



Opening the Box: Why Volunteers for Refugees Quit — And What Leaders Must Do

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Volunteer turnover is a persistent challenge for organisations working with refugees, yet research has largely focused on why people start volunteering or how they can be retained. Much less attention has been paid to why volunteers leave. This study addresses that gap by examining the reasons why volunteers disengage from refugee aid organisations and what this means for practice.

The study asks: Why do volunteers quit refugee aid organisations, and what distinguishes the three distinct profiles of those who leave?

Drawing on qualitative analysis of 605 former volunteers, the study identifies three main reasons for quitting: organisation-related factors, personal circumstances, and individual, goal-related motivations. The findings highlight that volunteer turnover results from a combination of organisational conditions and changing individual situations, rather than a single dominant cause.

[#VolunteerRetention](#) [#RefugeeAid](#) [#Philanthropy](#) [#Nonprofits](#) [#Volunteering](#)

Background

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Context



- Most research on volunteering has focused on recruitment and retention, while the question of **why volunteers leave remains relatively underexplored**. This is particularly relevant in refugee aid organisations, where volunteer turnover is high and continuity is difficult to maintain.
- To better understand this issue, the study draws on exit **survey data from 605 former volunteers in the Netherlands'** largest refugee aid organisation. Using qualitative thematic analysis, the authors examine how volunteers themselves explain their decision to leave.
- The findings show that **volunteer attrition is often linked to organisational conditions rather than individual motivation alone**. Volunteers frequently refer to issues such as limited support, changing staff structures, bureaucratic processes, or a lack of appreciation. In this sense, leaving is not simply a personal decision, but also reflects how volunteering is organised and experienced in practice.
- At the same time, **personal circumstances and changing individual goals** also play an important role. Together, these findings highlight that volunteer turnover emerges from the interaction between organisational structures and volunteers' evolving life situations and expectations.

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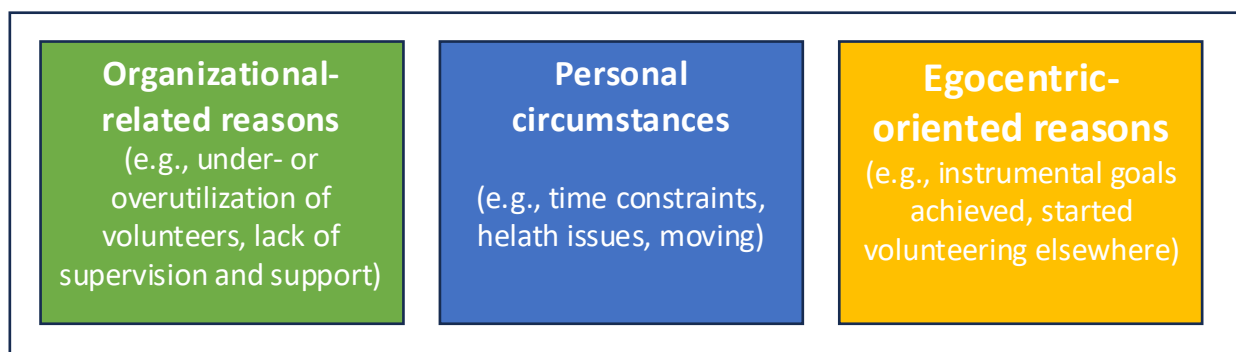
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Take aways & Learnings



- **No single reason → no single solution:** Volunteers leave for a variety of reasons. Those who leave due to organisational issues tend to report lower satisfaction, suggesting that improvements in support, communication, and recognition can make a real difference for retention.
- **Different volunteers require different responses:** Organisation-related quitters, personal circumstances quitters, and those leaving due to changing individual goals represent distinct groups. This highlights the need for more tailored approaches, rather than relying on one uniform retention strategy.
- **Appreciation and leadership shape the experience:** A perceived lack of recognition by paid staff emerges as a key driver of disengagement. This underlines how everyday interactions, support, and leadership practices influence whether volunteers feel valued and choose to stay.
- **Balance in volunteer roles is crucial:** Both excessive demands and a lack of meaningful tasks can lead to disengagement, but for different reasons. While burnout stems from overutilisation and insufficient support, boreout arises from underutilisation and a lack of purpose. Misdiagnosing these dynamics can even accelerate volunteer exit. Designing roles that are balanced, purposeful, and aligned with volunteers' expectations is therefore essential.
- **Leaving does not mean losing the relationship:** Volunteers who leave due to personal circumstances often report positive experiences and may remain connected to the organisation. Maintaining these relationships can open opportunities for future engagement, advocacy, or support.
- **Understanding turnover requires both data and dialogue:** While quantitative data helps identify patterns in volunteer turnover, qualitative insights are crucial to understand the motivations behind these patterns. This points to the importance of combining monitoring with regular opportunities for feedback throughout the volunteering experience.

Figure: (Potential) reasons why volunteers leave (own visualisation)



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