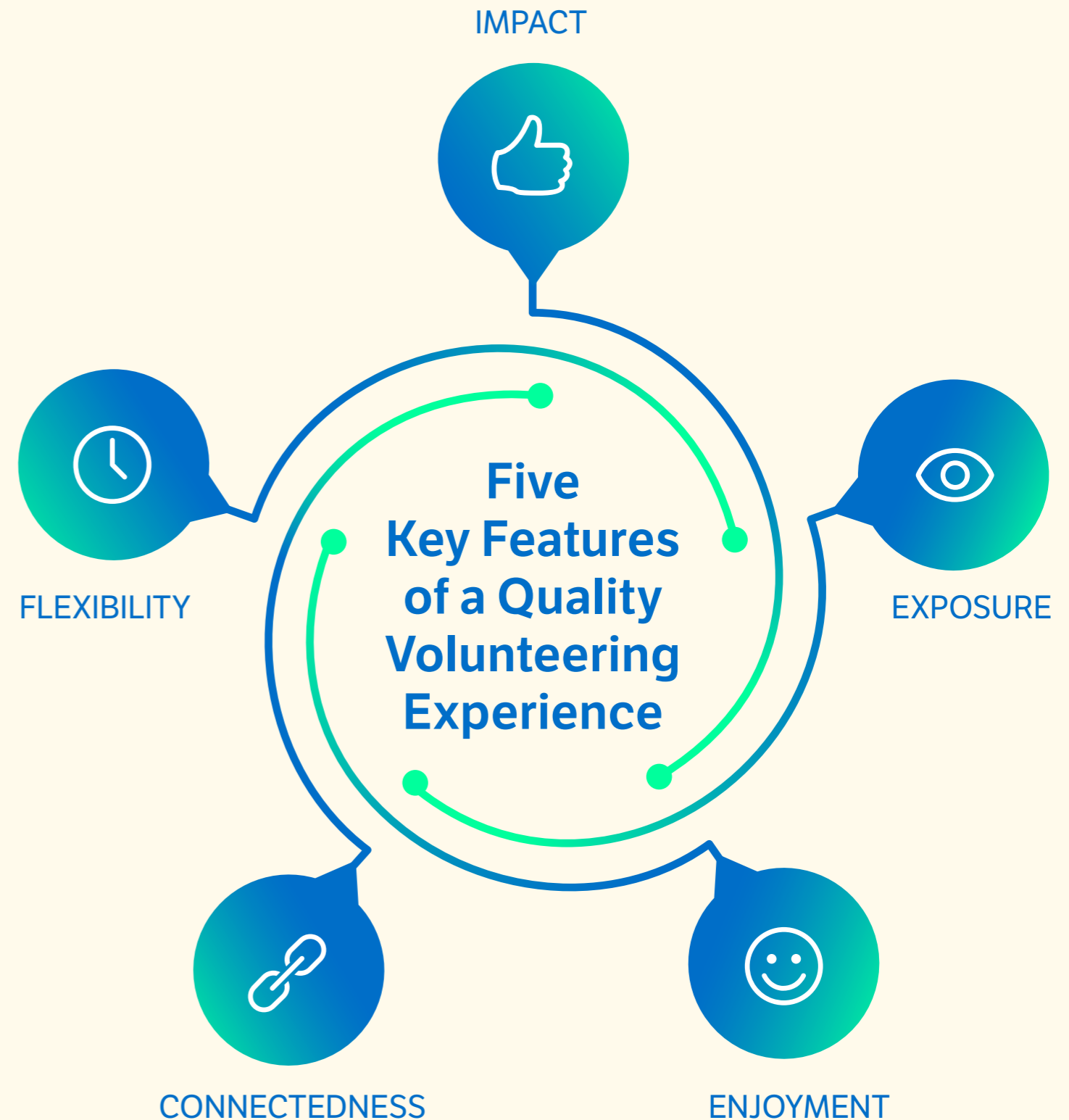
Given its importance to social service, the current research aims to investigate and enhance volunteerism in Singapore through two phases: (1) a quantitative survey to understand the perspectives of volunteers in the sector, and (2) a series of qualitative interviews to understand volunteer management from the perspectives of volunteer managers. Along with the results of this study, we present a framework for what we believe will constitute a quality volunteering experience, plus recommendations based on our findings. By equipping our readers with a holistic understanding of volunteerism, we hope to provide a springboard upon which Singapore's non-profit sector can improve the design and development of its volunteer management strategies.

The first phase of this study focused on volunteerism from the volunteers' perspective. The data analysis incorporated volunteer profiling based on different possible volunteer profiles, such as one's life stage or

volunteer role, to find out how specific known characteristics can influence their volunteer experience, retention and preferences. A key finding from the survey showed that when volunteers were asked why they chose to continue their voluntary work, the top two reasons given were the difference they were making and what the organisation stands for.

The second phase of this study, which was the qualitative interview phase, in turn focused on gathering insights about volunteerism from the perspectives of volunteer managers working in various Social Service Agencies (SSAs).

The emerging themes from the interviews, put together with the findings from the quantitative survey, suggest five key features that make up a quality volunteering experience: Enjoyment, Exposure, Impact, Connectedness and Flexibility. Based on this five-feature, human-centred framework, this report presents practical and actionable steps for SSAs to consider adopting. The recommendations in the report include Know-Your-Volunteer (KYV) strategies, which will enable organisations to enhance their volunteers' experience in a strategic and targeted manner, and volunteer-centred organisation strategies, which involve applying and incorporating the insights and knowledge gained from KYV strategies into the running and management of the organisation.



## Introduction

The Lien Centre for Social Innovation partnered with the National Council of Social Service to deliver a research study with the aim of transforming the volunteering experience in the social service sector.

### What the Literature Says

- ◆ Background
- ◆ Volunteer Impact
- ◆ Volunteer Motivation
- ◆ Volunteer Retention
- ◆ Volunteer Satisfaction
- ◆ Volunteer Management
- ◆ Research Gap

### Background

The goal of the present study is to achieve the following outcomes:

1. Social Service Agencies (SSAs) are empowered to develop data-backed volunteer management strategies for more effective outcomes
2. SSAs are equipped with a baseline/reference point to evaluate their volunteer management practices
3. Volunteers have increased satisfaction and retention within agencies and the social service sector.

A key challenge identified by the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) is a lack of integrated information to inform SSAs on volunteer management strategies that are backed with data. In the next section, we describe the relevant data on volunteerism in Singapore and beyond to provide a comprehensive overview of the local and global landscape on volunteerism.

In Singapore, volunteers play an essential role in ensuring the optimal delivery of services to social service users. According to the Charities Aid Foundation's World Giving Index in 2018, Singapore was ranked as one of the top 20 countries in terms of volunteerism, emerging as one of the biggest risers in the last decade.

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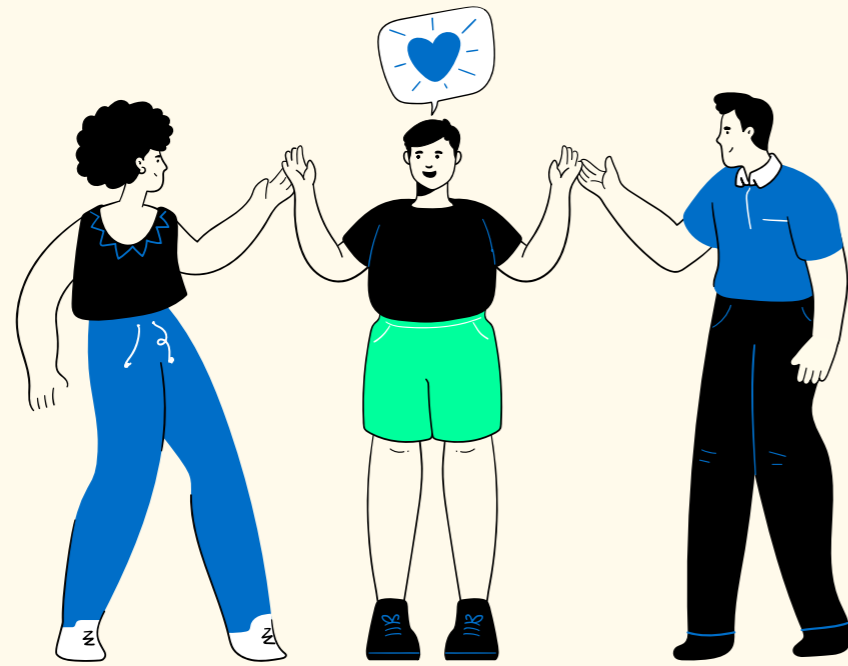
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### Volunteer Impact

Volunteer impact here looks at the impacts of volunteering on the volunteers as perceived by the volunteers, which includes both benefits and negative experiences. It was identified as one of key aspects of volunteering in a 2019 landmark study by the United Kingdom's (UK) National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO, 2019).

#### Benefits of Volunteering on Well-Being

Volunteering has been associated with various benefits to a person's well-being, such as physical and mental health benefits (Lawton et al., 2021; Matthews & Nazroo, 2021) and self-



reported health, particularly for older adults and individuals in poor health (de Wit, Qu & Bekkers, 2022). Closer to home, a study on five Asian societies, including Singapore, similarly found a positive effect of volunteering on the well-being of older adults (Huang, 2019). Volunteers may also derive a sense of enjoyment from their volunteering and a feeling of fulfilment that they are making a difference (NCVO, 2019).

In addition, interviews with volunteers in the UK have highlighted how volunteers in the same group develop a shared social identity, which provides them with a sense of belonging, acceptance, respect and support. Simply knowing that there are others out there willing to help out in a similar cause also enforces their sense of community and makes them feel part of a broader collective effort to do good (Gray & Stevenson, 2019). Moreover, volunteering alleviates social isolation and provides opportunities to meet new people (NCVO, 2019).

**Negative Volunteering Impacts**

While the negative impacts of voluntary work are less well understood than its benefits, it

remains an important consideration of the overall volunteer experience. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) study found that volunteers experienced negative effects, e.g., feeling that too much of their time or money was taken up by their volunteering activities (NCVO, 2019).

**Volunteer Motivation**

With the rise of volunteerism in the last decade, there has been a corresponding increase in the need to understand the factors that underpin it. The motivations of volunteers in Singapore appear to be similar to the cultures studied

elsewhere, with one’s ‘values’ or the desire to help others as the primary driver for engaging in these efforts (Conjunct Consulting, 2018; Chan, 2020; Wong & Foo, 2011). Indeed, the primary reason cited for why individuals choose to volunteer with SSAs is the appreciation of the valuable work that the organisation does for society (NCSS, 2019; 2020).

**Volunteering Goals Differ by Life Stage**

At the same time, while certain observations may generally be applicable for all volunteers,

a report by the NVPC (2018b) highlighted how giving varies across life stages. This study categorised volunteers in Singapore into different age groups youths (15–34 years), mid-lifers (35–49 years) and seniors (50 years and above) and looked at the specific goals and difficulties for the members in each group during that particular season of their lives (NVPC, 2018b).

While there is a high volunteering rate among school-going youth, their enthusiasm towards contributing to society starts to decline as they enter the workforce from around 25 years of age (NVPC, 2018b), mostly because they lack the time to continue (Conjunct Consulting, 2018). In a similar vein, mid-lifers—especially individuals in the sandwich generation—are even more stretched for time as they struggle to balance work and family life. Finally, senior volunteers are fewer but more consistent—they contribute more than three times as many hours as younger volunteers (NVPC, 2018a; 2018b). Long-term senior volunteers are motivated by the fulfilment of their life goals, with volunteerism being seen

as a way to derive greater meaning from life (Tan, Lopez, Tam, Ng & Goh, 2020). Senior volunteers also tend to regard volunteering as a social activity (NVPC, 2018b), with them highly valuing social bonds—between volunteers, among volunteers and service users, among volunteers and staff—that are formed through volunteering (Tan, Lopez, Tam, Ng & Goh, 2020).

**A Deeper Understanding of Volunteers Through Profiling**

It is thus crucial to understand the different profiles of volunteers, as they each have a different set of resources, responsibilities and motivations. This would also lead to different areas of opportunity. For instance, corporate-driven volunteerism that provides career development opportunities or more convenient and flexible ways of giving within the workplace presents itself as a major prospect for time-pressed youth and mid-lifer volunteers (NVPC, 2016; 2017; 2018b). Seniors, on the other hand, could potentially engage in work-related volunteerism where they can share

**It is thus crucial to understand the different profiles of volunteers, as they each have a different set of resources, responsibilities and motivations. This would also lead to different areas of opportunity.**



PHOTO CREDIT: CAPITALAND



their expertise, as well as build relationships by volunteering with friends, family and colleagues (NVPC, 2018a; 2018b). These insights reveal the need to examine volunteerism through various lenses—an important first step in order to generate evidence-based volunteer management recommendations that can further promote volunteerism in Singapore.

## Volunteer Retention

### Volunteer Satisfaction Predicts Volunteer Retention

It is also necessary to investigate the various factors that affect volunteer retention, such as a volunteer's affiliation to the organisation or cause, or their personal circumstances and resources (NCVO, 2019). Notably, it appears that one of the main drivers of retention is volunteer satisfaction—it was the most important predictor of volunteer retention found among university students in Malaysia (Ngah, Abdullah & Suki, 2022). Moreover, a Singapore study

(Cho, Wong & Chiu, 2020) found that volunteer satisfaction played a mediating role between volunteer management and retention, such that an increase in volunteer retention was explained by volunteer satisfaction. On the flip side, volunteers are likely to discontinue their activities if they feel dissatisfied with their overall experience (NCVO, 2019). This suggests that volunteer satisfaction is a central consideration when it comes to volunteer retention.

## Volunteer Satisfaction

### Good Volunteer Management Practices Can Influence Volunteer Satisfaction

What, then, drives volunteer satisfaction? The literature suggests that satisfaction is largely influenced by volunteer management. Good volunteer management practices can enrich the volunteer experience much in the same way that a company's work and organisational culture plays a role in creating a positive environment for its employees (Cho, Wong &

Chiu, 2020). Satisfaction is strongly associated with there being a culture of respect, trust and recognition and a sense of belonging to the organisation (NCVO, 2019). An organisation's responsiveness to its volunteers' needs is another important factor that creates a sense of support (Cho, Wong & Chiu, 2020; NCVO, 2019) and allows them to cope with the demands of their roles better (Gray & Stevenson, 2019). Volunteers also reported higher satisfaction when they felt that the organisation's values and mission were well communicated to them (Ngah, Abdullah & Suki, 2022) and when volunteer managers were able to facilitate good relationships amongst the volunteers within the same organisation (Gray & Stevenson, 2019).

## Volunteer Management

### Assessing the Impact of Volunteer Management Through Retention and Satisfaction

Indeed, there has been growing interest in ascertaining how volunteer management strategies influence volunteer satisfaction and retention. It is a key focus area for the local social service sector and it was ranked sixth among the top 10 challenges faced by SSAs (NCSS, 2018). According to a report examining worldwide trends in volunteerism, Singapore's rapid increase in volunteerism over the last five years may well be attributed to specific strategies designed to increase volunteering (CAF, 2018). For example, the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) has implemented recommendations over the years (e.g., training volunteers regularly, routinely gathering feedback, providing timely staff help and showing appreciation to volunteers) based on reports such as their Volunteer Engagement Tool (NCSS, 2019).

Given that all of these strategies are aimed at improving volunteer satisfaction and boosting volunteerism in the sector (NCSS, 2018; 2019; 2020), it is crucial to dive deeper into the relationship between volunteer management, retention and satisfaction. This would be helpful in assessing the impact and effectiveness of a volunteer organisation's activities and management and, in turn, identify potential areas of opportunity.

## Research Gap

At this current juncture, it is clear that there is a lack of local data on volunteer experience and management. Existing studies on volunteer experience are often only from the volunteers' perspectives, and the literature on volunteer management tends to be at an aggregate level. However, volunteer engagement can be influenced by several interconnected factors, and volunteer management strategies that work for one profile of volunteer may not work for another. Indeed, a landmark study involving 10,000 volunteers in the UK cautioned that "there is no single lever" to improve volunteerism (NCVO, 2019).

Thus, a key gap in the literature is a holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities of volunteering in the sector. This study therefore considers volunteerism from both the volunteers' and VMs' perspectives. In addition, as the literature above suggests, this study aims to delve into the various profiles of volunteers, as well as different aspects of volunteerism such as volunteer impact, motivation, retention and satisfaction, and how they might inform volunteer management strategies.



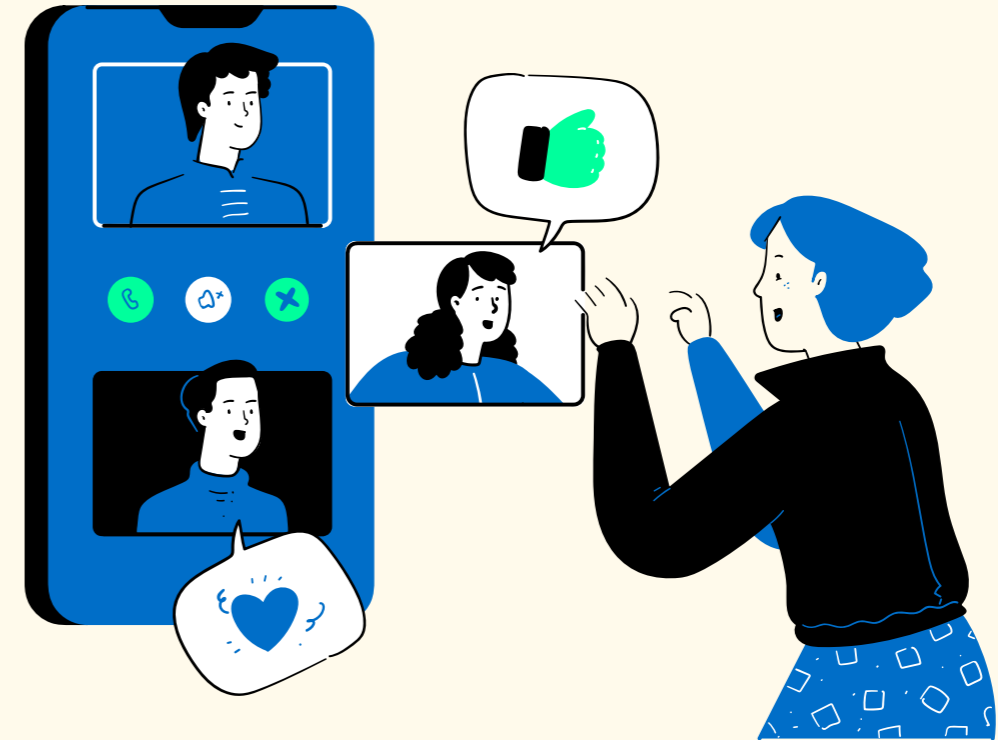
## The Current Study

In the current study, the primary objective lies in gaining a holistic understanding of volunteerism in Singapore and thus equipping the non-profit sector with evidence-based recommendations. This study comprises two phases:

- (1) a quantitative survey to understand the perspectives of volunteers in the sector, and
- (2) a series of qualitative interviews to understand the perspectives of volunteer management.

### How We Did It

- ◆ **Mixed-Method Study on Volunteers in Singapore**



The overarching research questions that will be addressed from this study are:

- ◆ What are the key features of a quality volunteering experience?
- ◆ How can volunteer management strategies implemented by Social Service Agencies (SSAs) be aligned to support better volunteer experiences?

### Mixed-Method Study on Volunteers in Singapore

This section provides details on how this study was conducted. It first explains how the participants—volunteers and volunteer managers (VMs)—were selected and the data collection instruments administered. It then provides a data analysis and the study's findings.

#### Methodology

##### *Survey administered to volunteers*

In order to capture multiple facets of the dynamic and complex nature of volunteering, a National

Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) study in 2019 was benchmarked. The survey used by NCVO (2019) was adapted for use in the current study. To allow for a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives of local volunteers, questions encompassed five key themes—volunteer participation, volunteer context, volunteer experience, volunteer impact and volunteer retention (NCVO, 2019). The results from this survey show the scope of volunteers' needs and perceptions, and the recommendations discuss how the sector can incorporate these findings into volunteer management strategies. More importantly, it also describes which of the above five themes influence volunteer satisfaction and retention.

This investigation is the first undertaking to capture an in-depth look into the volunteer community in Singapore.

##### *Virtual interviews with volunteer managers*

In order to record the views of VMs on the same focus areas, a semi-structured interview guide was developed to complement the survey tool. To ensure that responses from the VMs could be appropriately triangulated with those of the



volunteers surveyed, general questions from each of the five key themes identified were used, as well as specific questions to uncover challenges and opportunities for volunteer management. The results from these interviews illuminate what considerations managers take into account when implementing volunteer management strategies.

This study is the first endeavour to uncover perspectives of staff implementing recommendations pertaining to volunteer management in their organisations.

**Sampling of participants**

**Survey (volunteers)** – As the focus of this study was to explore the nature of volunteering in Singapore, purposive sampling was adopted. More specifically,

volunteers were identified through the SSAs at which they volunteered. A total of 745 individual representatives from 474 SSAs were contacted.

In total, 180 volunteers from 112 SSAs participated in the current study—a participation rate of 23.6% among the SSAs contacted.

**The objective of volunteer profiling is to explore how specific known characteristics of volunteers can influence their volunteer experience, retention and preferences. The findings from volunteer profiling will enable VMs in SSAs to design and implement volunteer management strategies according to the specific known characteristics of volunteers.**

**Virtual interviews (volunteer managers)** – Purposive and convenience sampling was adopted to explore the insights of VMs. More specifically, VMs were identified through the SSAs that participated in the survey. A total of ten VMs, all representing different SSAs, participated in this phase.

**Data analysis**

**Survey** – A variety of statistical techniques were used to analyse the data collected from participants. Broadly, statistical techniques such as multinomial logistic

regression, ordinal regression and the chi-square test for independence were used, depending on the nature of the variables and the purpose of analysis.

Specifically, multinomial logistic regression and ordinal regression were used to analyse the data as a whole. The chi-square test for independence was used for analysing data specific to volunteer profiling, in particular, to measure the relationships between predictor and dependent variables.

**Virtual interviews** – The 10 transcribed files were imported into Nvivo, an analytical software, where themes were established and manually organised through open, axial and selective coding. The findings from the virtual interviews are presented in the discussion section of this report.

**Volunteer profiling**

Volunteer profiling was adopted in this study in order to ascertain if there were varying needs and perceptions of volunteers according to specific profiles. The objective of volunteer profiling is to explore how specific known characteristics of volunteers can influence their volunteer experience, retention and preferences. The findings from volunteer profiling will enable VMs in SSAs to design and implement volunteer management strategies according to the specific known characteristics of volunteers.

More specifically, volunteers were profiled based on their:

1. Life stage
2. Volunteering role
3. Motivations for continuing to volunteer
4. Perception of the benefits of volunteering

**Life stage** – In this report, we refer to young adults as individuals aged 18–34 years old. This is in line with the national definition of ‘youth’ (NYC, 2021). Individuals aged 35–54 are categorised as middle-aged adults. Those 55 years and above are categorised as seniors.

**Volunteering role** – Three broad groups inform the work undertaken by the volunteers: support roles, user roles and organisation roles.

The categorisation of these roles were determined in collaboration with the National Council of Social Service (NCSS). Broadly, support roles refer to volunteering activities that help service users directly, but volunteers may not have direct interactions with these service users. User roles refer to volunteering activities that include direct service and interactions with service users. Organisation roles refer to activities that help the organisation directly but with no direct service to the service users.

An illustrative sample list of activities associated with these three broad groups are provided in Table 1.

**Table 1: Subcategorisation of ‘Volunteering Role’\***

Support Roles (n = 140 (77.8%))	User Roles (n = 101 (56.1%))	Organisation Roles (n = 93 (51.7%))
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Supported services or programmes (e.g., therapy, classroom support)</li> <li>2. Provided practical help (cooking, gardening)</li> <li>3. Provided transport/driving</li> <li>4. Distributed necessities</li> <li>5. Organised/helped run an activity or event</li> <li>6. Facilitated group activities or sessions</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Gave advice/information/counselling to people</li> <li>2. Befriended people</li> <li>3. Mentored people</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Provided secretarial or administration support</li> <li>2. Provided training support (e.g., for volunteers or service users)</li> <li>3. Led or contributed to a project or committee</li> <li>4. Ambassador or Advocate on behalf of organisation</li> <li>5. Provided professional skills help (organisational development)</li> <li>6. Fundraised on behalf of organisation</li> </ol>

\*Participants could choose more than one role



PHOTO CREDIT: AGENCY FOR INTEGRATED CARE (AIC) SILVER GENERATION OFFICE

**Motivations for continuing to volunteer –**  
The objective behind subcategorising volunteers by their motivations is to explore if there are differences in the factors that influence them to continue volunteering. This is a measurement of volunteer retention. The categorisation of these roles was determined in collaboration with NCSS. ‘Motivations for continuing to volunteer’ was subcategorised into four broad groups— ‘Affiliation’, ‘Beliefs or values’, ‘Career development’, and ‘No strong motivation’—for group analysis (see Table 2).

**Perception of the benefits of volunteering –**  
As with motivation, this study also seeks to explore if there are differences in the retention of volunteers according to the perceived value attributable to volunteering. The categorisation of these roles was also determined in collaboration with NCSS.

‘Perception of the benefits of volunteering’ was categorised into three broad groups— ‘Well-being’, ‘Professional’ and ‘Social’— for group benefits (see Table 3).

**Table 2: Subcategorisation of ‘Motivations for Continuing to Volunteer’\***

Affiliation	Beliefs or Values	Career Development	No Strong Motivation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone asked me to give help</li> <li>It is connected with the needs of my family/friends</li> <li>It is part of my school or work requirements</li> <li>I want to meet people / make friends</li> <li>I have been helped by the group/ club/organisation before</li> <li>The group/club/organisation is really important to me</li> <li>My friend(s) / family member(s) are already involved</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I want to improve things / help people</li> <li>The cause is really important to me</li> <li>I feel there is a need in my community</li> <li>I feel there is no one else available to help the group/club/organisation</li> <li>It is part of my religious belief / philosophy of life to help people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I think that it will give me a chance to use my existing skills</li> <li>I think it will give me a chance to learn new skills</li> <li>I think it will help me get on in my career / to get a recognised qualification</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I have spare time to do it</li> <li>Others</li> <li>Not applicable— there are no reasons in particular why I continue volunteering</li> </ul>

\*Participants could choose more than one motivational factor

**Table 3: Categorisation by ‘Perception of the Benefits of Volunteering’\***

Well-being	Professional	Social
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I enjoy it</li> <li>It improves my mental health and well-being</li> <li>It helps me feel less isolated</li> <li>It improves my physical health</li> <li>It gives me a sense of personal achievement</li> <li>It broadens my experience of life</li> <li>It gives me more confidence</li> <li>It makes me feel like I am making a difference</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It gives me new skills and experience</li> <li>It improves my employment prospect</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I meet new people</li> <li>It brings me into contact with people from different backgrounds and cultures</li> </ul>

\*Participants could choose more than one perceived benefit

# CHAPTER 03

## Findings

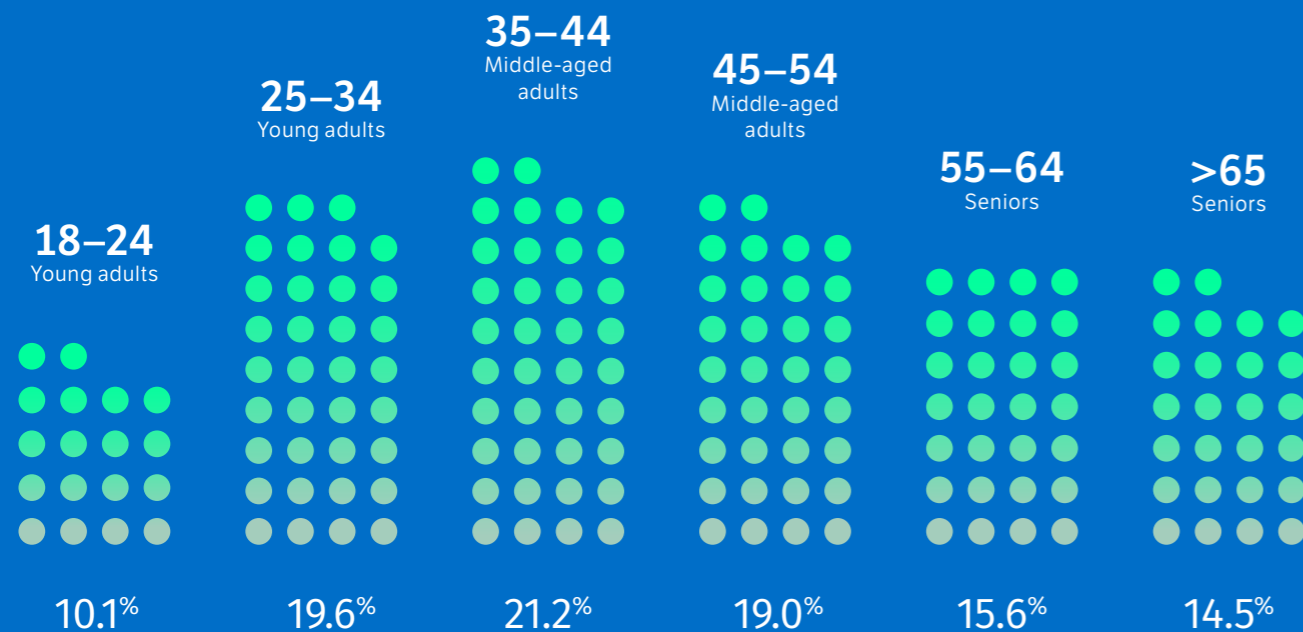
This section details the main findings from the survey. All findings presented were statistically significant, meaning that the results were not likely to be due to chance and are thus reliable in the context of this study. The qualitative interview findings will be covered in the discussion section of this report.

### Descriptive Results

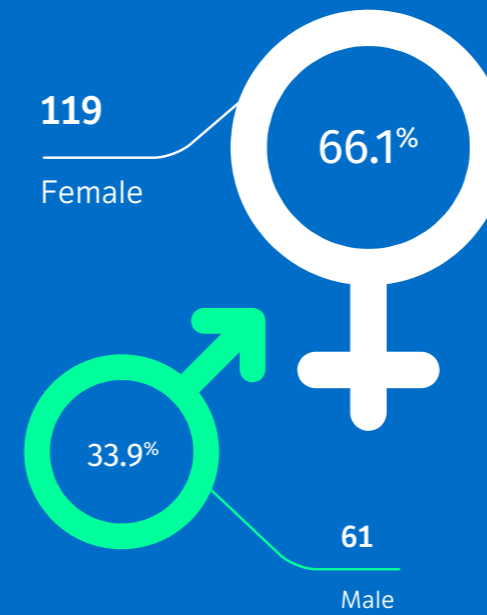
The demographic characteristics of our study sample are presented as follows.

(N = 180)

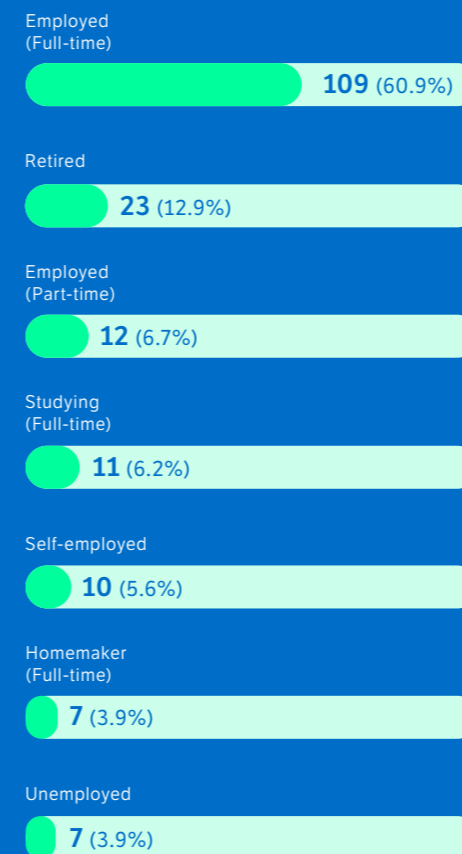
## AGE



## GENDER



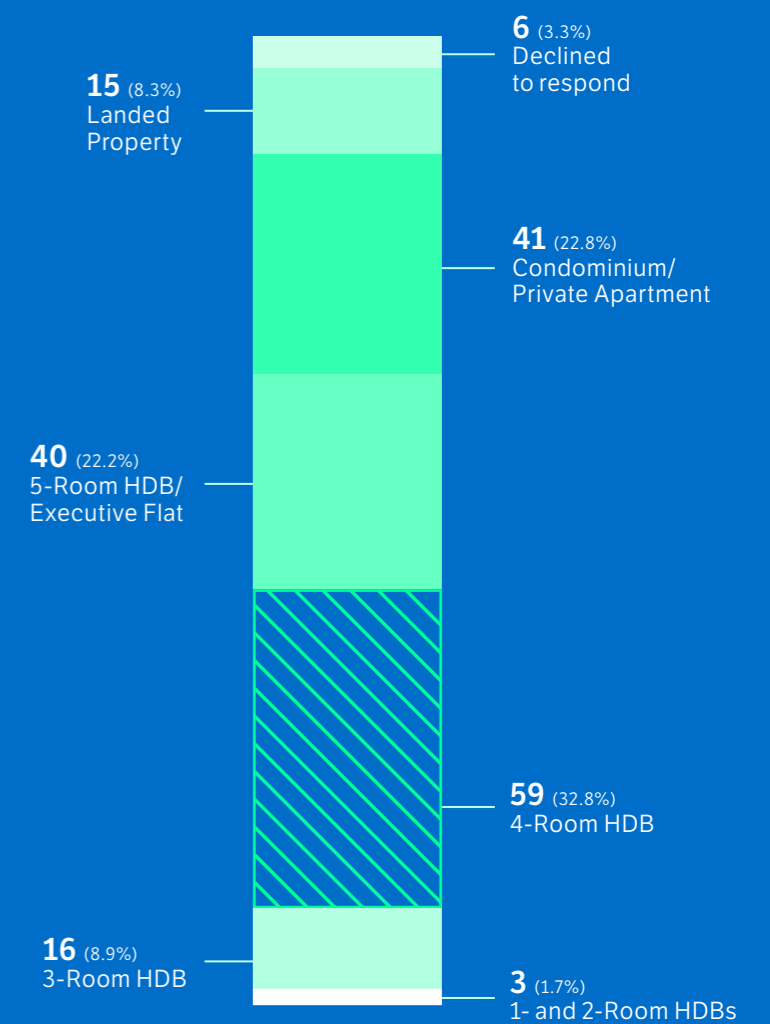
## EMPLOYMENT STATUS



## EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

- Degree or above 117 (65.7%)
- Diploma 35 (19.7%)
- O-Level 12 (6.7%)
- A-Level 10 (5.6%)
- Secondary 4 (2.3%)

## HOUSING TYPE



## Results by Volunteer Profiling

This section presents the findings analysed by volunteer profiling. Volunteers were profiled based on their ‘Life stage’, ‘Volunteering role’, ‘Motivations for continuing to volunteer’, and ‘Perception of the benefits of volunteering’. As highlighted in the previous sections, the objective behind volunteer profiling is to explore how specific known characteristics of volunteers can differ when understanding the perceived impacts of volunteering and volunteer retention. The usefulness of the findings in this section lies in the ability of Social Service Agencies (SSAs) to use the targeted findings (by the various ways of profiling) according to the needs and context of their organisations.

### Negative and Positive Impact of Volunteering

A chi-square test for independence, also called Pearson’s chi-square test or the chi-square test of association, was used to determine if there were statistically significant relationships between specific positive and negative impacts of volunteering and volunteers according to their different life stages and volunteering roles.

#### By life stages

While young adults were more likely to feel that volunteering improved their employment prospects (  $\chi^2(1) = 7.613, p = .022$ ), they were also more likely to feel that it negatively impacted their work or studies (  $\chi^2(1) = 7.222, p = .027$ ). Hence, this finding highlights the importance

of managing the responsibilities and expectations of young adult volunteers, ensuring that volunteering is flexible and the time commitment required by organisations is clearly communicated and does not negatively impact the work or studies of young adult volunteers.

By volunteering roles – Tables 4 and 5 summarise the results of the chi-square test of independence between volunteer roles and statistically

significant positive and negative impacts of volunteering, respectively.

In both tables, ‘Key perceived impacts’ refer to impacts that are statistically significant and have a majority (>50%) of participants choosing the specific indicator. ‘Other perceived impacts’ refer to impacts that were found to be statistically significant but have less than a majority (<50%) of participants choosing the specific indicators. ‘Key perceived impacts’ are impacts that SSAs should pay prompt attention to. The latter indicators (‘Other perceived impacts’) are included in the findings, given that they are statistically significant and can be viewed as impacts actionable by SSAs going forward.

As shown in Table 4, there are three statistically significant key perceived positive impacts of volunteering—‘Enjoys volunteering’, ‘Feels that he/she is making a difference’, and ‘Brings one into contact with people from different backgrounds and cultures’—that emerged across the three types of volunteering roles (i.e., ‘Support’, ‘User’, ‘Organisation’).

Volunteers from all three roles were more likely than not to perceive the positive impacts of volunteering. Other perceived positive impacts of volunteering, regardless of roles, include better mental health and well-being (‘Improves mental health and well-being’). SSAs may use the data in Table 4 to focus on role specific findings as certain perceived impacts may be unique to certain roles. For example, feeling a sense of achievement was a key perceived impact for the support role only. SSAs can use any relevant significant

findings during volunteer recruitment for specific types of roles. For example, an SSA that offers support roles can focus on communicating the relevant impacts afforded by these specific roles during volunteer recruitment. Apart from the three key perceived impacts that spanned across all roles, these roles also enabled volunteers to widen their horizon (‘Feels like it broadens one’s experience of life’) and feel more accomplished (‘Feels a sense of achievement’).

**As shown in Table 4, there are three statistically significant key perceived positive impacts of volunteering—‘Enjoys volunteering’, ‘Feels that he/she is making a difference’, and ‘Brings one into contact with people from different backgrounds and cultures’—that emerged across the three types of volunteering roles (i.e., ‘Support’, ‘User’, ‘Organisation’).**



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**Table 4: Statistically Significant Positive Impacts of Volunteering by Volunteer Role\***

	POSITIVE IMPACT (BENEFIT)		
	Support	User	Organisation
<b>KEY PERCEIVED IMPACTS (POSITIVE)</b>			
Enjoys volunteering	✓	✓	✓
Feels that he/she is making a difference	✓	✓	✓
Brings one into contact with people from different backgrounds and cultures	✓	✓	✓
Feels like it broadens one’s experience of life	✓		✓
Feels a sense of achievement	✓		
Feels like they meet new people			✓
Results in an increase in confidence			✓
<b>OTHER PERCEIVED IMPACTS (POSITIVE)</b>			
Improves mental health and well-being	✓	✓	✓
Feels less isolated		✓	✓
Equips with new skills	✓		
Improves physical health		✓	
Gains a new skill/experience			✓

\*The results of this chi-square test for independence should be viewed independently (i.e., support roles are more likely to enjoy volunteering than not) and not assessed across roles (i.e., which roles enjoyed volunteering the most). For example, results should be interpreted as volunteers in programme-based roles were more likely to enjoy volunteering than not.

**Table 5: Statistically Significant Negative Impacts of Volunteering by Volunteer Role\***

NEGATIVE IMPACT			
	Support	User	Organisation
<b>KEY PERCEIVED IMPACT (NEGATIVE)</b>			
Perceives no negative impacts of volunteering	✓		
<b>OTHER PERCEIVED IMPACTS (POSITIVE)</b>			
Feels unappreciated		x	x
Conflicts with others		x	x
Increases personal expenses or a lack of reimbursements		x	
Feels that one is not part of the group		x	
Negatively affects family life		x	
Negatively affects work and studies		x	
Feels pressured to do more than they would like / continue involvement			x
Feels that it takes up more of their time			x

\*The results of this chi-square test for independence should be viewed independently within roles and not assessed across roles (i.e., which role had volunteers feeling the most unappreciated). For example, results should be interpreted as volunteers from programme-based roles were more likely to perceive no negative impacts of volunteering than not.

Table 5 summarises the results of the chi-square test for independence between volunteer roles and statistically significant negative impacts of volunteering. It should be highlighted that there was a statistically significant association between those who take on support roles and those who perceive no negative impacts of volunteering, i.e., volunteers who undertook support roles were more likely to perceive no negative impacts of volunteering (  $\chi^2(1) = 4.265, p = .039$ ). However, it should be noted that while a majority of volunteers in support roles perceived no negative impacts of volunteering, there was still a minority that did not indicate the same. Hence SSAs should focus on maintaining their support roles to ensure that their volunteers continue to perceive no negative impacts of volunteering.

Other perceived negative impacts of volunteering for those in user- and organisation roles included being more likely to feel unappreciated and being in conflict with others, as seen in Table 5 ('Feels unappreciated' and 'Conflicts with others'). These findings highlight the importance of showing

appreciation to volunteers in these roles, whether by action or words. Volunteers should also have safe spaces to articulate their grievances should they experience conflict with others during their volunteering experience.

**Retention: Reasons for Continuing to Volunteer**

The chi-square test for independence was used to determine if there were statistically significant relationships between volunteers from different groups and their reasons for continuing to volunteer. These groups consisted of those who were earlier profiled based on their: (1) Life stage, (2) Volunteering role, (3) Motivations for continuing to volunteer, and (4) Perception of the benefits of volunteering.

**By 'Life stage'**

When asked why they may stop volunteering in the near future, volunteers from different life stages gave varying reasons. Young adults were more likely to stop volunteering due to changing circumstances (home, work, study, moving away,

etc.) (  $\chi^2(1) = 8.377, p = .015$ ), while seniors were more likely to stop volunteering due to health reasons (  $\chi^2(1) = 7.911, p = .019$ ). These findings indicate that these factors are beyond the locus of control of the SSAs.

Young adults were also more likely to stop volunteering if the perceived volunteering was causing too much stress (  $\chi^2(1) = 8.118, p = .017$ ). Based on these findings, SSAs can cater volunteering opportunities to the needs and aspirations of young adult volunteers. One possible way to reduce the stress and negative impact of volunteering is to keep it flexible and enjoyable.

**By 'Volunteer role', 'Motivations for continuing to volunteer' and 'Perception of the benefits of volunteering'**

Table 6 presents the statistically significant reasons behind continuing to volunteer by 'Roles', 'Motivation' and 'Perceived benefits'. 'Key reasons for continuing to volunteer' refer to reasons that are statistically significant and have a majority (>50%) of participants choosing the specific indicator. SSAs should pay prompt attention to these key reasons to understand volunteer retention. 'Other significant reasons for continuing to volunteer' refer to reasons that were found to be statistically significant but have less than a majority (<50%) of participants choosing the specific indicators. These latter indicators are included in the findings, given that they are statistically significant and can be viewed as valuable insights by SSAs going forward.

As shown in Table 6, 'The difference they [volunteers] are making' is the main reason why volunteers continue to volunteer across the 'Roles', 'Motivation' and 'Perceived benefits' groups. 'What the organisation stands for or helps' emerged as a main reason across the

'Roles' and 'Perceived benefits' groups, in addition to volunteers who are motivated to continue volunteering because of their beliefs/values and career prospects. This finding indicates that communication with volunteers is key to retaining them. Sharing the impact and importance of volunteers, as well as continued sharing of the ethos of the SSA, are ways SSAs can communicate with volunteers.

Notably, 'Fits with the volunteer's everyday life' constituted an 'Other significant reason for continuing to volunteer' that was applicable for all in the 'Motivation' and 'Perceived benefits' groups. This finding indicates that the flexibility and adaptability of volunteering remain important aspects of retaining volunteers.

**Based on these findings, SSAs can cater volunteering opportunities to the needs and aspirations of young adult volunteers. One possible way to reduce the stress and negative impact of volunteering is to keep it flexible and enjoyable.**

Table 7 presents the statistically significant reasons for not continuing to volunteer by 'Role', 'Motivation' and 'Perceived Benefits'. The 'Main reason for not continuing to volunteer' for those in user roles or who are motivated to continue volunteering because of affiliation and career development or perceived personal and professional benefits from volunteering is a change in circumstances ('A change in volunteer circumstances'). Another 'Other significant reason for not continuing to volunteer' was health-related ('Health issues'), which emerged as a significant reason for the majority of the profiles. These findings indicate that these factors are beyond the locus of control of the SSAs.

The findings presented in Tables 6 and 7 can be adapted to the needs of SSAs. For example, SSAs can choose to focus on role-based results and, more specifically, on only support roles because of their relevance to the specific SSA. Based on the findings for support roles, the 'Key reasons for [volunteers] continuing to volunteer' were: 'The difference they are making', 'What the organisation stands for or helps', and 'The organisation/group they are volunteering with'. Based on these findings, the SSA can design volunteer retention strategies accordingly.

Table 6: Statistically Significant Reasons for Continuing to Volunteer by Volunteer Role, Motivation and Perceived Benefits\*

REASONS	ROLE			MOTIVATION <sup>1</sup>			PERCEIVED BENEFITS <sup>2</sup>			
	Support	User	Organisation	Affiliation	Beliefs/Values	Career development	No strong motivation	Well-being	Professional	Social
<b>KEY REASONS FOR CONTINUING TO VOLUNTEER</b>										
The difference they are making	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
What the organisation stands for or helps	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
The organisation/group they are volunteering with	✓			✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
The skills and experiences the volunteer is gaining						✓			✓	
A sense of duty and obligation				✓		✓				
<b>OTHER SIGNIFICANT REASONS FOR CONTINUING TO VOLUNTEER</b>										
Fits with the volunteer's everyday life				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
A sense of duty and obligation		✓	✓		✓			✓		✓
Fellow volunteers			✓	✓	✓			✓		✓
The skills and experiences the volunteer is gaining				✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
Impact on volunteers' health and well-being				✓	✓			✓		✓
The lack of people to take their place			✓	✓		✓				
The organisation itself					✓					

\*The results of this chi-square test of independence should be viewed independently within roles and not compared across roles/ motivation/perceived benefits to conclude reasons for continuing to volunteer (i.e., which role/motivation group/perceived benefit groups had volunteers that felt most strongly about the difference they are making). For example, results should be interpreted as volunteers in all roles being more likely to want to continue volunteering because of the desire to want to improve things / help people than not.

<sup>1</sup> More information on the categorisation of the motivation group (affiliation, beliefs/values and career development) can be found in Table 2.

<sup>2</sup> More information on the categorisation of the perceived group (well-being, professional and social) can be found in Table 3.

Table 7: Statistically Significant Reasons for Not Continuing to Volunteer by Volunteer Role, Motivation and Perceived Benefits\*

REASONS	ROLE			MOTIVATION <sup>1</sup>			PERCEIVED BENEFITS <sup>2</sup>			
	Support	User	Organisation	Affiliation	Beliefs/Values	Career development	No strong motivation	Well-being	Professional	Social
<b>MAIN REASON FOR NOT CONTINUING TO VOLUNTEER</b>										
A change in volunteer circumstances		x		x		x			x	x
<b>OTHER SIGNIFICANT REASONS FOR NOT CONTINUING TO VOLUNTEER</b>										
Health issues	x	x		x	x			x	x	x
A one-off activity or event	x						x		x	x
Did not get on with others in the organisation			x	x		x				x
Wanted more time for other things				x	x	x			x	
Felt that they were not making a difference in the way they wanted to		x	x		x			x		
The organisation was not relevant to them anymore		x	x						x	x
Caused too much stress		x		x		x			x	
Unhappy with the way their volunteer help was managed/organised		x	x		x					
A change in volunteer circumstances	x				x			x		
Their partner/family did not want them to be involved anymore				x					x	
Did not match their interests/skills/experience						x				
Did not feel like volunteering anymore			x							

\*The results of this chi-square test of independence should be viewed independently within roles and not be compared across roles, motivation and perceived benefits to conclude reasons for continuing to volunteer (i.e., which role, motivation or perceived benefit groups had volunteers that felt most strongly about the difference they are making). For example, results should be interpreted as volunteers in all roles being more likely to want to continue volunteering because of the desire to want to improve things / help people than not.

<sup>1</sup> More information on the categorisation of the motivation group (affiliation, beliefs/values and career development) can be found in Table 2.

<sup>2</sup> More information on the categorisation of the perceived group (well-being, professional and social) can be found in Table 3.



## Discussion

During the survey, volunteers were asked questions about their volunteer experience related to their motivations, perceived impact of volunteering, barriers, and challenges. During the qualitative interviews, similar questions were asked of volunteer managers from various Social Service Agencies. Put together, these findings suggest five key features of volunteering that make up a quality volunteering experience for volunteers and may be considered by organisations when looking at the challenges and opportunities of volunteering.

### Key Takeaway

- ◆ Features of a Quality Volunteering Experience

### Features of a Quality Volunteering Experience

These key features contribute to the 'needs assessment' and 'recruiting and selecting volunteers' components of the National Council of Social Service's (NCSS) 'Volunteer Management Framework', which is available to Social Service Agencies (SSAs) in Singapore (NCSS, 2019; 2020). More importantly, insights on what constitute key features of a quality

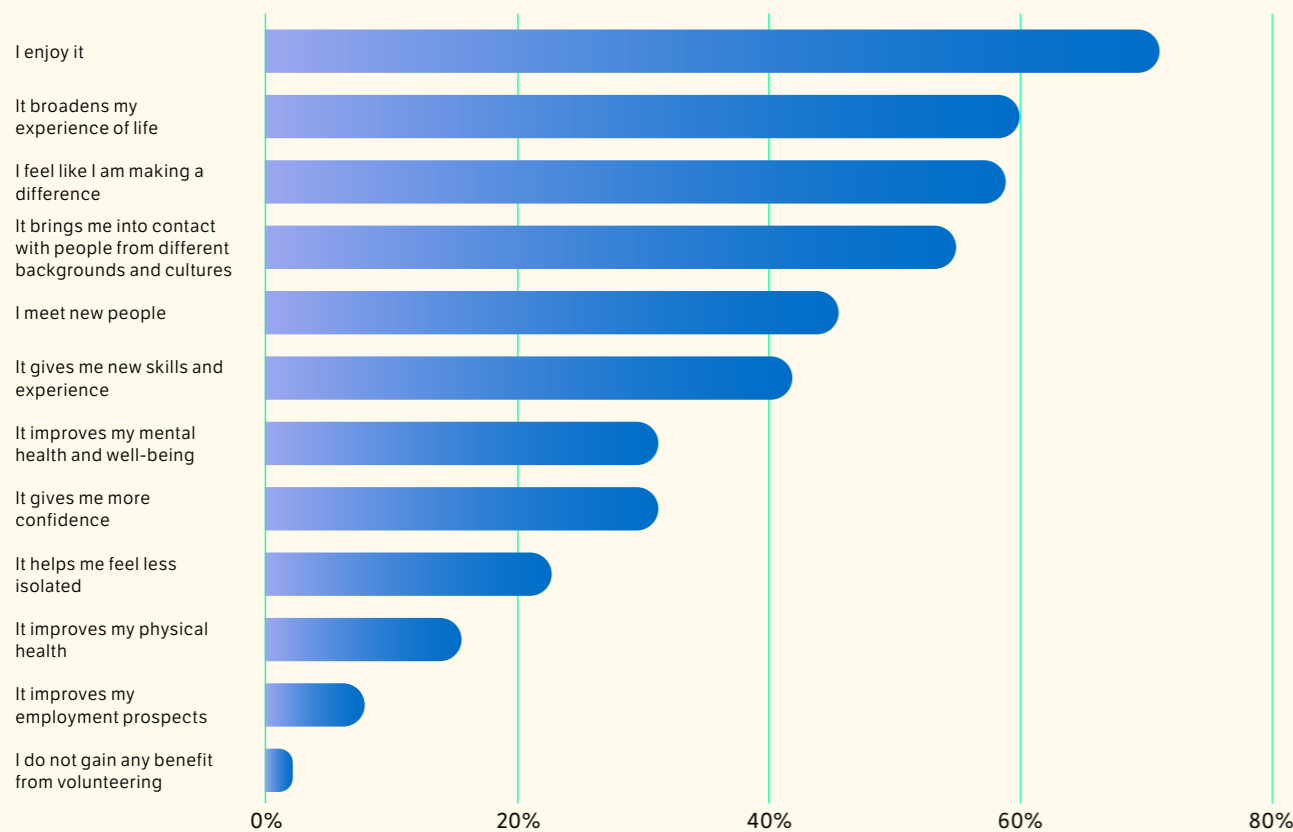
volunteering experience from the perspective of volunteers will enable SSAs to evaluate whether these key features exist in their volunteering opportunities when assessing the needs of their organisation, subsequently communicating it appropriately to volunteers during recruitment and selection and later on during the volunteering process.

The five key features, illustrated in Figure 1, are as follows:



Figure 1: Five key features of a quality volunteering experience

Figure 2: Benefits of volunteering\*



\*Respondents could select more than one of the above reasons

The features identified in this study as quality volunteering experience are largely aligned with local studies on volunteerism and giving in Singapore.

Time is precious, and the need for 'Flexibility', especially for specific groups of volunteers, is key (NVPC, 2018b). Increasing the flexibility of formal volunteering and supporting volunteers to contribute in ways that are meaningful to them could then be an important opportunity area for the social service sector moving forward (NCVO, 2019).

The features of 'Connectedness' and 'Impact' were also found in the NCSS Volunteer Engagement Tool Sector Report (VET) (NCSS, 2020), where it was highlighted that volunteers have a greater appreciation of their SSA and are motivated by the value it delivers to society and individuals. Drivers of volunteer satisfaction included: 'finding volunteer work meaningful' and 'a sense of belonging in the SSA' (NCSS, 2020).

The features of 'Enjoyment' and 'Exposure' were derived mainly from the quantitative survey portion of this study. While these have not been explicitly mentioned in the local literature, they have been implicitly acknowledged by volunteer managers (VMs) in the sector, as we will discuss below.

**Enjoyment**

During the survey, volunteers, prompted by a list of different benefits and impacts, were asked to reflect on how volunteering has affected them. A total of 70.6% indicated that enjoyment was one of the personal benefits they derived from volunteering (see Figure 2).

During the interviews, the VMs also perceived their volunteers to be happy with their activities. Indeed, many SSAs actively invest in their volunteers in order to enhance the latter's overall experience. For example, they might provide training for their volunteers as a way of letting them know that they are valued.

*[It would help if] we are able to send our volunteers to [training] programmes, [so that] they know they're being valued in a sense... [to know that] we are still wanting to invest in them [and] for them to level up in volunteering skills.*

Another VM explained how investing in their volunteers is part of their organisation's management philosophy and strategy to engage and nurture them.

*We believe that our volunteers are a blessing—all of them are a blessing, a very valuable partner in our work, in mentoring our youth, our children, our seniors. And therefore, we want to engage them, we want to nurture them. We hope that, as volunteers, they will find fulfilment [while] fulfilling needs with us.*

*That is our volunteer management philosophy. And that translated into a strategy basically puts us in a place where we [position] ourselves [to] say all the things that I mentioned, and of course [this involves] investing time, effort, energy and money to mature them, to grow them, to train them.*

The training and investment in volunteers not only ensures that they are able to carry out their duties appropriately and competently, it also helps VMs to create a positive working environment in which their volunteers may find fulfilment, worth and growth. These positive benefits enhance the overall experience of volunteering and contribute to a sense of enjoyment while doing good with the SSA.

**Exposure**

According to the survey results, volunteers gain more life experience and exposure to things they might not otherwise have encountered. A total of 60% of the respondents felt that their life experiences broadened through volunteering, and more than half (55%) indicated that volunteering brings them into contact with people from different backgrounds (see Figure 2).

One way in which SSAs encourage more of such exposure opportunities is by organising social

events, as these foster friendships and provide a sense of belonging.

*That's where we play a part to facilitate [and] to create that kind of big family environment to let them feel welcomed... They have the opportunity to meet each other [and] share notes. Because [otherwise] sometimes we notice that the volunteers in a particular programme [work in] silos—they only know about their [own] programme, they are not interested in other things. But through these kinds of social gatherings [they can] build bonds and friendships. [I] believe these little things do help to keep our volunteers with us.*

One VM expressed a hope to build a strong community of volunteers amongst people of different backgrounds and cultures because it supports growth in their volunteer pool in an organic way.

*[We want to] become so focused on our intention [and so] clear on our purpose that the volunteer community will grow naturally, organically. It is self-supporting [because] everybody is on this same boat for the same reason... I mean, they can have different personal reasons [for joining]... But ultimately [our volunteers] are really part of the extended [SSA's name] community, which includes our clients, staff and volunteers.*

*Everybody is part of the bigger picture... that is ultimately the dream. Because the community exists, retention is something that also becomes organic. And engagement also becomes something that is not just the role of the staff, but [an] extension of a volunteer's personal role. "Hey, you know, I'm having so much fun, and this is so meaningful, why don't I invite other people to join me?" And [that sparks] their own conversations about the work that they are doing... [That would be] something very beautiful.*

Establishing a strong network generates a sense of community within the organisation. This kind of exposure and engagement with people that

they might not otherwise have met is valuable, and the VM quoted above believes that this will stir up initiative in volunteers such that they would naturally want to introduce this experience to others.

**Impact**

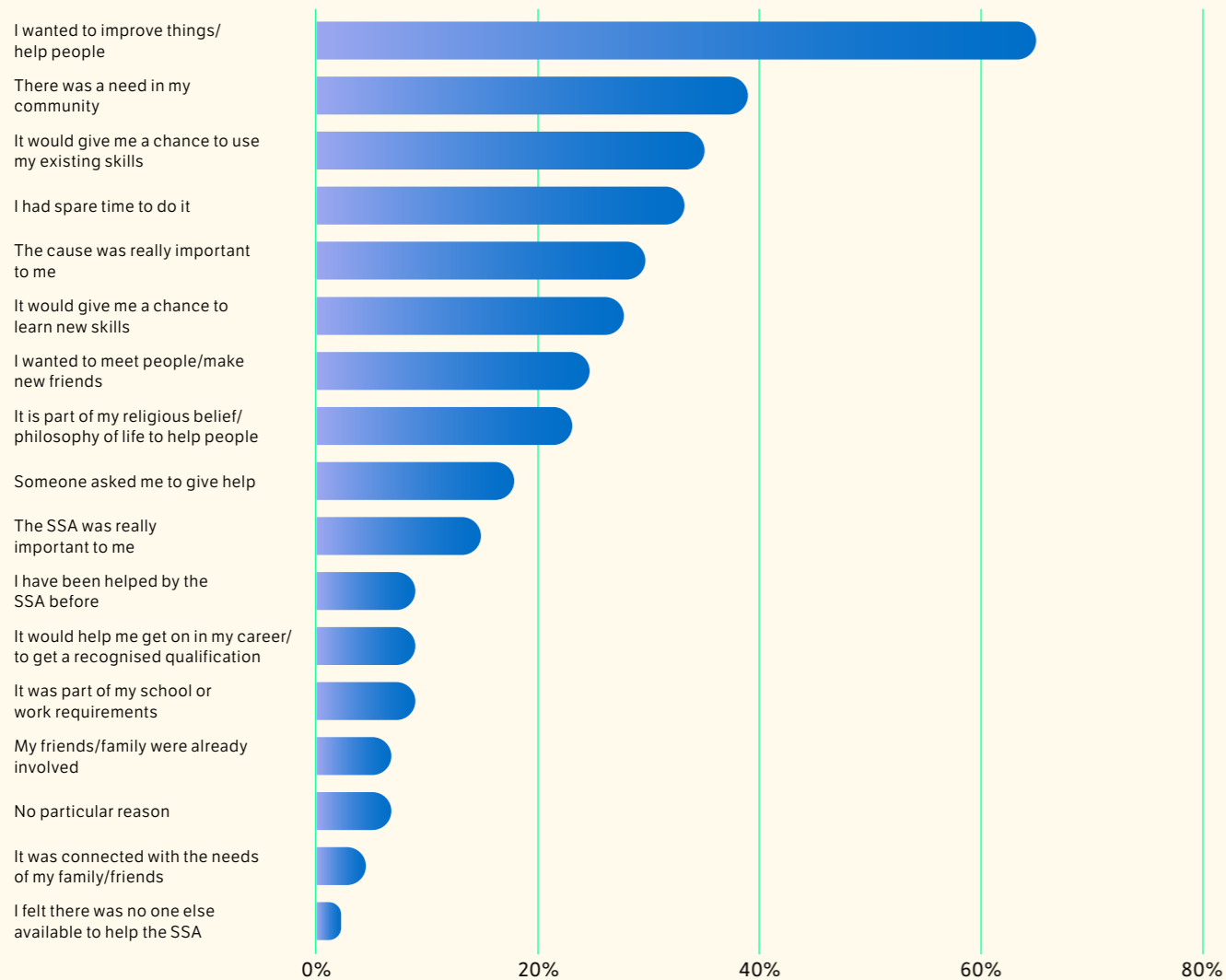
The survey revealed that while volunteers are driven by a mix of different reasons, the most common ones were their desire to improve things or help people (62.7%) and the belief that there is a need in the community (39.4%) (Figure 3).

Moreover, 58.9% of the volunteers indicated that volunteering allowed them to feel like they were making a difference, and 51.1% of them stated one of the key reasons why they continue to volunteer is the difference that they are able to make.

During the interviews, the VMs supported this sentiment and perceived that most volunteers desire to create an impact, even if it appears small and not very significant.

*I think all of us—not only our volunteers—when it comes to volunteering, we have that inner ambition: “I want to impact lives!” But the thing is, impacting lives takes [little things], over a long time period. [Even if all they manage is for the beneficiary to] share a little bit more about her life or his life and some struggles, [the volunteers are] very happy that they opened up. It’s the little achievements [the volunteers] receive from individual sessions of volunteering [that bring satisfaction].*

**Figure 3: Motivations for first getting involved in volunteering with the organisation\***

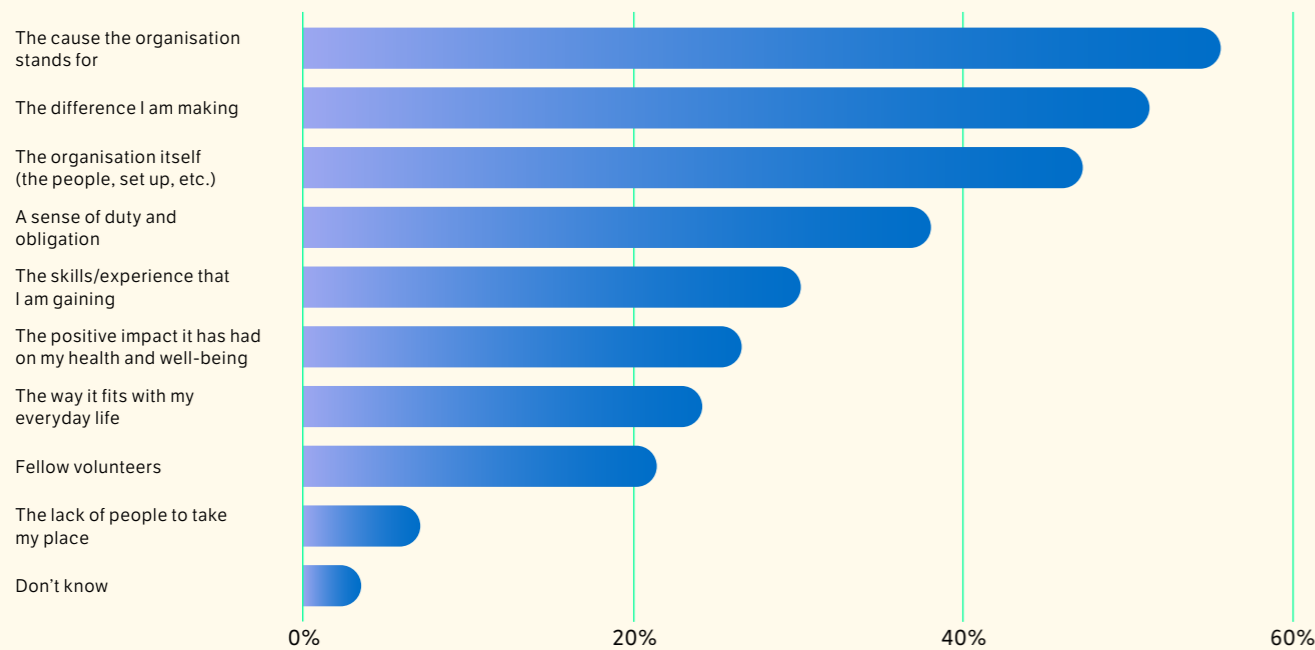


\*Respondents could select more than one of the above reasons



PHOTO CREDIT: SINGAPORE INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

**Figure 4: Key reasons why volunteers are likely to continue volunteering\***



\*Respondents could select more than one of the above reasons

Highlighting the progress that the volunteers make with their beneficiaries and recognising them for it could thus be an effective strategy for managers to enhance the volunteer experience. For instance, one of the SSAs spoke about the value of recognising and acknowledging volunteers' impact in the presence of others.

*We recognise them on various platforms. It may not be formal recognition, but even informal recognition—recognising them with their families around, inviting the families to come for a day, for a meal... Being recognised in front of families is also a big thing, right? [It] is very motivating as well. These are the small things [that] really enhance the experience... And [it's about] trust in the organisation, [a sense that] "my work is not being wasted, it's been recognised, it's being appreciated. The work that I do is meaningful; I'm meaningfully giving [to] somebody. At the end of the day when I walk out, I've maybe created a small change in this person's life... So we're very, very careful and mindful of things like this. That's what keeps us—people—coming back.*

When volunteers are able to see the value that they create and feel appreciated for their contributions, they can be reminded of why they chose to volunteer and feel motivated to continue the good work they do.

**Connectedness**

The survey also explored the topic of volunteer retention, and the main reason why volunteers continued their activities, as answered by 56.7% of the participants, was their belief in the cause that the organisation stands for (Figure 4).

During the interviews, VMs acknowledged that many volunteers are motivated by a connection they have to the cause that they are serving. This connection may have come from their personal lives, such as having a relative suffering from the same illness that is related to the organisation they are volunteering for, or it could have been forged during their time as a volunteer. SSAs hope to create a space that enables their volunteers to continue feeling that kind of affiliation with beneficiaries.

*What the volunteers feel is very personal, because every single wish they receive or they grant [creates a] special moment...*

*Those that have stayed with the organisation for very long will [all] tell you—there's always something special they feel from that one extra wish that they've granted... and they want to be able to [share] this special [something] to every single eligible [beneficiary]... We [want to] empower them to be able to continue feeling that way.*

On the part of the SSA, having a clear organisational vision was also an important strategy that would strengthen the connection that volunteers have with the organisation.

*I think a lot boils down to the same alignment of the so-called mission-vision. [The volunteers] must believe in what we [the organisation] are doing, and see that there is value. So we will make sure that we will communicate this [to them]... They must see eye to eye with us, [otherwise] I think some of them will leave after a short while.*

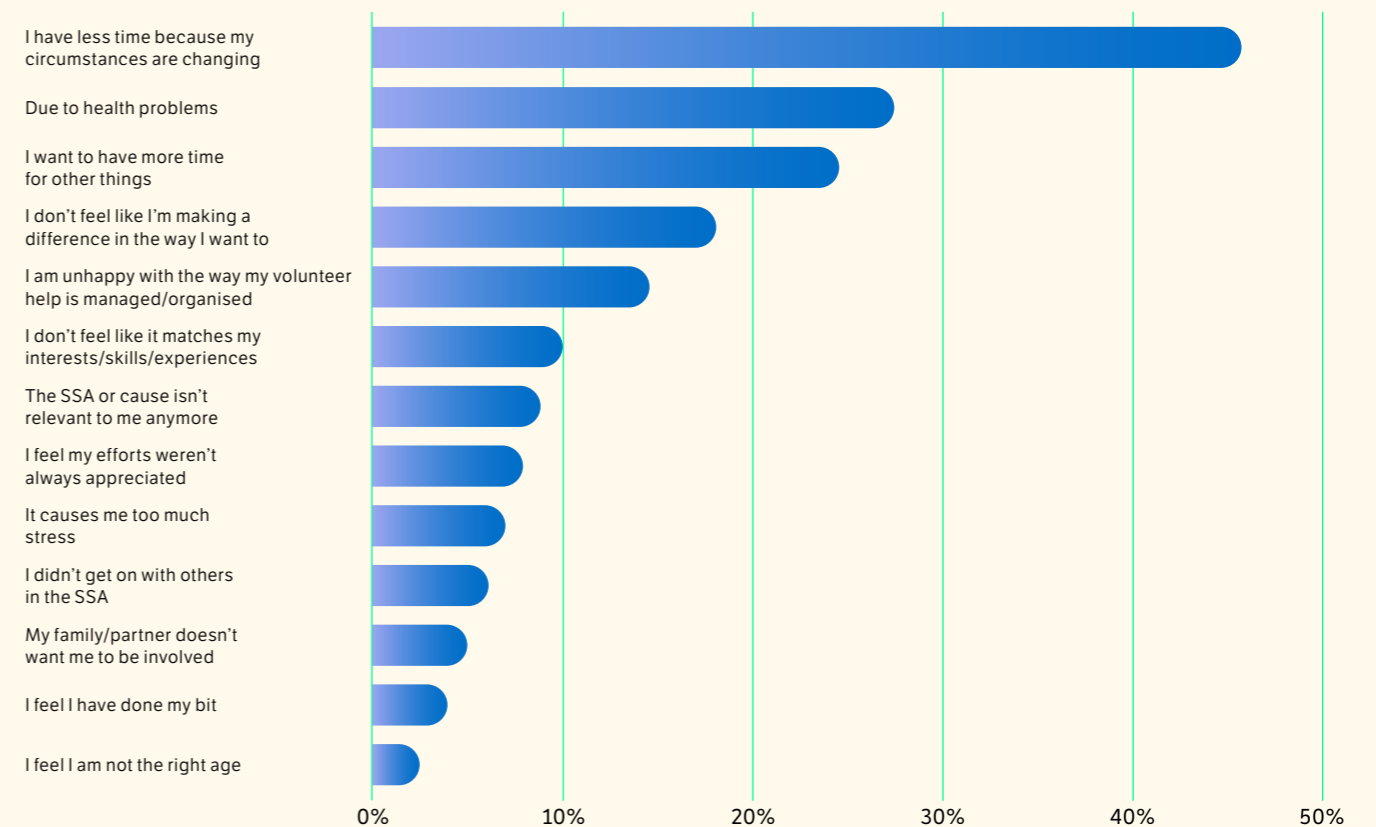
Just as this VM explained, an SSA should communicate its mission and vision clearly to its volunteers, so that volunteers know exactly what they are getting themselves involved with. This would ensure that all parties are aligned and on the same page about the cause they are serving and form a strong relationship of collaboration between the SSA and its volunteers.

**Flexibility**

The flexibility of an organisation's volunteering system is critical because even the most passionate person may face barriers to volunteering if the programmes do not accommodate their lifestyles to a certain extent. This study revealed that one of the key reasons why volunteers might stop volunteering is due to a change in their personal circumstances.

**Changing personal circumstances** – When asked why they would be unlikely to continue volunteering, the most common reason cited by volunteers was the lack of time due to changing circumstances (43.9%), followed by health problems (26.7%), and a desire for more time for other things (23.3%) (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Key reasons why volunteers are unlikely to continue volunteering\***



\*Respondents could select more than one of the above reasons



As mentioned above, volunteers might have to navigate health issues, difficult life transitions, or a change in family situations. It could also simply be that their priorities have changed over time, and they feel that the cause is less relevant or that they would prefer spending their time elsewhere.

One VM also recognised that people who are in the middle of a life transition find it particularly challenging to put in the same kind of time and effort into their volunteering activities.

*We have no challenge with the younger folks because students like uni students do [still] come in... it's quite okay [for them]. It's more of when people are transiting—you know, getting married, having their own family, then they [get] busy—and that's when it's difficult to retain them, but it's completely understandable. That's the [part of] retention that is difficult.*

Students, for instance, might have a more manageable schedule compared to those going through big changes like marriage or having a child, such that regular, long-term volunteering can be too demanding. 'Busyness' could also come in the form of unexpected life events, and it might benefit SSAs to consider how they can mitigate unplanned changes in their volunteering programmes.

Organisational issues – Having said that, rather than focusing on reasons that are beyond the SSA's locus of control, VMs would do well to target organisational and management-related issues that allow for more flexibility and communication with their volunteers.

For example, some of the other reasons why volunteers were unlikely to continue volunteering were: feeling that they were not making a difference in the way they wanted to, being unhappy with the way their programmes were

being managed, and that their volunteering activities did not match with their interests, experiences or skills (see Figure 5).

These challenges are relatively more surmountable, especially where alignment of expectations, volunteering needs and skills are concerned. It would thus be good for SSAs to pay attention to the kinds of communication approaches and channels that they have established with their volunteers, as these would help them gather feedback from their volunteers and allow them to continually enhance organisational practices.

During the interviews, many VMs talked about having a human-centred management approach by working closely with their volunteers to find the right fit for them.

*It's really [about] trying to cultivate a safe space for open conversations... Having my volunteers feeling safe to [talk to] me, that's something that I envision for our volunteers... I [once] had this experience with a volunteer that [I was trying to] reactivate. [I wanted to] assign him to a role, [but] he felt that maybe that's not it for [him], [and that he would] prefer to do [something else instead].*

*For volunteers, it's really about the jobs to be done—like when they come and volunteer, they have their [own] motivation[s] for why they volunteer. So understanding their intention and trying to match that, I believe that would also be valuable to the volunteers.*

Each organisation has its own processes for onboarding and orientation, training, programme assessments, etc. Most of the managers have some form of tracking and evaluation system by which they check in with their volunteers, respond to them, and give them feedback regularly.

*When we do the evaluation, [it] is to say, "You see, you are doing something! You are improving this life! So don't give up! To continue or not [is] up to [you], but don't give up! You're doing great!" So the evaluation is not so much for us to boast about our impact. Of course, that's nice, but the evaluation is also to reinforce what our usual volunteers have been doing. [We want to] be very clear with our volunteers that we're not giving [them] a KPI, [but they] are already hitting KPIs hahaha! ...so that's the message that we hope to bring to our volunteers when they come to that state.*

One other VM spoke about providing progression for the volunteers to move on to new roles or leadership positions so as to keep them engaged.

*Eventually, the novelty [of volunteering] will run out. So what we hope to be able to do is to change their job scope [and enable them to focus on different things], so that all these [new activities] would hopefully [maintain] that novelty value to every single volunteer.*

Having regular check-ins and working in collaboration with volunteers will ensure that their needs are taken into account and that they are more meaningfully engaged in their activities and more aligned with the organisation as a whole.

## Recommendations

This section translates our results into practical, actionable steps for volunteer organisations.

These recommendations are broad strategies and activities that Social Service Agencies can consider adopting in order to achieve quality volunteering experience in the sector, which then should ideally be incorporated into organisational strategies to ensure continuity.

The recommendations put forward in this report are based on the findings of this study.

### What Can Be Done

- ◆ Know-Your-Volunteer Strategies
- ◆ Volunteer-Centred Organisational Strategies



### Know-Your-Volunteer Strategies

The results of this study, published by volunteer profiling, highlight the importance for Social Service Agencies (SSAs) to invest in understanding their volunteers. Implementing Know-Your-Volunteer (KYV) strategies encourages organisations to take appropriate action by adapting relevant insights to the volunteering experience of volunteers. SSAs can make use of the profiled findings from this study as they embark on their own KYV strategies.

Some KYV strategies that SSAs can adopt include the following:

- Paying attention to intuitive volunteer profiling that does not require additional data collection, for example, **volunteer life stage or volunteer role**, as this information can be found in volunteer application forms*

One of the ways volunteers were profiled in this study is by the volunteer life stage. As found in this study, young adult volunteers were more likely to feel that volunteering improved their employment prospects. SSAs working with young adult volunteers could adopt the following:

- ◆ Engagement and networking opportunities with senior management

- ◆ Introduce 'career progression' or 'job rotation' for volunteers, through which they will have opportunities to experience different roles with higher levels of ownership and autonomy
- ◆ Empowering young adult volunteers to run their own committees and programmes
- ◆ Provide capacity-building opportunities through a volunteer capacity-building fund

Another way of volunteer profiling that was adopted in this study entailed looking into the different types of volunteer roles and ascertaining the similarities and differences across roles. For example, when asked about the negative impact of volunteering, volunteers in organisation roles perceived feeling unappreciated, being in conflict with others, feeling pressured to do more than they would like, and feeling that volunteering took up more of their time. Thus, SSAs who offer organisation roles could adopt the following in order to mitigate these perceived negative impacts of volunteering:

- ◆ A safe avenue for volunteers to communicate any grievances or provide feedback on their volunteering
- ◆ An informal 360-degree feedback system, whereby volunteers are not only given constructive feedback on their service but are also able to give feedback on their volunteering experience in the organisation

**b. Administer a simple survey to do a volunteer-oriented needs assessment and profiling to understand volunteers better**

As part of the volunteer onboarding process, volunteer managers (VMs) may, for example, include an activity or questionnaire with up to 10 key questions to better understand their new and recent volunteer. One useful question would seek an understanding of what constitutes 'enjoyable' to each volunteer since enjoyment may be subjective. Thus, the knowledge of what each volunteer finds enjoyable would allow VMs, to the best of their abilities and circumstances, to match volunteers to appropriate roles. Other questions could relate to the other key features of quality volunteering experience or responses

to certain strategic focus areas or values of the organisation. This needs assessment would also enable an SSA to profile volunteers to (1) find the sweet spot between meeting the organisation's needs and responding to current shifts from 'traditional' volunteering, and (2) plan for a more diverse and nuanced demand in the future of volunteerism.

Depending on the profile and needs of different volunteers, SSAs may, for example, introduce some 'dynamic forms' of volunteering, e.g., micro-volunteering. The implications of this include keeping volunteers engaged and increasing access to previously untapped volunteers and those who want variety and/or progression.



**Volunteer-Centred Organisational Strategies**

Once an organisation has invested in KYV strategies and gained a better understanding of its volunteers' experiences and perspectives, it is important for this organisation to put these insights into action by adopting a volunteer-centred approach. In other words, as its volunteers take on strategic and complementary

roles alongside staff, an SSA should systematically incorporate valuable volunteer knowledge into the way the organisation is run as a whole.

On a broader level, volunteer-centred strategies involve the organisation's overarching relationship with their volunteers and how it views the role of a volunteer. On a more granular level, a volunteer-centred approach would involve improving organisational processes in a pragmatic way.

We, therefore, two lines of action that SSAs could take to enhance their organisation's volunteer-centred strategies:

**a. Examining the way volunteers are viewed and adopting a more inclusive approach**

This study has highlighted the need for VMs to engage meaningfully with their volunteers to enhance their connectedness with the SSA. Our recommendation is to deepen that good relationship to see volunteers as partners in the organisation and communicate it as such.

Based on the VM interviews, all of the SSAs in this study have already established their own ways of appreciating and developing their volunteers, i.e., volunteer recognition in the form of an award, showcasing their efforts in a social media appreciation post, or volunteer welfare activities. While commendable, we recommend moving a step beyond appreciation to include volunteers into the organisation's management. For example:

- ◆ Empowering volunteers to progress into leadership and management roles
- ◆ Including volunteers in the volunteer management team
- ◆ Including volunteers in the SSA's Board or Management Committee

These are some questions that SSAs could ask themselves to guide this shift: What is the purpose of volunteers? What kind of role/status should they hold in this organisation? What kind of relationship do VMs want to have with volunteers?

By examining their relationship with their volunteers and moving towards a more inclusive partnership, SSAs will be able to incorporate their volunteers' views into their policies, as those volunteers can represent their fellow volunteers during volunteer management meetings and evaluations. Having volunteers in management is also a value-add for both parties: for volunteers, it invokes a stronger sense of ownership with the

SSA's cause, while for the SSAs, it allows them to account for their volunteers' perspectives and to co-create better strategies and solutions with them.

**b. Incorporating corporate people-development strategies into volunteer management**

As previously discussed, some things are beyond an SSA's locus of control, e.g., a volunteer's health, life stage, and other changes in personal circumstances. However, structural and organisational improvements are more within an SSA's power. While volunteers are not employees, it is important to bring the same rigour and diligence in people development into volunteer management.

For example, establishing clear organisational goals and culture would provide a cohesive environment for volunteers. Communicating the SSA's vision and mission statement would bring everyone together onto the same page, and setting up a welcoming and positive organisation culture would create a sense of community and strengthen the SSA's network.

Many of the SSAs interviewed already have their own ways of communicating with their volunteers and their own processes

for different stages of the volunteer cycle such as recruitment, onboarding and engagement. With this as a foundation, it might be worth exploring people-development strategies such as feedback, evaluations, team building exercises, etc., to see what among this great asset within the SSA can be enhanced.

Our results showed that a volunteer's sense of achievement and exposure to new skills and experiences are some of the statistically significant perceived benefits of volunteering. This illustrates the value of investing in a volunteer's sense of support, progress and development within the organisation, as these efforts will help to convey the importance of volunteers to the SSA and help the organisation effectively navigate the volunteers' shifting needs and interests.

**By examining their relationship with their volunteers and moving towards a more inclusive partnership, SSAs will be able to incorporate their volunteers' views into their policies, as those volunteers can represent their fellow volunteers during volunteer management meetings and evaluations.**

Some possible strategies to consider include:

- Having more than one staff in the Volunteer Management team, which should be led by someone with Guest Relations training or people-facing experience
- Investing in a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software system or a volunteer portal that will make it easier for volunteers to stay engaged with the SSA
- Adapting communication and engagement plans to all stages of the volunteer cycle (i.e., recruitment, onboarding, deployment, rotation, recognition, etc.)
- Implementing in-house impact evaluation that will allow the SSA to track volunteer hours and aid with volunteer progression or rotation within the organisation
- Organising volunteer outings, training and networking events, akin to staff development plans

Having said this, these people-development strategies are not meant to turn an SSA into a workplace but to facilitate smooth engagement between the organisation and its volunteers. It is important for SSAs to learn from the best practices of other industries and to adapt and apply them according to their own contexts, needs and goals.

Ultimately, the aim of this study and its recommendations are not to provide a blanket solution for all SSAs but rather to propose a holistic lens through which they can consider their own volunteer management practices. At the heart of it all is a human-centred approach, by which an SSA can better understand the needs of its volunteers and work together towards a quality volunteering experience, as jointly defined by both volunteers and their organisations.

## Limitations and Considerations

The current study is designed to answer the identified research gap that emerged from the local literature available on the topic of

volunteerism. Given the paucity of the data available, it was necessary to embark on a research project to collect primary data from the two key stakeholders groups using a synergistic approach in order to derive a framework on quality volunteering experience.

As with any study, the findings of the present study should be evaluated in light of its limitations: the findings are exploratory in nature, and the sample is relatively small and imperfectly representative of the population of volunteers in Singapore. Nonetheless, this report can provide a valuable foundation for understanding volunteer experience in Singapore.

Using the findings of this study as a springboard, future investigations on this topic will then be able to expand the research focus to answer more fine-grained research questions that are beyond the scope of the current study. For example, after unpacking the challenges pertaining to volunteer retention from volunteers, future research can then build on exploring more deeply certain key concepts highlighted in this study. For example, future studies can further unpack what constitutes an ‘enjoyable’ volunteer experience or how and why volunteers perceive improvements to their mental health and well-being from volunteering. A third stakeholder group of non-volunteers to understand the perspectives of individuals in the community who have never volunteered can also be explored. In this way, the current study will provide an initial baseline from which more targeted research questions can be answered.

## Conclusions

Insights derived from the current research study illustrate how volunteers can be engaged more strategically, such that they can play a more significant role in augmenting the capacity of the social service sector to deliver enhanced quality services to their service users. This study sets the stage for the sector to shift towards a more sustainable volunteer partnership model in the long term.

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# About the Report

*Transforming the Volunteer Experience in the Social Service Sector* is the first analysis report of its kind that focuses on investigating and enhancing volunteerism in Singapore. Through the perspectives of volunteers and volunteer managers via surveys and in-depth interviews, this report reveals a framework depicting five key features that contribute towards a quality volunteering experience.

The study also makes recommendations on the actionable steps and strategies that Social Service Agencies can adopt to engage their volunteers more strategically, so that they can play a more significant role in delivering enhanced quality services to service users.

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