The Routledge Handbook of Festivals

Judith Mair

Managing festival volunteers

Publication details
Kirsten Holmes, Leonie Lockstone-Binney, Karen A. Smith, Alex Rixon-Booth
Published online on: 22 Aug 2018


PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
MANAGING FESTIVAL VOLUNTEERS

The HELPERS model

Kirsten Holmes, Leonie Lockstone-Binney, Karen A. Smith and Alex Rixon-Booth

Introduction

Festivals are highly dependent on volunteers. Community festivals are frequently entirely organised and run by volunteers, and major international festivals rely on large numbers of volunteers to steward events, host artists and provide a range of behind-the-scenes support. Volunteering has positive outcomes for the volunteers, the festival organisation, festival attendees and participants, and communities more generally (Holmes & Smith 2009). For the volunteer, helping at a festival is a means of becoming an insider, gaining greater access than an audience member – to meet artists, be a part of the festival team and to augment the festival experience. Volunteers can also enhance the visitor experience of those attending festivals (Jensen & Buckley 2011). However, there are also personal costs for the volunteer involved in festival volunteering (e.g. Holmes & Smith 2009) and there are barriers to an individual’s ability to volunteer, and financial costs for the festival organisation associated with recruiting, managing, training and rewarding volunteers.

This chapter critically examines the small body of literature on festival volunteers to examine the ways in which they can be organised. It then goes on to explore and detail a new volunteer management model for recruiting and managing volunteer programmes across a range of festivals and events developed by the Australian company I Need Helpers (INH). The model in question, the HELPERS model represents a Hub for Events Looking to Procure Engage Retain and Support volunteers. It represents an evolution of the ‘outsourcing’ model of volunteering recruitment (Smith & Lockstone 2009) in that HELPERS represents the contracting out to INH of all aspects of volunteer management, from recruitment through to operational management and post-event engagement, with INH working closely with the festival organiser across the event cycle to ensure, wherever possible, the seamless integration of the volunteer programme with all other functional components of festival management.

Research to date on festival volunteers

The majority of research on event volunteering has focussed on sporting events, particularly large-scale events (Smith, Baum, Holmes & Lockstone-Binney 2014), with relatively
scant attention paid to festival volunteering, or, indeed, volunteering at other types of events. Researchers have captured a range of types and scales of festival, including music (Clayton 2016), film (Love, Sherman & Olding 2012), beer (Ragsdell & Jepson 2014), science (Jensen & Buckley 2011) and religious festivals (Gallarza, Arteaga & Gil-Saura 2012), amongst others.

Volunteers are an important part of the not-for-profit festival business model, holding a significant role in terms of stakeholder power and influence, and involving many more volunteers than public or private-sector events (Andersson & Getz 2009). Jæger and Olsen (2017) discuss the commodification of the volunteer experience; however, an issue rarely addressed is the ethics of involving of volunteers in private or profit-making event organisations.

In a festival context, the term ‘volunteer’ is typically used for operational staff who primarily deliver the event. However, in volunteer-led festivals, where there may be no paid staff, community members in organisational and governance roles are crucial to the very existence of the event. Many community festivals would struggle financially without governance and operational volunteers (Rogers & Anastasiadou 2011). Yet, volunteer support can be a challenge; in a study of festivals in Australia, Norway, Sweden and the UK, just over a third of festival organisers reported a lack of volunteers, or difficulty in keeping them, as a major threat to their event, and this threat was greatest for not-for-profit festivals (Carlsen & Andersson 2011). Frost and Laing (2015) also highlight the challenges faced by festival organisers in rural communities, where issues included difficulties in finding new committee members, and burnout of committee volunteers, linked to the increasingly onerous regulatory and administrative burden of managing and staging events.

Motivation has been a dominant focus of festival volunteering studies, as it has been with event volunteering research more widely (Smith et al. 2014), with motivation increasingly being linked to retention of festival volunteers (e.g. Bachman, Norman, Hopkins & Brookover 2016; Elstad 2003). A second research theme has been volunteering experiences (e.g. Campbell 2009; Clayton 2016), with experiences and satisfaction also being related to future volunteering intentions (Bachman, Backman & Norman 2014; Lee, Alexander & Kim 2013). This focus on the re-engagement of volunteers stems from the reoccurring nature of many festivals where building a pool of volunteers who return to the event can reduce resource-intensive recruitment efforts with securing new volunteers.

Event volunteers are the archetypal episodic volunteer, one that seeks short-term or one-off experiences. However, various studies suggest event volunteers are not homogenous (e.g. Bachman et al. 2014; Handy, Brodeur & Cnaan 2006). Festival organisers cannot assume that all episodic volunteers are motivated by the same reasons or want to be involved in similar ways.

Many festivals focus on recruiting individuals or groups from their local community as their volunteer pool (Laing & Mair 2015) and informal approaches to selection and screening dominate (Smith & Lockstone 2009). Festivals can also draw volunteers from a wider geographical area, such as the solo female ‘grey nomad’ travellers in Campbell’s study (2009) who were regular volunteers at Australia’s National Folk Festival. However, Rogers and Anastasiadou (2011) note that when outsiders are brought in as volunteers, some potential community benefits of a festival are lost. The proportion of local (compared to non-local) volunteers can therefore be used as an indicator of a festival’s level of community involvement (Rogers & Anastasiadou 2011). Students have also been recognised as an important group of festival volunteers, primarily motivated by instrumental reasons, such as gaining work experience for future employment (Jensen & Buckley 2011).
Managing festival volunteers

Other studies have focussed on supporting volunteers as festival managers, for example, through mentoring schemes (Hede & Rentschler 2007), knowledge management and sharing of volunteer organisers (Ragsdell & Jepson 2014) and operational volunteers (Clayton 2016), and operational challenges such as scheduling volunteers and training (Gordon & Erkut 2005).

Organising festival volunteers

Organisers are concerned with how to source volunteers and how to keep them, particularly for recurring festivals. Festivals use a range of models for managing their volunteers depending on their scale, budget and whether they are a one-off or recurring festival (Holmes, Hughes, Mair & Carlsen 2015). Many festivals are organised entirely by volunteers. All-volunteer festivals typically use a membership management model (Meijs & Hoogstad 2001) for organising their volunteers. This model involves using a bottom-up approach to designing and assigning volunteer roles (Meijs & Hoogstad 2001), which seeks to assign volunteer roles on the basis of the volunteers’ skills and interests.

The reliance of community festivals on volunteers raises questions about the long-term sustainability of the event if the main event organisers are unable or unwilling to continue in their role (Holmes & Ali-Knight 2017). For example, Casino Beef Week is an agricultural festival in New South Wales, Australia, which claims to be Australia’s longest-running volunteer run event (NCMC Casino Beef Week 2017). However, in 2007, with insufficient volunteers to run the event, the organising committee chose to cancel it. The volunteer organisers were experiencing burnout, due to the workload falling to fewer people (Preez 2007). The decision to cancel encouraged new volunteers to become involved, and the festival was reinvigorated for 2008 (O’Neill 2007). However, the new volunteer committee also chose to employ a paid professional festival organiser to assist with future festivals (Derrett 2009).

Major festivals with substantial budgets and large numbers of volunteers tend to adopt the programme management approach for organising their volunteers, which involves treating the volunteers largely as unpaid staff, replicating typical human resource management processes (Holmes & Smith 2009). The volunteer programme is normally managed in-house by either a paid or voluntary coordinator. The festival organiser will need to first identify how many volunteers are needed and in which roles. Next, they need to develop descriptions for each of these roles, then recruit, select and possibly train the volunteers.

An alternative model for festivals is to outsource their volunteer requirements (Smith & Lockstone 2009). Festival organisers recruit local community or special interest groups who then recruit volunteers from among their members. The volunteers can be directly managed by the festival organisers, or their group can be given responsibility for a specific task which they manage among themselves, e.g. a local Rotary club running the car park. Typically, the group will be given a donation by the festival organisers as a recognition of their contribution, rather than rewarding individual volunteers. The advantage for the festival organisers is that they save time and funds on recruiting and managing the volunteers. The disadvantage is the loss of direct control, which is less of a risk when the tasks to be fulfilled are relatively unskilled and simple in nature.

Destinations can also establish a dedicated pool of trained and experienced event volunteers. This mirrors the commercial companies that supply festival staff such as stewards but is typically run by government. To date this practice has been relatively rare, and these pools have usually been formed as part of the volunteer legacies of mega-events, such as the
Manchester Commonwealth Games (Nichols & Ralston 2012). However, festivals can make use of such pools in their volunteer recruitment, and large recurring festivals could establish their own pool with other similar festivals within the same location.

Methods

This chapter uses a case-study research design to examine the development of a new model for sourcing and organising festival volunteers, the Hub for Events Looking to Procure Engage Retain and Support volunteers model, referred to as HELPERS hereafter. Case studies are particularly useful for examining why and how contemporary, real-life phenomena occur (Yin 2009) and have been a commonly used method in festival studies research. Case studies typically involve the collection of multiple forms of evidence (Yin 2009). This research employed a mixture of data sources and data types to provide a complete picture of the phenomenon under study (Yin 2009). The INH HELPERS model was selected as a unique case offering a novel approach to recruiting, training and managing a festival volunteer programme. The defining elements of the model are examined in reference to one particular event that INH managed over a two-year period, the Virgin Australia Melbourne Fashion Festival (VAMFF), hereafter referred to as the Festival. INH’s engagement with the staging of the Festival in 2015 is the particular focus of this case study. The Festival is Australia’s largest consumer-focused fashion event, featuring ‘world-class runway shows featuring Australia’s established and emerging designers, state-of-the-art production, beauty workshops, retail events, industry seminars, forums, live entertainment’ (VAMFF 2018). Informing the case study were secondary sources including the Volunteer Program Growth and Development Report prepared by INH for festival management, together with personal reflections of INH’s Director, who is a co-author of the current chapter. These data generated a case-study report (Yin 2009), which provides a detailed analysis of the volunteer programme, how it operates and its distinctive features. The following section details the case-study findings in reference to the HELPERS model as applied to the 2015 Festival.

Case study: I Need Helpers

INH was established in 2010 in recognition that there was scope to develop an event volunteering management platform for temporal events of varying sizes, allowing these events to tap into an existing base of experienced event volunteers. INH, through its HELPERS model, provides staff and volunteer management consulting; on-site management and coordination of festival and event management programmes; and access to a custom-built rostering platform, the INH Volunteer Management System (VMS), which will be described in further detail later.

INH has worked with a range of small- and large-scale events (INH 2017). Within the Australian major events sector, these include Melbourne Food & Wine Festival and L’Étape Australia by Le Tour de France (New South Wales) and Vivid Sydney. Their portfolio also includes a number of internationally recognised events where INH has held the exclusive volunteer management Partner/Supplier rights to manage the volunteer programmes.

Turning to examine the HELPERS model, discussion will elaborate INH’s approach as a full service provider across the cycle of the Festival from application process, on-site management through to post-event reporting. In 2015, INH coordinated 890 individual volunteer shifts at the Festival, accounting for 6,949 volunteer hours contributed by
279 volunteers across 16 venues before and during the event held from 14 to 22 March. Volunteers contributed on average 25 hours to the Festival (INH 2015).

The HELPERS model is underpinned by each customised technologies developed by the INH team to support volunteer management. At the time of the Festival, INH had approximately 2,000 students registered on its volunteer database, ‘INH Opportunities’, as expressing interest in event volunteering opportunities (INH 2015). Students have been a particular source for INH, and the organisation has worked closely to establish relationships with vocational education and higher education providers, mostly in Melbourne and Sydney. This model benefits not only from the increasing push towards episodic volunteering but also the mandating of volunteering in many higher education degree programmes (Handy et al. 2010). The database integrates with INH’s cloud-based and automated VMS. For the Festival, the VMS was used to ‘capture applicants’ details, manage the shortlisting process, record briefing attendance, manage rostering and commentary, generate required documentation reports and allow for automated scheduled SMS notification during event operations’ (INH 2015, p. 8).

Applicants, if not already on the INH Opportunities database, were required to create a profile prior to completing a Festival Application Form. This allowed INH to track the involvement of each volunteer at the Festival (e.g. number of shifts completed) and monitor any other opportunities volunteers undertook with INH throughout the year to assess their suitability for future placements. For applicants not familiar with the Opportunities database, INH created a series of How-to-Guides to familiarise them with the platform.

Applications for the 2015 Festival volunteering programme were launched in November 2014, with the application period open for one month. In total, 822 applications were received (INH 2015). The demographic profile of applicants was mostly female (93.3%), commonly aged between 21 and 23 years (35.2%). Not surprising given the heavily student-focused approach to recruitment, the majority of applicants indicated that ‘skill and career development’ was their key motivation for volunteering (INH 2015).

To assist in reducing attrition and ensuring appropriate placement of potential volunteers, INH staff conducted one-on-one 5-minute interviews with 500 applicants over a two-week period in January 2015. Applicants were notified of their interview time through the Opportunities platform, and an automated SMS was sent to each candidate on the morning of their interview containing a relevant location map and contact information. Resulting in part from the interview process, only 50 candidates who were deemed successful subsequently withdrew or failed to attend their allocated shifts (INH 2015).

Pre-Festival volunteers were recruited to assist in a number of roles including supporting the Festival campaign launch (December 2014), volunteer interview support (January 2015) and volunteer briefing support (March 2015). During the Festival, volunteers assisted in a number of roles including but not limited to Backstage Manager Assistant, Production Runner, Event Stylist Assistant, Office Support, Back of House Runner and Front of House Usher. INH created 85 unique position descriptions for volunteers reflective of their event role and venue location (INH 2015).

Two pre-Festival briefing sessions were held in early March 2015 in the lead-up to the Festival. These were scheduled for the early evening (6–8 pm) to accommodate commitments volunteers might have had during business hours and were well attended by 222 volunteers (INH 2015). These sessions covered an overview of the Festival programme, customer service basics, communication protocols and reasonable expectations associated with volunteering at the event. In addition, a comprehensive Volunteer Handbook was prepared for volunteers, which outlined expected standards on behaviour. This was supplemented by the volunteer’s individual position description, which was available on the Opportunities platform.
During Festival time, technology continued to be used to engage the volunteers. Volunteers again received SMS notifications for every shift, outlining their shift time, venue location and contact details for their on-site coordinator (a role to be discussed in further detail). The SMS functionality also allowed for any urgent messages or last-minute changes to be communicated to on-site volunteers and Festival management. All volunteers signed in and out for each shift by way of the VMS, which was accessed by on-site staff via their mobile phones. At the conclusion of each shift, volunteers received a personalised email requesting their feedback on that particular shift (e.g. the in-depth on-site briefing provided, suitability of the tasks allocated), allowing INH to collect accurate data throughout the Festival, not just at one point in time, e.g. a post-event survey.

Volunteers were also encouraged to engage with the Festival via technology and social media platforms to build retention and gratification. On the Opportunities platform, volunteers were able to post pictures and status updates for sharing with their fellow volunteers, which were moderated by INH. INH coordinators also uploaded photos to the INH Facebook page and tagged with them the first name of the volunteer, which allowed for further sharing amongst followers.

As a full service provider, another key element of the HELPERS model is INH's deep engagement with the festival organiser at all stages of the event cycle and their on-site management of volunteers. INH worked closely with all Festival Project Managers, production staff and the management team in the lead-up, during and after the event. A Volunteer Management Guide was developed by INH and circulated to all Project Managers and internal management staff that would be interacting with volunteers during the Festival. Additionally, INH circulated the volunteer profile information (age bracket, gender and key motivations) to all Project Managers to provide them with an informed understanding of who the volunteer cohort were and why they were choosing to engage with 2015 Festival. Production Managers were engaged as contractors themselves to the Festival to plan and oversee a specific show as part of the 2015 programme.

Festival volunteer requirements were captured via a Volunteer Resource Requirements template that allowed Project Managers to populate the requested positions and shifts for their assigned events. Once volunteer rosters were drafted, an online portal was circulated to Project Managers which provided them with the ability to view live roster reports, monitor allocated resourcing and keep track of which volunteers were on-site at any given time.

Supporting the volunteers and liaising with Festival staff, INH had three volunteer coordinators servicing the 2015 Festival. A coordinator was on-site for each volunteer shift to manage sign-in and sign-out, ensuring up-to-date monitoring of volunteer attendance. Additionally, these staff were responsible for briefing volunteers at the commencement of each shift and distributing on-site accreditation passes, which were date specific (volunteers were able to retain these as mementos post-shift). Other coordinator duties included responsibility for ensuring volunteers’ on-site safety, break management and entering a commentary in the VMS on all the volunteers that they had dealt with during their shift, information which was intended to be reviewed if candidates sought future involvement with the Festival.

Post-event, INH’s VMS allowed volunteers to download a Certificate of Appreciation (signed by the Festival CEO), a ‘Certified Hours’ document detailing the hours they had contributed to the Festival and a Reference Letter for any mandated study requirements or for their CV. Hours contributed by the volunteers were labelled INH points, which could be exchanged for attendance at future networking events and also strengthened the volunteer’s profile on the Opportunities platform for consideration for future volunteering opportunities. The volunteer with the most INH points was also profiled on the Opportunities platform.
INH administered a survey to both volunteers and Project Managers post-event to collect a range of data to inform future planning for the Festival. Forty-three per cent of volunteers completed the survey, with a higher response rate for the Project Manager survey (71%) (INH 2015). On a 5-point scale, volunteer respondents assessed their ‘overall involvement with the Festival’ positively with a rating of 4.3. Overwhelmingly, 98% indicated they were interested in registering their availability for next year’s Festival. In the case of the Project Managers, all (100%) found the live roster updates to be ‘convenient to access and useful’ and also agreed that the Volunteer Management Guide ‘provided them and/or their on-site team with the proper guidance when interacting with volunteers’ (INH 2015).

Discussion

The case highlights the key distinctive features of the HELPERS volunteer management model. First, although there are variants (e.g. consultancy to existing Festival management programmes), in the case of the 2015 Festival, the HELPERS model provided contracted full service support, with INH managing all aspects of the volunteer programme, from recruitment to on-site coordination of volunteers and post-Festival volunteer recognition. This represents an extension of the recognised outsourcing model (Smith & Lockstone, 2009), which has typically been applied by festival management to outsource an ancillary component of festival operations to a third party, usually a community group. Interestingly, the HELPERS model also encompasses elements of the programme management model (Holmes & Smith 2009), with INH developing tailored volunteer position descriptions based on the Festival’s requirements for each role and venue. Indeed, INH relies on close engagement with Festival staff, with in the case of the 2015 Festival, Production Managers being their key liaison point.

The HELPERS model integrates technology solutions (VMS and Opportunities platform) to streamline and support the management process. These technologies extend beyond existing Australian volunteer platforms such as GoVolunteer and SeekVolunteer, which essentially act as matching sites, to connect potential volunteers to volunteer-involving organisations. In the case of the 2015 Festival, volunteers received SMS notifications regarding their shift times and were able to log on to the Opportunities platform to track their hours volunteered, whilst Festival management received live updates on volunteer rosters, enabling monitoring of potential shortfalls. Monitoring volunteering activity in real time allows greater insight into the volunteer experience across the Festival’s duration, supplemented by the data collected from volunteers at the end of every shift, allowing for multiple data collection points rather than relying on one retrospective post-event survey. Finally, the HELPERS model has greatly benefited by tapping into vocational and higher education students as a source of potential volunteers, cognisant that many of these programmes are now mandating volunteering as part of their course requirements.

Conclusions

In their exploration of the future of event volunteering, Lockstone-Binney, Baum, Smith and Holmes (2014) envisaged the continued need for volunteers at event and festivals. Factors influencing future volunteering included demographic changes, increased choice and time pressures, information and communication technology developments, the growth of corporate or employee volunteering, and the increasing diversity of volunteering engagements. A number of future forms of volunteering were proposed, including the development of the outsourced model discussed here.
The HELPERS model offers a one-stop shop of festival and event volunteering expertise, and reduces the duplication of effort and resources of festivals trying to each separately recruit volunteers, leading to increased professionalism of festival volunteer management. Indeed, the HELPERS model has been recognised as best practice and the learnings from it shared at several tourism and volunteering conferences within Australia.

Since 2015, the INH team has focussed on refining the systems and technology to support internal volunteer programmes throughout Australia. INH now grants access to volunteer-involving organisations to tap into the scheduling platform, mobile applications and automated services (i.e., automated calls and SMS reminders) as well as a shared database between all organisations to manage their own volunteer programme. The model continues to evolve and to expand the services it provides to festival organisers.

The review of the HELPERS model offers some directions for future research. For example, the model could be used to support other forms of episodic volunteering such as spontaneous volunteering. The HELPERS model also shows the value of digital technology in assisting festival organisers, however big the volunteer programme may be, alongside the possibility of involving virtual festival volunteers in, for example, website development and marketing. The HELPERS platform allows for tracking of volunteer activity, which might allow for a greater understanding of the festival volunteer experience. Being able to recruit and retain satisfied volunteers is at the heart of any festival volunteer programme.

References


Managing festival volunteers


