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Setting expectations during volunteer recruitment and the first day experience: a preregistered experimental test of the met expectations hypothesis

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ABSTRACT

In a preregistered experimental study that draws from the met expectations hypothesis, we examined how volunteer recruitment messaging can shape expectations of new volunteers prior to their first day, and whether meeting or failing to meet expectations on the first day would affect satisfaction. By experimentally manipulating a recruitment poster, we set either a transactional (i.e., by volunteering, one can learn new skills) or a relational expectation (i.e., one can work in a team). Participants then viewed an experimentally determined vignette that depicted their first day as a volunteer as either being rich in, or bereft of, experiences of teamwork and learning new skills (crossed). We found that recruitment messaging strongly impacted the participants' expectations of the volunteering experience prior to their first day. Neither meeting expectations regarding teamwork nor learning new skills played a statistically significant causal role in determining satisfaction. By contrast, richer experiences notwithstanding expectations, and especially those pertaining to learning new skills, were more important determinants of satisfaction. Polynomial regression analyses supported the experimental results, namely that experiences far more strongly determined satisfaction than did expectations. We conclude that providing richer experiences to volunteers is more important than expectation management for volunteer satisfaction.

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volunteering; recruitment;
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An ongoing challenge for many volunteer-involving organizations (VIOs) is recruiting new volunteers. Recruitment describes the “practices and activities carried on by the organization with the primary purpose of identifying and attracting potential [members]” (Barber, 1998, p. 5) and is an important tool for organizations seeking to grow their memberships (Chapman et al., 2005; Ployhart et al., 2017). A common element to an organization's recruitment strategy is the crafting of messages that will appeal to its intended target audience (Breugh, 2008) which, in the present context, is prospective volunteers (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2014). If, however, the messages used in recruitment do not reflect the volunteer experience accurately, prospective volunteers may develop unrealistic expectations, and be later disappointed if these expectations are not met by the experience (Kappelides et al., 2018; Kragt et al., 2018; Woolford et al., 2022). Indeed, in contrast to paid employees, volunteers can very easily quit a new role at any time without suffering financial consequences, and thus managing expectations in recruitment may be especially important for volunteer retention. In this preregistered experimental study, we seek to investigate the impact of expectation-setting on retention in the volunteer recruitment context.

This study draws from the principles of the met expectation hypothesis (Porter & Steers, 1973) to examine the causal role that recruitment messaging plays in influencing the formation of expectations among prospective volunteers, and how expectation-congruent and expectation-incongruent experiences

causally determine new volunteers' satisfaction and intentions to remain beyond their “first day”. Through this investigation, we contrast two types of expectations about the volunteering experience – expectations about the transactional aspects with expectations about the relational aspects. In so doing, we contribute new insights into the met expectation hypothesis from the understudied, but societally critical context of volunteering (Vantilborgh et al., 2014). We focused on volunteering for two major reasons. First, volunteering differs from traditional paid work in several meaningful ways: it is not remunerated, the costs of turnover to the volunteer are lower, it rarely offers a clear long term career trajectory, and is typically less formalized (e.g., no employment contract, performance indicators; Pearce, 1993). These differences in context give cause to reconsider some assumptions in current theoretical approaches to understanding organizational behaviour. For example, Boezeman and Ellemers (2009) found that, among volunteers, relatedness need-fulfilment drove role satisfaction whereas among paid workers, autonomy-need fulfilment was more important.

Second, and more practically, many vital community services rely on the ongoing contributions of volunteers and, pressingly, it appears that the volunteering participation rates are in decline across many parts of the world (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019; Walk et al., 2019), with the problem further aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Luksyte et al., 2021). Indeed, beyond recruiting, volunteer retention is often a significant challenge for VIOs, demanding that recruiting strategies that go beyond

simply attracting more members but attracting members who are likely to remain. Altogether, there appears to be an urgent need for effective, evidence-based recruitment practices developed in the context of volunteering; this paper aims to answer the recent call to undertake research with a clear translation path to social impact (Arnold et al., 2021).

Setting expectations during volunteer recruitment

Seminal work on volunteering participation has identified the main functions that volunteering serves for individuals (Clary et al., 1998), and demonstrated that providing opportunities to fulfil these functions through volunteering may appeal to different volunteers with different need profiles (Stukas et al., 2008, 2009). Thus, setting expectations about opportunities to fulfil psychological functions may be an effective means to recruit volunteers with particular need profiles. While research with volunteer samples has found that volunteer expectations are shaped in part during recruitment (Kappelides, 2017), there has been very little attention dedicated to understanding precisely how or what expectations are shaped by volunteer recruitment activities. Similarly, while the relations of (un)met expectations with outcomes have been studied in field research involving volunteers (Farmer & Fedor, 1999; Hoye & Kappelides, 2021; Woolford et al., 2022), we are not aware of research in volunteering settings that systematically manipulated the meeting of expectations, as opposed to observing the phenomenon as it unfolds in situ. Thus, it remains unclear whether failing to meet expectations is a causal determinant of outcomes such as dissatisfaction or withdrawal, or whether perceptions of unmet expectations are confounded with these outcomes by other variables.

Met expectations describe “the distinction between what a person encounters on the job in the way of positive and negative experiences and what he (sic) expected to encounter” (Porter & Steers, 1973, p. 152). Expectations are typically construed as being set via exposure, either organically (Major et al., 1995) or through intervention (e.g., via recruitment or a realistic job preview), to information about an organization (or a role) *prior to interacting directly* with that organization (Sutton & Griffin, 2000, 2004). The broad met expectations hypothesis is that expectation-(dis)confirming experiences will be (un)satisfying and encourage (discourage) satisfaction and retention.

When recruiting, a VIO may transmit signals (e.g., text, imagery) through various media (e.g., posters, videos, social media updates) that are designed to catch the attention of prospective volunteers and expand these individuals’ knowledge of the organization (Cable & Turban, 2003; Carpentier et al., 2019; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Yu & Cable, 2012; Zhu et al., 2021). These signals typically aim to communicate an organization’s purpose, values, or mission, the characteristics the organization is seeking from its members, and/or the opportunities the organization will afford to its members. Upon receipt by a prospective volunteer, the signals will be interpreted in relation to the individual’s own past experiences with volunteering (Kappelides, 2017) and with the VIO itself. This interpretation is then thought to shape the prospective volunteers’ expectations about the anticipated volunteering experience (Hoye & Kappelides, 2021; Kappelides et al., 2018).

One practical challenge with studying expectations quantitatively is that there are potentially infinite expectations that could be set during recruitment. Volunteers could develop expectations, for example, regarding the facilities in which the volunteering is undertaken, the relationships they will have with leaders and recipients of the volunteering services, and the potential for personal development from the volunteering activities. Attempting to cover all possible expectations in a single experimental study would be unfeasible. To build a manageable expectation space for our study, we drew from psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1989, 1990), which distinguishes between transactional and relational psychological contracts. That is, following the psychological contract analogy, we contrast between transactional and relational expectations.

Transactional matters are grounded in economic currency (i.e., are extrinsic), are specific and narrower in scope, include exchanges that are mutually profitable and are generally considered over a shorter term (Rousseau, 1990). In the context of expectations for volunteering, we construe the opportunity to learn a new skill set or gain career-related experiences as transactional elements in which volunteers’ expectations could reasonably be grounded. Indeed, two volunteer functions from Clary et al.’s (1998) model, Career (volunteering as a pathway to forging a career) and Understanding (volunteering to learn and apply skills), capture these more extrinsic and transactional reasons to volunteer, and are typically more salient to younger volunteers who benefit most from such activities (Chacón Fuertes et al., 2017; Muhammad Farid et al., 2019).¹ By contrast, relational matters are those which are grounded in social-emotional currency (mutual confidence, stability, and loyalty), are less specific, and are generally considered with a longer term relationship in mind (Jensen et al., 2010; Rousseau, 1990). In the context of volunteering expectations, a key function of volunteering for many people is to build and foster social connections (Social in the Clary et al. volunteer function model, see also, Boezeman & Ellemers, 2009) and thus the expectation of being able to work as part of a cohesive group for the longer term may be important to many volunteers. Moreover, practically, we recognize that transactional and relational expectations and experiences are likely to occur in varying degrees across different volunteering opportunities, and prospective volunteers may value them to differing extents. Accordingly, in our study, we simultaneously compared the role of setting and fulfilling a transactional and relational expectation in determining volunteer satisfaction.

Issues regarding measurement of met expectations

A meta-analysis by Wanous et al. (1992) suggested that, consistent with the met-expectations hypothesis, having one’s expectations met was positively associated with satisfaction, commitment, and intentions to remain. After this review was published, however, the body of empirical research on met expectations was criticized for its approaches to measuring expectations and experiences. In research conducted to that point, met expectations were measured directly (e.g., “My pre-entry expectations were met”) or, indirectly, through a numerical discrepancy between self-reported expectations and

experiences (Irving & Meyer, 1994, 1995). Direct measures assume that participants can recall their pre-entry expectations and perform the mental calculus to arrive at a difference between these expectations and their experiences. Instead, however, these measures appear to be most strongly determined by experiences rather than by the combination of expectations and experiences. For example, Irving and Meyer (1995) found that experiences explained most of the variance in participants' reports of met expectations, with the expectations reported prior to entry explaining almost no variance. These authors speculated that direct measures of volunteer met expectations may represent "proxy measures" of satisfaction with the experience.

As an alternative, discrepancy-based scoring approaches to measuring met expectations allow researchers to separately capture expectations prior to entry, and experiences post-entry, solving one of the problems of direct measures. Operationalizing met expectations through simple difference scores (i.e., expectation – experience), however, introduces a statistical constraint into regression-based models that simultaneously estimates the effects of these two factors. Specifically, these models constrain the strength of the relation of expectations with the outcome (i.e., the regression weight) to be equal but opposite in sign to that of the experience.

After these methodological issues described above were identified, researchers tested the met expectation hypothesis in studies using polynomial regression analyses. Polynomial regression analyses can independently estimate the effects of both components in a congruence model (expectations and experiences in this case) while also estimating higher-order effects such as multiplicative interactions (see, Stukas et al., 2009, for an example in a volunteering context). Studies of expectations using these advanced modelling techniques have generally found that expectations play, at best, only a small role in shaping outcomes, whereas the experiences appear to be far more influential (Hom et al., 1999; Irving & Meyer, 1994; Sutton & Griffin, 2004).

Pursuing met expectations for volunteer recruitment

The results of the more recent tests of the met expectations hypothesis, all conducted in paid employment settings, suggest that experiences are the stronger determinants of post-hire satisfaction. Nonetheless, we feel that abandoning the investigation of the role of expectations in the context of volunteer recruitment would be premature for two reasons. First, we note that nearly all the contemporary research on met expectations has involved observational designs with self-report measures of expectations and experiences. While observational field studies are important for observing phenomena in context, they pose significant challenges for identifying the causal roles of interventions such as recruitment messaging on expectation formation, and of objective experiences on subjective experiences. Given that organizations have considerable control over their recruiting and onboarding strategies, it is important to provide an evidence-base for the causal roles that decisions about these strategies have on valued outcomes. Second, exploratory research on volunteer recruitment with a sample of camp volunteers has provided qualitative support of associations of recruitment

messaging with expectation setting and the role of meeting expectations for volunteer engagement (Kappelides et al., 2018). Further, a quantitative study of emergency services volunteer personnel who had been with their service for one year revealed relations between these volunteers' expectations about their volunteer experience and intentions to remain (Kragt et al., 2018). However, a qualitative methodology does not allow for causal inference, necessitating the present experimental study. Thus, altogether, there remains a case for revisiting the met expectations hypothesis and informing the broader literature on the psychological contract in the volunteering context.

The present study

In this study, we adopted a multi-phase experimental design to test the met expectations hypothesis. It was undertaken as part of a larger project that was focused on volunteer attraction and retention in the State Emergency Service (SES; described in the Methods section) in Western Australia.

To design our study stimuli, we consulted extensive qualitative and quantitative data collected from SES volunteers and Australian non-volunteer community members. This information guided the development of two sets of volunteer recruitment materials, in the form of posters. Each poster was tailored with extensive pilot-testing to set either a transactional or relational expectation. In this experiment, we contrasted these two expectation types to one another because a traditional "control" condition (i.e., a recruitment poster with no expectation-setting information) would be highly unrealistic. Using a vignette approach, we examined whether meeting expectations causally determined a prospective volunteer's satisfaction with the (fictional) volunteer experience and their interest in receiving more information about volunteering for the SES. We tested the following two preregistered hypotheses:

H1: Overall satisfaction will be highest among participants whose volunteer experiences are congruent with the expectations set by the recruitment materials.

H2: Participants whose volunteer experiences are congruent with the expectations set by the recruitment materials will be more likely than those whose experiences are incongruent to request information from the researchers about how to volunteer for the SES.

We also examined, in an exploratory manner, whether the effects of setting and meeting expectations on satisfaction were moderated by the type of expectation (transactional or relational). Insights from our larger research project suggested that volunteers valued their opportunities to learn new skills and to work in a cohesive team, and both represent key volunteer functions identified by Clary et al. (1998). The methodology of that larger project did not allow, however, for any clear weighting of one expectation type over the other, and hence we proposed the following unregistered research question:

RQ1: What is the relative importance of the effects of setting relational or transactional expectations, and providing relational or transitional experiences on satisfaction?

In addition to the experimental manipulation of the above, we also draw from participants' subjective ratings of expectations and experiences to investigate higher-order relations (interaction and polynomial terms) of expectations and experiences in determining volunteer satisfaction using a polynomial regression approach (Irving & Montes, 2009). Indeed, we note that expectations and experiences may both be forged by factors other than the content of our experimental manipulations (e.g., tacit knowledge about the organization, individual differences, prior experiences with volunteering). In line with the met expectations hypothesis, we hypothesized that satisfaction would be highest when expectations and experiences were congruent. This hypothesis was not preregistered.

H3: Satisfaction will be highest when expectations and experience are congruent.

Finally, we note that an "unmet" expectation can be either over- or under-delivered. For example, Irving and Montes (2009) found that the satisfaction of paid workers was lower among those who were receiving more skill development than expected, and, when they received greater compensation than expected. The experimental tests do not allow us to investigate the directionality of an unmet expectation and, we will inspect the response surface plots to investigate the following unregistered research question:

RQ2: How does over- or under-delivering on expectations affect satisfaction?

Method

This study took place in the context of the State Emergency Services (SES), an Australian organization that is responsible for responding to various emergencies including, protecting community members from weather-related events (cyclones, floods, storms), wildfires, and conducting search and rescue operations for missing or trapped persons. At the time of writing, the SES hosted over 30,000 volunteers, representing 96% of its workforce, who operated in 929 units across the country. While SES groups report to an executive within each State and Territory of Australia, they are typically community-run "grassroots" organizations that operate with considerable autonomy.

This study's design, planned sample size, participation exclusion criteria, and analyses pertaining to hypothesis tests were all preregistered prior to data being collected. The pre-registration is available via <https://osf.io/698dq> and raw data, scripts, and all materials are available via <https://osf.io/k4qgf/>. The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Office of the University of Western Australia, approval number (RA/4/20/1028).

Design and materials

This study employed a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ randomized between-subject factorial design. The first experimental factor aimed to set one of two distinct volunteer experience expectations: being part of a team (relational) versus learning new skills (transactional) and was reflected by exposure to one of two recruitment

posters. The posters comprised three photographs of volunteers in action, along with one text-based quotation, all depicting the intended expectation. Poster content was determined through extensive pilot testing with community members and volunteers, and details are provided in the supplemental materials.

The second and third experimental factors took the form of one of four stories which described the "first day experience" as a volunteer with the SES. The four vignettes were formed by crossing the low versus high levels of exposure to "being part of a team" and "learning new skills" to create four orthogonal volunteer experiences. Each vignette comprised photographs and text, with the content in these vignettes being informed by our larger project with the SES.

Participants

We pre-registered a target sample size of 1600 participants, allowing for 200 cases per condition. Such a sample size affords a 95% chance of detecting a "true" effect size, η_p^2 of .008 or larger in ANOVA models (a small effect). First, we invited 1750 participants who had identified as Australian residents on Prolific.co to participate in exchange for £1 (approximately AU\$1.75). Over a two-week period, we received only 927 useable responses. To acquire the necessary sample size, we employed a market research organization, PureProfile, to recruit a second sample of Australian residents. This organization recruited useable responses from 700 more participants, resulting in a total usable sample size of 1627. Information regarding participant exclusion is available in the supplement. The final sample reported a mean age 39.1 years ($SD = 16.4$), 47% were male, and 51% female, and 2% did not identify with either category. The majority (71%) were born in Australia, and among those who were not, the mean time lived in Australia was 21.4 years ($SD = 18.16$). Sixty-two percent of participants reported completing a college/Bachelor's degree or higher, and 14% had completed technical tertiary/vocational training. Approximately 18% indicated that they currently volunteer (for a mean of 22.1 hours per month, $SD = 37.3$), and 46% of the non-volunteers indicated that they probably, or definitely, would volunteer in the future.

Procedure

The study was conducted using the university's Qualtrics platform. Participants provided consent, completed two "bot" screening questions, and then a demographic survey. Participants were then presented with an immersive first-person vignette that described a scenario where they were considering volunteering somewhere, noticed a volunteer recruitment poster for their local ("Stonesmith") SES unit, had decided to volunteer at the SES and finally what their first day as a volunteer was like. The exact content of the story varied as a function of their randomly-assigned condition. Some of the measures were shown in between the sections of the story, and others appeared at the end. The entire flow of the study is summarized in Figure 1 and all materials, including the questionnaire, are available in the supplement.

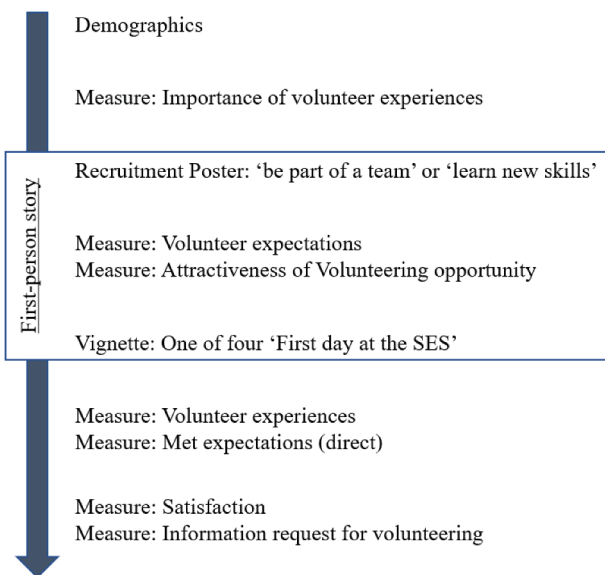


Figure 1. A flowchart describing the process that a participant went through in this study. All materials are available in the supplement.

Measures

Volunteer expectations

Immediately after viewing the poster, participants were provided with the following question, “What are your expectations of volunteering with the SES, based on this poster? Please indicate how much of the following experiences you would expect to have in this volunteer role.” Participants then rated ten items describing experiences on a 5-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *a very great deal* with a sixth response option, *I cannot tell from the poster*, coded as a missing response. Eight items were distractors, describing experiences that were not manipulated and the remaining two were “Being part of a team” and “Learning new skills”.

Attractiveness of volunteering opportunity

Participants were also asked “Overall, given what is on the poster, how attractive does the volunteering opportunity seem to you?”, and responded on a 7-point scale from *very unattractive* to *very attractive*.

Volunteer experiences

Immediately after walking through the “first day experience” vignette, participants were asked, “To what extent were the experiences below reflected in your first day of volunteering, as it was just described?” Participants then rated the same ten experiences as before using a 5-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *a very great deal*.

Dependent variables

To assess satisfaction with the experience and willingness to continue volunteering, participants were presented with the following text, “If the first day experience was indicative of how volunteering with the SES would be like for you . . .” They were then asked “Overall, how satisfied would you have been with that experience?” (7-points, *extremely dissatisfied* to *extremely satisfied*) and “How likely is it that you would return for next

week’s volunteering session with the Stonemith SES?” (7-points, *extremely unlikely* to *extremely likely*). The correlation of these two items was .74 ($p < .001$) and we averaged the responses to the items to form a composite “Volunteer Satisfaction” dependent variable.

Finally, participants were asked whether they would like to receive information about volunteering for the SES in their State or Territory. If they indicated yes (300 did so), we provided details about the SES and how to find a local SES group to join after the study concluded.

Results

Preliminary analyses and manipulation checks

Prior to hypothesis testing, we conducted a series of analyses to evaluate our experimental stimuli and full details are provided in the supplement. In sum, we found that both posters were seen as approximately equally attractive. Each poster also set the expectations that were intended, and neither poster set the counterpart expectation (i.e., the teamwork poster appeared not to affect expectations regarding learning new skills, nor vice versa). The teamwork experiences vignette manipulation affected reports of teamwork experience but did not seem to affect reports of learning new skills. By contrast, the presence of the learning new skills experiences vignette manipulation positively affected reports of *both* teamwork and learning new skills experience.

Hypothesis tests

To test the effect of meeting expectations on volunteer satisfaction (H1), we conducted a univariate ANOVA with the three factors being the Expectation Condition (i.e., “Teamwork” vs. “Skills” recruitment poster), Teamwork Experience Level (high vs. low), and Skills Experience Level (high vs. low). We were primarily interested in the two two-way Expectations by Experiences interactions and the results are shown in Table 1 and Panel 1 of Figure 2. These analyses revealed that volunteer satisfaction was most strongly driven by a main effect of the learning new skills experience ($F(1, 1619) = 25.70, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .016$). The expectation condition was not significantly associated with satisfaction ($F(1, 1619) = 3.20, p = .074, \eta_p^2 = .002$). The interaction between Expectation and the Teamwork Experience level condition was small and not significant ($F(1, 1619) = 2.85, p = .092, \eta_p^2 = 0.002$), and the other Expectation \times Experience interaction effect was also not significant ($F(1, 1619) = 0.74, p = .390, \eta_p^2 = <.001$). The marginal means of volunteer satisfaction by conditions are plotted in Panel 2 of Figure 2 and the form of the interactions was such that the impact of an experience with higher levels of teamwork on satisfaction was slightly stronger among those who saw a teamwork expectation-setting poster. Thus, the interaction’s form was consistent with the met expectations hypothesis, but the effect was not statistically significant. The impact of a learning new skills experience appeared to be roughly equally positive, notwithstanding

Table 1. Analysis of variance of volunteer satisfaction by expectation, and teamwork and skills experience conditions.

Effect	<i>df</i>	<i>MSE</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2
Expectation	1	5.223	3.202	.074	.002
Teamwork Experience	1	1.924	1.180	.278	.001
Skills Experience	1	41.926	25.702	<.001	.016
Expectation \times Teamwork Experience	1	4.648	2.849	.092	.002
Expectation \times Skill Experience	1	1.215	0.745	.388	<.001
Teamwork Experience \times Skill Experience	1	0.002	0.001	.974	<.001
Expectation \times Skill Experience \times Teamwork Experience	1	1.620	0.993	.319	.001
Error	1619	1.631			

Expectation was either being exposed to a recruitment poster that either emphasized relational team (0) or learning new skills (1); *df* = degrees of freedom, *MSE* = mean squared error

the poster viewed by the participant. Thus altogether, there was no statistical support for H1, and although the relational expectation showed an effect pattern that was more in line with the met-expectation hypothesis than the transactional expectation, it was not significant (RQ1).

We next examined whether meeting expectations determined the likelihood of a participant making a request for more information (H2). To that end, we conducted a binomial logistic regression of whether participants requested additional information about the SES, onto the three experimental condition variables and their interactions. The results of these analyses are reported in Table 2. The interaction term between Expectation and the level of learning new skills experience was the strongest predictor among the set, however it did not reach statistical significance ($b = 0.602$, $p = .088$, odds ratio = 1.83). The direction of the effect was consistent with the met expectation hypothesis in that it showed that the combination of viewing the learning new skills poster and experiencing a new skill being taught, was associated with a greater likelihood of requesting more information. We note, however, that the overall model did not provide a statistically significant prediction ($\chi^2(7, N = 1628) = 11.80$, $p = .107$).

Altogether, we found some directional but not statistically significant evidence for met expectations, with respect to teamwork, improving volunteer satisfaction. Similarly, we also found

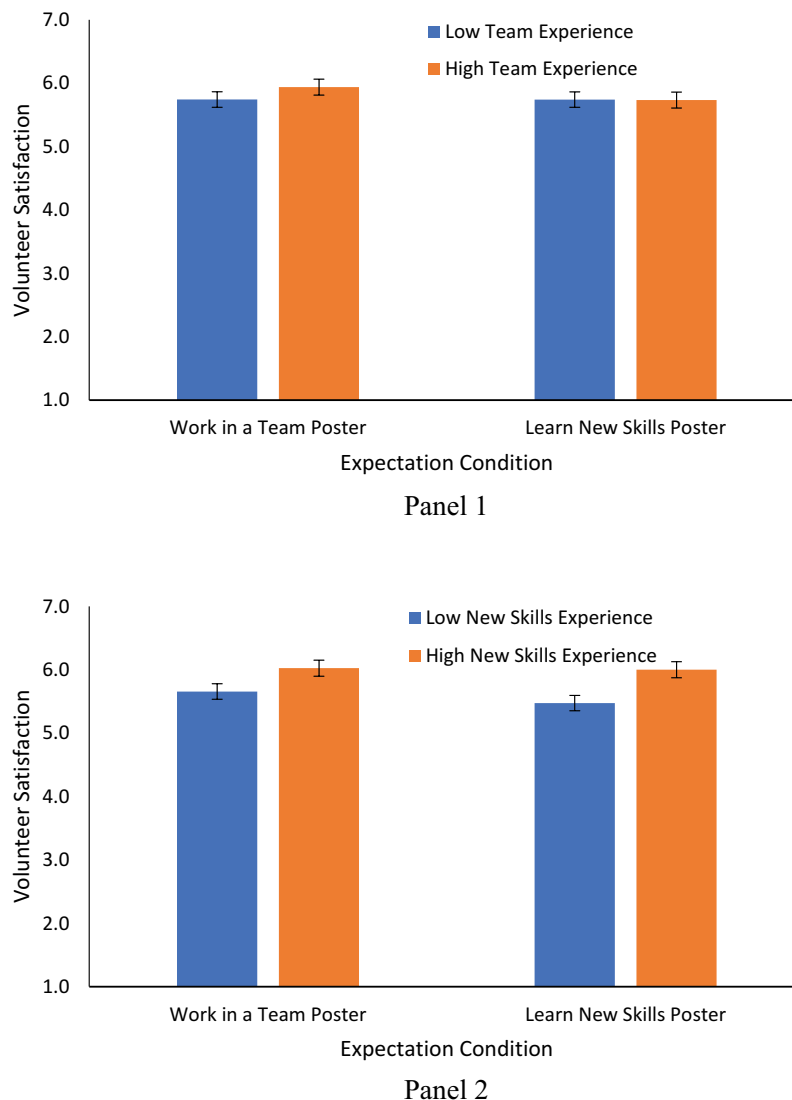


Figure 2. Estimated marginal means of volunteer satisfaction by expectation condition \times working in a team experience level (panel 1) and \times learning new skills experience level (panel 2). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Table 2. Binary logistic regression of participant information request onto experimental conditions.

Effect	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i> (<i>b</i>)	Wald	<i>p</i>	Exp (<i>b</i>)	1/ Exp (<i>b</i>)
Constant	-1.206	0.166				
Expectation	-0.270	0.242	1.247	.264	0.764	1.310
Teamwork Experience	-0.167	0.246	0.460	.498	0.846	1.182
Skills Experience	-0.403	0.258	2.452	.117	0.668	1.497
Expectation × Teamwork Experience	-0.186	0.359	0.268	.605	0.830	1.204
Expectation × Skill Experience	0.602	0.353	2.902	.088	1.826	0.548
Teamwork Experience × Skill Experience	0.378	0.361	1.093	.296	1.459	0.685
Expectation × Skill Experience × Teamwork Experience	-0.588	0.519	1.281	.258	0.556	1.800

N = 1627 (300 were in the “1” category for the dependent variable); Expectation was either being exposed to a recruitment poster that either emphasized relational team (0) or learning new skills (1); *SE* = Standard error.

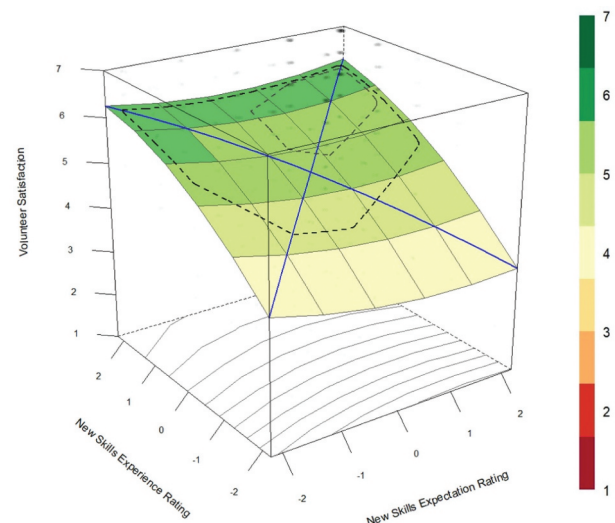
directional but not statistically significant evidence that the likelihood of requesting more information about the volunteering opportunity in the real world may have increased by meeting expectations with respect to learning new skills. Overall, we conclude that the test of the causal roles of setting and meeting expectations were not evidenced by this study.

Polynomial regression tests of met expectations

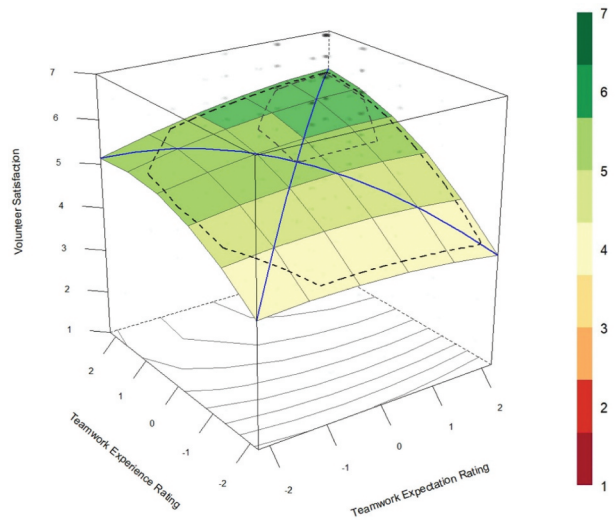
H3 and RQ2 were concerned with the combined effects of self-reported expectations and experiences on volunteer satisfaction. To investigate this hypothesis and research question, we performed polynomial regression using the **RSA** package (v0.10.4; Schönbrodt & Humberg, 2021) in R (v4.1.1), following the guidelines of Humberg et al. (2018). Prior to conducting the analyses, we first centred the expectation and experiences variables on the mid-point of the scale (3) with the package then automatically calculating polynomial terms using these centred variables.

We ran two polynomial models: one for the transactional new skills elements, controlling for all terms of the relational elements (i.e., linear and polynomial), and the other for the relational teamwork elements, controlling for all terms of the transactional elements. While both models are statistically equivalent, and are shown as one in Table 3, specifying the two models separately allowed us to generate 3-dimensional response surface plots for the transactional and relational elements separately. The combined regression model explained 26.6% of the variance in satisfaction ($F(10, 1473) = 62.4, p < .001$). The polynomial terms for the transactional new skills elements uniquely explained 0.5% of the variance over the linear terms for this element and the full set of linear and polynomial terms for the relational teamwork element ($F(3, 1463) = 3.46, p = .016$). Similarly, the polynomial terms for the relational teamwork elements uniquely explained a similar amount of variance in satisfaction ($\Delta R^2 = .006; F(3, 1463) = 3.96, p = .008$).

As Table 3 shows, the two strongest determinants of satisfaction were the linear experience ratings with both ratings being positively and significantly associated with satisfaction.



Panel 1



Panel 2

Figure 3. Polynomial response surface analyses of volunteer satisfaction on expectations and experiences. Solid lines show the lines of congruence and incongruence. Shaded circles depict the individual response densities; 50% of points are contained in the inner bag, and the remaining 50% in the outer region.

Neither type of expectation was significantly associated with satisfaction. Among the polynomial terms, we observed weak but statistically significant effects of the squared terms for the transactional skills element and a relatively strong significant effect of the squared experience term for the relational teamwork element. None of the linear interaction terms were statistically significant.

Finally, we inspected the two polynomial response surfaces and, using the **RSA** package, estimated the slopes and curvatures along the lines of congruence and incongruence for each plot. The line of congruence (LOC) describes the line in the X-Y plane where $X = Y$; that is, along this line, expectations and experiences are perfectly congruent. Orthogonal to the LOC, the line of incongruence (LOIC) describes the line in the X-Y plane where $X = -Y$, or concretely, where expectations and experiences are equal in magnitude but opposite in sign. In a

Table 3. Polynomial regression of volunteer satisfaction on teamwork and new skills-related expectations and experiences.

Predictor	<i>b</i>	SE (<i>b</i>)	95.0% CI for <i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	β
Intercept	4.67	0.08	(4.50, 4.83)	<.001	
Linear Expectation and Experience Ratings					
Skills Expectation Ratings	0.09	0.06	(-0.04, 0.21)	.176	0.06
Skills Experience Ratings***	0.45	0.08	(0.30, 0.60)	<.001	0.30
Teamwork Expectation Ratings	-0.07	0.06	(-0.18, 0.04)	.234	-0.05
Teamwork Experience Ratings***	0.60	0.08	(0.44, 0.77)	<.001	0.38
Skills Polynomial Terms					
Expectation \times Experience	0.03	0.04	(-0.04, 0.10)	.386	0.04
Expectation ^{2*}	0.05	0.02	(0.01, 0.10)	.027	0.07
Experience ^{2*}	-0.09	0.04	(-0.17, -0.01)	.020	-0.12
Teamwork Polynomial Terms					
Expectation \times Experience	0.06	0.04	(-0.01, 0.13)	.101	0.08
Expectation ²	-0.03	0.03	(-0.09, 0.03)	.266	-0.05
Experience ^{2**}	-0.11	0.04	(-0.18, -0.04)	.001	-0.15

SE = standard error, CI = confidence interval, *b* = unstandardized regression coefficient, β = standardized regression coefficient. *N* = 1474. All ratings were centred on the mid-point of the scale (3) prior to the calculation of polynomial terms.

p* <.05, *p* <.01, ****p* <.001

recent tutorial paper on interpreting response surface analyses in the context of congruence hypotheses, Humberg et al. (2018) cautioned against interpreting the slope and curvature parameters of the LOC and LOIC in isolation, and identified four conditions that must be satisfied for a congruence hypothesis to be supported. We examined the features of our response surface plots in relation to these four conditions.

The first condition is that the intercept of the first principal axis must be close to zero, and the second condition is that the slope of the principal must be close to one. Where a response surface forms a saddle shape, as is expected in congruence hypotheses, the first principal axis represents the projection of the saddle's ridge along the X-Y plane. If the intercept of this axis (parameter p_{10}) is significantly different from zero, it indicates that the ridge of the surface plot is displaced from the LOC, meaning that the most positive combined effects of X and Y are not occurring when X and Y are equal (i.e., perfectly congruent). If the slope of the first principal axis (p_{11}) is significantly different from one, then it indicates that the ridge of the saddle is not parallel to the LOC, again contravening a congruence hypothesis. The third condition is that the curvature along the LOIC (parameter a_4) is significant and

negative, indicating that the shape of the surface at the ridge is an inverted U. The fourth condition is that the slope along the LOIC (parameter a_3) is close to zero, which indicates that the parabolic function is maximized along the LOIC.

Figure 3 shows the two response surface plots, and Table 4 shows the statistical tests of the parameters therein. For both transactional and relational polynomial models, the condition that the intercepts of the surfaces' first principal axes (p_{10}) are close to zero was violated with both intercepts highly significantly greater than zero. These results both contravene the congruence hypothesis H3. Further, in the case of the transactional element, there was also no evidence of curvature along the line of incongruence, with parameter a_4 being nonsignificant. Inspection of the surface plot (Figure 3, Panel 1) shows that transactional experience level is the stronger determinant of satisfaction, and there was little evidence that expectations moderated the effect of experiences nor contributed directly.

With respect to the relational elements (Figure 3 Panel 2), there was evidence of a parabolic ridge along the LOIC, however, the slope along this line was significantly different from zero, thus again contravening H3. An inspection of the surface plot suggested that satisfaction was highest among those with high expectations and high experiences, and that experiences were slightly more important drivers of satisfaction among those with higher expectations (RQ3). Finally, we note that the slope along the LOC (parameter a_1) was positive and significant for both response surfaces. We must interpret this parameter with some caution because the first principal axis was displaced from the LOC, however, its positive and significant value suggests that the effects on satisfaction of expectations and experiences are stronger when both are higher than when both are lower. In totality, however, the met-expectations hypothesis was not well supported by the direct reports of expectations and experience for either transactional or relational elements; instead, experiences were the strongest driver of satisfaction, with expectations playing a minor role.

Discussion

The study used an experimental design with realistic stimuli to investigate how setting and meeting (or failing to meet) expectations affect volunteer satisfaction and the desire to be a part of the organization. We grounded this research in the met expectations tradition (Porter & Steers, 1973; Wanous et al., 1992), which describes the extent to which expectations formed prior to direct interaction with an organization (e.g., during recruitment) are fulfilled by the experiences received upon joining the

Table 4. Response surface parameters for expectations (X) and Experience (Y) Predicting volunteer satisfaction (Z).

Model	p_{10}	p_{11}	a_1	a_2	a_3	a_4
Transactional learning skills	3.33** (.003)	0.11 (.385)	0.53*** (<.001)	-0.01 (.891)	-0.67*** (<.001)	-0.07 (.276)
Relational teamwork	1.70*** (<.001)	0.34 (.352)	0.53*** (<.001)	-0.08 (.094)	-0.36*** (<.001)	-0.21** (.002)

p* <.05, *p* <.01, ****p* <.001

Figures are parameter estimates with *p* values presented in parentheses.

p_{10} is the intercept of the first principal axis

p_{11} is the slope of the first principal axis

a_1 is the slope along the line of congruence

a_2 is curvature along the line of congruence

a_3 is the slope along the line of incongruence

a_4 is curvature along the line of incongruence

organization, and the consequences of any incongruencies. We undertook this study in a novel context of volunteer recruitment; a context where the barriers to turnover, especially after an initial experience, are much lower when compared to traditional paid employment where the effects of expectations have been studied (Pearce, 1993). Indeed, two recent narrative reviews have highlighted the possibility of negative consequences to volunteer satisfaction and withdrawal if realistic expectations are not set (Hoye & Kappelides, 2021; Woolford et al., 2022), and that the recruitment process is when expectations are often determined. Thus, research showing precisely how expectations can be shaped by recruitment processes is a timely contribution (Kappelides, 2017; Kappelides & Jones, 2019). We examined two types of expectations, namely, those pertaining to a transactional aspect of volunteering (learning new skills) and a relational aspect of volunteering (working as part of a cohesive team). Our results showed that expectations among prospective volunteers can be influenced by the content contained in advertising materials. We found, however, very little evidence that fulfilling the expectations that were set at recruitment in the first day in their role, determined volunteers' satisfaction and their intentions to return. Indeed, while fulfilling an expectation regarding opportunities to work in a team showed a directional relation with satisfaction, the effect was not significant, despite the large sample of this study. Similarly, requests for information about how to volunteer for the organization in our study's context were not clearly influenced by the fulfilment of the expectation that one can learn new skills by volunteering for the organization in question.

The finding that expectations are influenced by recruitment messaging is consistent with other research showing the role that signalling from organizations plays in influencing the cognitions of potential job applicants (Chapman & Webster, 2006; Turban & Keon, 1993). We found clear evidence of expectations being set by the recruitment materials (Kappelides et al., 2018) and only a modest difference between the two types of expectations with respect to the attractiveness of the volunteering role. Because of the absence of a control condition (i.e., a recruitment poster that did not set any specific expectation), it is difficult to ascertain whether those expectations were adding to, subtracting from, or having no net effect on the attractiveness of the role. However, when considered together, these findings have implications for volunteer recruiters seeking to manage expectations regarding the volunteer experience.

To what extent does meeting prospective volunteers' expectations on their first day determine their satisfaction and willingness to return for more experiences? We found that meeting neither relational nor transactional expectations played causal roles in determining satisfaction. In directional terms, meeting the relational expectation of engaging in teamwork was associated with satisfaction in a manner consistent with the met expectations hypothesis, however the effect was not significantly greater than zero. Similarly, a small but again non-significant effect of meeting the transactional expectation (learning new skills) was associated with an increased likelihood chance that a participant would request more information about the volunteer organization being studied. Overall, we conclude that setting and meeting expectations has little impact on satisfaction. These findings are consistent with those of field studies in paid employment (Irving & Meyer, 1994; Irving & Montes, 2009) and

volunteer (Farmer & Fedor, 1999) contexts, however, we note that in such studies, expectations are either typically measured either retrospectively, or pre-hire, with experiences measured quite some time some time (e.g., several months) afterwards. Perhaps it is not unreasonable for people to have forgotten about their expectations in these field studies, but it seemed rather striking that the participants here had apparently forgotten about, or ignored, their expectations that were measured only several minutes earlier, when making judgements about their satisfaction; instead, participants drew from their experiences to form their judgements. Nonetheless, our findings would appear to contradict several studies on volunteers which have suggested that unmet expectations are a cause of volunteer dissatisfaction (see, Hoye & Kappelides, 2021; Woolford et al., 2022, for systematic narrative reviews). By being able to separate, temporally, the formation of expectations from the volunteer experience and manipulate the meeting of these expectations, our study was able to untangle the conflation of retrospectively-perceived expectations and the valence of experiences (Irving & Meyer, 1995). Replicating this design in a field setting to establish causality would introduce significant logistical and ethical challenges, and therefore future research might consider experimental studies with an even more immersive design, such as using actors instead of vignettes, to further improve ecological validity.

In contrast to our success with setting very specific expectations with the recruitment posters, portraying highly specific volunteer experiences through vignettes that also aimed to depict a realistic volunteering setting was less successful. On the one hand, a relational experience of working in a team was determined, as expected and intended, by the nature of the first day experience we had crafted for this purpose. Further, the experience of working as part of a team did not appear to also cause participants to report experiences with learning new skills. On the other hand, the transactional experience of learning new skills we had crafted for this study was not decoupled from the relational experience of teamwork; in other words, an experience focused on learning new skills also seemed to give participants a sense of working in a team. Perhaps the lack of specificity in the latter experience detracted from its capacity to meet the expectations of those who expected to learn new skills. One possibility is that the nature of the new skill we had chosen to portray (learning about flood prevention) was such that it would not be easily implemented individually, and thus teamwork was necessarily intertwined with that experience. Nonetheless, the confounding of multiple experiences is likely a reflection of the real world where volunteers engage in a variety of complex activities.

When considering the combined relations of self-reported expectations and experiences with volunteer satisfaction through polynomial regression and response surface analyses (Irving & Meyer, 1994; Irving & Montes, 2009), it appeared that granting experiences with respect to teamwork was more influential among those volunteers who harboured higher expectations of engaging in teamwork than with those who harboured lower expectations. In other words, the participants who were more pessimistic about the prospects of working in a team, who nonetheless perceived higher levels of teamwork during the volunteering experiences, apparently benefited less from that experience than those who were more optimistic. Nonetheless,

the polynomial regression analyses, and both response surface plots, again showed that experiences, rather than expectations, most strongly determined volunteer satisfaction, and altogether, there was no support for the met-expectations hypothesis, in that the response surface plots were not consistent with a congruence model (Humberg et al., 2018).

Altogether, our findings suggest that when considering the relational and transactional expectations that we examined, experiences determine volunteer satisfaction to a far greater extent than meeting (versus violating) expectations. Of the two experiences, in our study, the experience of learning new skills seemed to predict satisfaction to a greater extent than the experience of working in a team. This falls in line with other research on volunteering, including in the emergency services, where learning new skills is often cited as a reason why volunteers, especially males, return (Muhammad Farid et al., 2019; Walk et al., 2019).

Limitations, future directions, and implications

The findings of our study should be interpreted with several limitations in mind. First, a limitation of its experimental design was that it necessarily proposed a hypothetical scenario to participants, which likely impacts negatively on the ecological validity of the study. Indeed, among the 1336 participants who did not already volunteer, 195 (or 15%) indicated that they either probably or definitely would *not* do so in the future. We also noted several free-text comments from older participants who questioned their physical capability to contribute to the organization depicted in the study and must acknowledge that these participants may not be part of a population that benefits from research that seeks to improve volunteer recruitment.

Second, we note that the experimental stimuli (i.e., the recruitment posters and volunteer experiences), while firmly grounded in real-world experiences observed from our larger research project (Muhammad Farid et al., 2019), provide an over-simplified picture of the volunteer recruitment process and the volunteer experience, again adversely affecting ecological validity (Maguire et al., 2015). Typically, volunteer recruitment would involve more than viewing a simple poster and signing up, and in the time in between, a prospective volunteer would likely have an opportunity to clarify expectations with a volunteer unit leader well before experiencing their first day in the role. Similarly, experiences would likely be richer than portrayed in the vignettes. Nonetheless, manipulating experiences in the way we did does allow for tests of the causal roles of expectations and experiences in determining outcomes, albeit in a simulated context (Aiman-Smith et al., 2002).

We must also recognize the fact that this study manipulated a limited set of expectations and experiences, when in practice, many additional features of the volunteering context will have activated expectations beyond the two we examined. While we did compare an example of a transactional expectation to an example of a relational expectation, and both expectations were identified in our larger research project as being highly relevant to the volunteering experience, there are clearly many other expectations that we overlooked. Already, our study measured eight other distractor expectations to obscure the manipulation. It is possible that failure to fulfil these other expectations may be

important for satisfying and retaining volunteers. Further, rather than the transactional and relational elements being distinct (Aggarwal & Bhargava, 2010), as we intended through our manipulation, we suspect it is likely that some participants regarded the opportunity to undergo regular training with the SES as longer-term and volunteer “career”-supporting which is better considered a relational element (Rousseau, 1990). Indeed, in the context of paid work, training and development opportunities were construed as relational psychological contract terms as they represent a longer-term investment by an organization in its staff (Jensen et al., 2010; Rousseau, 1990). In the volunteering context, learning new skills through shorter-term volunteering is a common transactional motive for people, especially younger people (Chacón Fuertes et al., 2017), to volunteer. Nonetheless, within the SES, especially in regional areas, it is not uncommon for volunteers to remain with the service for a very long time, and cite the continual upskilling as a key reason why they remain (Muhammad Farid et al., 2019).

Of note, we also acknowledge that we did not examine the category of expectations regarding ideology or values (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003). Indeed, in the volunteering context, ideology and values play a very important role in determining whether an individual chooses to volunteer and in which organization (or on which activity) that individual dedicates their time (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2008a; Clary et al., 1998; Hager & Renfro, 2020; Kappelides & Jones, 2019). In the present study, we sought to hold the ideological expectations constant by presenting all participants with the same volunteering opportunity (i.e., same activities with the same organization). However, we again recognize that, in practice, VIOs will vary a great deal on these factors, thus having implications for setting expectations, and potentially, the consequences of failing to meet them. Indeed, because of the “grassroots” historical origins of the SES units, there is likely to be variability across groups in values and ideology. We therefore encourage future researchers to examine the met expectations hypothesis in relation to this category of expectations.

Altogether, our results suggest that the setting and meeting expectations during recruitment is unlikely to have a substantial impact on volunteer satisfaction, compared with simply providing richer experiences to volunteers. That said, it appears from this research that setting expectations can be achieved through recruitment messaging, and it remains possible that these expectations influence the perceived attractiveness of a role, and thus whether people consider applying (Chapman et al., 2005). Thus, a clear practical implication for VIOs from this work would be to focus recruitment efforts on setting positive expectations and concentrate on ensuring a positive experience is delivered. Nonetheless, premature turnover remains an issue for many VIOs and unmet expectations are often cited as an intuitive cause. Perhaps, then, there are certain conditions where setting and meeting expectations are important, and we thus we need to better understand these boundary conditions better. For example, both expectations we studied represented the presence (versus absence) of a typically positive or highly desired element of a volunteering experience (Stukas, Hoye et al., 2016; Stukas, Snyder et al., 2016). However, it is possible expectations violated by the presence of something negative or unpleasant (e.g., having to dedicate a long time to completing paperwork, or being called

out to a job very early in the morning) may negatively affect satisfaction (McLennan, 2020; O'Halloran & Davies, 2020). If the more "negative" expectations are those that need to be managed, then this could prove challenging for volunteer recruiters who also must try to craft a positive signal to attract volunteers in the first place (e.g., Boezeman & Ellemers, 2008b). Further, perhaps if we had designed vignettes describing a more intense delivery of the elements (e.g., very long periods of intensive teamwork, or near-constant learning; both of which may be unpleasant), then setting expectations may become more important. Indeed, research in paid settings has shown that providing realistic previews of work can signal an organization's honesty, which in turn is associated with lower turnover (Earnest et al., 2011).

Note

1. We note that training and development is construed as a relational element of a psychological contract by Rousseau (1990) and others (e.g., Jensen et al., 2010), as it signals a longer-term investment in an employee by an employer. We return to this matter in the Discussion section.

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