The role of cultural factors in affecting integration of migrants in the labour environment: Volunteering as a model for future labour relationships

N. Ivashinenko
Ph.D., IPPPC, RAO, CRONEM, UK

2011 is the European Year of Volunteering

Background: According to the latest report "Engage to Change Migrant and Refugee Voices on Active Citizenship" by MRN and MRCF, migrants and refugees mainly volunteer in MRAS organisations, local and community groups, voluntary organisations, faith institutions and trade unions. The roles vary, although they often include interpreting, providing language support, advocacy and campaigning, case work, training, cooking, cleaning, administrative jobs, organising events, sitting on group's management committees, mentoring and befriending.

Some of the principal motivations for migrant volunteering are to try to "make a difference" and contribute to the community. Although this represents a "challenging experience" many migrant volunteers would communicate that they value the experience.

Volunteering helps you to gain experience, meet people, in order to represent a "challenging experience" many migrant volunteers would communicate that they value the experience.

The proposed project explored:
- The experiences and expectations of voluntary sector employers
- The experiences and expectations of East European migrants in volunteer work
- The difficulty in combining work and volunteering
- How to address the need for workplace norms and appropriate behaviour.

Methodology: The research involved interviews with 12 volunteers from different countries, who have volunteered for periods of time from two weeks to six months, and with migrant employers and managers working with migrants, but those who do start working with them rarely encounter serious difficulties.

Positive (+) and negative (-) aspects of volunteer's perspective

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Psychological characteristics

- Positive (+) and negative (-) aspects of volunteer's perspective

Migrant volunteers tend to be less confident than local volunteer. Migrants can be insecure, which complicates communication.

Skills (-) They know many interesting things that are very helpful in their work

- Positive (+) and negative (-) aspects of volunteer's perspective

Skills (-) They know many interesting things that are very helpful in their work

Migrants often need to be taught how to do things. They often do not have experience and want to get it.

Language (+) Migrant volunteers often want to volunteer to gain language practice

DiQulties to explain complex tasks

Culture (+) Bring new jokes, revive the company, attracting the attention of others, help to cope with routine

Cultural and ethnic differences emerge in an informal setting; migrants are not able to talk in order to defuse a situation. They may not have local friends. A supervisor must be assigned to them in order to make sure they do not become isolated.

Discussion and conclusion

1. You cannot force people to volunteer; it destroys the very idea of engaging in new work activities and doesn't further people's personal development.

2. We observe when migrant or 'obligated' volunteers and 'real' volunteers undertake volunteering activities together, it strengthens both the effectiveness of the social impact of these activities and allows a specific type of communication to develop. It is necessary to support organisations that are doing great work towards uniting cooperative efforts. Social services that were established solely for refugees are more likely to put them off and give rise to stagnation than promote integration.

3. Differences between the educational systems and technologies of different countries give rise to differences in the way almost all workers volunteer. Volunteering is a unique model of working practice where people with different knowledge and skills work together, informed by intercultural differences. Migrant workers who hold social positions as members of an organisation have the opportunity to use their knowledge in a new environment and local volunteers have the chance to open themselves up to the new ideas that migrants bring. For these reasons, international organisations have started to express an interest in volunteer projects as promoters of integration and innovative processes in Europe.

4. The language barrier in the way it interacts with the process of integration is a part of a lack of knowledge, usually there are a result of lack of practice and self-confidence issues. Professional activation permits the transfer of linguistic communication to a new level. It is important to organise cooperation between educational and voluntary organisations where there is the possibility to practise voluntary work language. Access to ESOL programs in computer centres could also be broadened.

5. It is necessary to support organisations that are doing great work towards uniting cooperative efforts. Social services that were established solely for refugees are more likely to put them off and give rise to stagnation than promote integration.

6. The most difficult thing for migrant volunteers is informal interaction, which is based entirely on social expectation and social norms of appraisal of conduct and where there are the strongest cultural differences. Practical experience of working with migrant volunteers became unique for managers and administrations.

7. The position of migrant volunteers is very varied and considerably differs depending on age, sex and the stage they are at in the process of integration: Young migrants have greater needs and the majority of which are happy to lead a simple life. It is only possible to emphasise that women are more likely to put them off and give rise to stigmatisation than promote integration.

RESEARCH RESULTS:

We defined two types of volunteers, regardless of nationality:

A) who come out of the goodness of their hearts (so-called 'real' volunteers), usually there are a "Local volunteers" come as a result of an excess of social resources and are willing to help and to share the skills that they have.

B) who come because they are obliged to do it in order to receive benefits etc. (so-called 'obligated' volunteers). It makes sense to compare these two groups, usually "Migrants volunteer" come as a result of a perceived lack of recognition; they want to be useful and, not having found any work that suits their needs, they want to be in demand in the third sector.

When splitting volunteers into 'real' and 'obligated' groups, it must be kept in mind that the boundary between the groups is permeable.

EXAMPLES FROM INTERVIEWS:

- "If you can find a normal job, why spend time working for a charity? Here you run around like a headless chicken and the money isn't enough."
- "God knows what's expected of you. At first I didn't understand anything at all and just sat there like an idiot with my heart racing and me not sure what to do. Now you can use a question. Then I could speak to people, but my hands still got sweaty when I asked questions."
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