

Whose Heritage Railway is It? —A Study of Volunteer Motivation

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This article explores the evolving role of volunteers at two heritage railways in the UK. It analyses the characteristics and motivations of volunteers¹ and seeks to draw conclusions for management of heritage railways.

As heritage-railway operations have grown in operational and financial complexity over the past 50 years, so has the part played by volunteer railway workers. Rolt² writing of the trials of resurrecting the Talyllyn Railway in the early 1950s described a *Boy's Own* comic spirit of adventure involving enthusiasm, ingenuity and a fair degree of irresponsibility. Team spirit was built by overcoming adversity in order to make the railway run at all. Catering for passengers was almost a sideline to running trains; a large number of passengers were committed enthusiasts who forgave a lot. No two journeys were the same!

My studies on the Bluebell Railway in East Sussex and the Swanage Railway in Dorset (respectively, 41 and 29 years old),

shows volunteering in a more structured and managed context, tasked with keeping the railway operating with focus on aspects of customer service such as punctuality, cleanliness, safety, and an array of ancillary services. A Swanage interviewee put it succinctly saying, 'This is a business we are operating, we are no longer playing trains.'

Methodology

A themed questionnaire distributed to guards and other grades was used to categorize volunteer characteristics, personal motivations and views on railway aspirations. Open opinions were also canvassed on railway targets and the balance to be struck between commercial and social aims. The questionnaire response rate was very good (32 returns (66%) for Bluebell and 16 returns (44%) for Swanage) possibly due to my 'insider' role, which gave me access to respondents and encouraged

participation, but with the risk of my being uniquely sympathetic to organizational dilemmas³. An opportunity to conduct a telephone interview with respondents was also requested and ten provided their contact numbers.

My approach was to characterize volunteers and their perceptions rather than pose problems for evaluation. Some of the results are summarized in Table 1.

Preliminary Conclusions

Do heritage railways face an aging volunteer workforce? (Q5)

It would appear that people born after steam traction was phased out from Britain's railways are underrepresented, possibly because these people are typically in the middle of their working careers and usually have heavy family commitments. Roger Orchard, a Swanage youth group leader, noted that while only 10% of 11- to 16-year olds attracted to the railway by interests in train modelling, steam traction and helping out with railway tasks continued as volunteers, they may return to volunteer later in life. Retirement also appears to offer great recruitment opportunities with 50% of the volunteers sampled on both railways already retired. Younger and working volunteers tend to take on operational roles while older members perform mainly restorational, repair, and maintenance tasks.

Recruitment of younger volunteers to what may be perceived as an older members' club does require a pro-active approach beyond helping out with odd jobs in non-safety critical areas. Good practice would be to provide an annual training timetable for those aspiring to a specific role.

The historically authentic hierarchical disposition of some heads was also reported to be problematic, and it may



Marin Troit, Deputy Passenger Services Manager at Swanage Railway
(Author)



Simon Hanney, student and youngest passed signalman (21) at Swanage Railway
(Author)

be necessary to ensure adequate training and support in human resource management skills for volunteers arriving in management positions through operational and technical abilities and availability.

What motivates volunteers? (Q6)

On both railways, the devotion of leisure time to railway hobby interests is significant and suggests a specific interest in the nature and development policies of the volunteer's railway. Social contact with colleagues is valued on the Bluebell Railway where staff facilities are quite developed. The lower score for the Swanage Railway may reflect the greater distance travelled by volunteers and the smaller core workforce of a much smaller railway.

The surprisingly low score for railway projects (Q6 (c)) may reflect a sample bias towards guards. Analysis of non-operational roles indicates that the focus of the project is most important. There were some unexplained inconsistencies in individual responses.

The neutral response to meeting railway customers (Q6 (d)) hides support by train and platform operating grades compared to volunteers performing non-customer work.

It is not surprising that volunteers want to help the railway.

Volunteer support for railway aspirations (Q7)

Both railways are involved in extension plans that command the respondents' support.

Historical accuracy is unanimously supported on the Swanage Railway where it is more problematic, while the Bluebell Railway response does contain dissenters. This anomaly is also apparent in restoration of railway items where the Bluebell Railway generally enjoys a pre-eminent reputation.

The response to customer education is

Table 1 Summary of Partial Questionnaire Results

| Q4 Volunteer Areas | | |
|--|----------|---------|
| | Bluebell | Swanage |
| Driver/Fireman/Cleaner | 2/1/1 | 3/2/2 |
| Guards | 22 | 9 |
| Booking Office | 10 | 1 |
| Carriage & Wagon | 1 | 3 |
| Track | 2 | 1 |
| Signalling | 3 | 3 |
| Ticket Inspectors | 11 | 2 |
| Platform Staff | 13 | 5 |
| Catering | 2 | 1 |
| Administrative | 6 | 2 |
| Q5 Age Profile | | |
| | Bluebell | Swanage |
| 20–29 years | 2 | 0 |
| 30–39 years | 6 | 2 |
| 40–49 years | 6 | 4 |
| 50–59 years | 6 | 5 |
| 60–69 years | 9 | 3 |
| 70+ years | 3 | 2 |
| Average age | 51.4 | 59.1 |
| Q5 (a) Distance Travelled to Railway | | |
| | Bluebell | Swanage |
| Up to 10 miles | 11 | 3 |
| 11–40 miles | 14 | 7 |
| 41+ miles | 7 | 6 |
| Average distance | 26 | 59.2 |
| Q6 Reason for Volunteering? (5 = strongly agree; 1 = strongly disagree) | | |
| | Bluebell | Swanage |
| (a) Meet and work with colleagues | 4 | 3.5 |
| (b) Leisure hobby | 4.5 | 4.2 |
| (c) To achieve specific project | 2.3 | 3.3 |
| (d) Meet customers | 3 | 3.2 |
| (e) Help railway | 3.7 | 4.3 |
| Q7 Strength of Volunteer Support for Railway Aspirations (5 = strongly agree; 1 = strongly disagree) | | |
| | Bluebell | Swanage |
| (a) Reach new destinations | 4 | 4.2 |
| (b) Historical accuracy | 3.9 | 4.1 |
| (c) Railway restoration | 3 | 3.5 |
| (d) Educate customers | 3.1 | 3.3 |
| (e) Provide customers with interesting day out | 4.2 | 4.2 |
| Q10 Use of Communication Channels | | |
| | Bluebell | Swanage |
| (a) Society AGM attendance | 75% | 75% |
| (b) Functional training meetings | 81% | 64% |
| (c) Read society journal | 100% | 100% |
| (d) Write to journal | 34% | 29% |
| (e) Discussion with colleagues | 84% | 94% |
| (f) Communication via website | 9% | 0% |
| (g) Threat of resignation | 12% | 12% |

consistent with the response to Q6 (d), although it begs the question about the intended point of recreating historical accuracy.

Care for the customer in terms of a quality day out is encouraging, although this also yields good commercial returns.

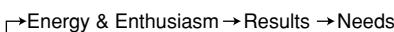
Communication channels with volunteers (Q10)

The responses to show a strong desire to be informed about railway matters via journals and annual general meetings. Operational training and discussion is also valued. There is some evidence that voluntary membership societies can be resignation-prone when problems arise. Use of website communication is limited—perhaps in keeping with steam-age interests.

Management of Volunteers

Volunteering can be seen as a form of contract. Handy⁴ argues that individuals

will compare the energy and enthusiasm expended with the expected results in terms of satisfying self-fulfillment needs. This is illustrated by the diagram below.



Handy points out that voluntary organizations should operate under cooperative psychological contracts, whereby volunteers are undertaking railway roles as part of their own preferences. Thus management of volunteers should be facilitating and cooperative by nature. But this could be more challenging than operating a calculative contract with paid staff, because the volunteer also retains the right not to volunteer.

However, the nature of heritage railway operations and their rates of pay ought to favour cooperative and teamwork approaches even amongst paid staff, who invariably have been previous volunteers

of longstanding.

It is also important to remember that heritage railway volunteers are also stakeholder society members, customers, and may have trustee roles⁵. Loyalty to colleagues and teams will also reinforce commitment.

The response by volunteers to the questionnaire indicates that hobby motivations are significantly stronger than social and colleague motivations. In particular, there is a low customer-related motivation when the individual hobby score is high. There might be customer-service benefits resulting from engaging volunteers in teamwork if facilities and operating schedules aimed to encourage social participation.

Achievement of society-wide goals such as line extensions appear to generate support. This is less true for smaller restoration projects, which a few volunteers scored highly and the rest scored lowly; significant number of respondents referred to the cost of 'pet projects.' Perhaps the best strategy is to



John Philips, at Sheffield Park Booking Office of Bluebell Railway, also a guard and a retired banker
(Author)



David Whiting, a new volunteer cleaner (retired) at Bluebell Railway

(Author)



George Nickson, volunteer since 1963. Ex master mariner (retired 1994) has been a guard, station master, cleaner, fireman, driver, originally joined the Bluebell Railway to meet a female volunteer! (Author)



Gerry Brown (retired), Horsted Keynes platform staff at Bluebell Railway (Author)



Charles Vigor (retired banker), guard at booking office volunteer at Bluebell Railway (Author)

manage and incorporate individual projects that support and build towards an overarching strategic objective. Generally, the survey suggests volunteers at heritage railways are engaged in enterprise and activities of more consequence than 'keeping a cat'⁶ and that there is a need for more comprehensive research into volunteering. ■

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Notes

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2. L. T. C. Rolt. *Railway Adventure*, David & London, Charles, 1953.

3. S. Hensby and J. Harrow, Insider management research in a community organization: its impact on the researcher and the organization's agenda, *National Council for Voluntary Organizations & Non-profit Studies Journal*, 7/8 September 1995.
4. C. Handy, *Understanding Voluntary Organisations*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1988.
5. R. Paton and C. Cornforth, What's different about managing in voluntary and non-profit organizations? in J. Batsben, C. Cornforth, and R. Paton, *Issues in Voluntary and Non-profit*

Management, Workingham Addison Wesley, 1993.

6. N. Cossons, 1994, reported in H. Newby and R. W. Ambler (eds), *The History and Practice of Britain's Railways. A new research agenda*, Aldershot Ashgate, 1999.



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