

## **Being a volunteer or not: psychological contract implications.<sup>1</sup>**

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Poster contribution

Session topic: Volunteering and social capital

Employees liaise to employers through an exchange relationship: employees perform duties and expect receiving rewards in return. Within an economic exchange relationship, employees expect to get paid as stipulated in their formal contract. Additionally or alternatively employees develop a more informal social exchange relationship with their employer, in which they again expect to receive rewards in return for their effort, but without these rewards being formally determined. Within this last relationship, employees trust their employer in that (s)he will provide appropriate rewards (Blau, 1964).

Originating from the literature on this exchange relationship, the psychological contract of employees has become an important research topic during the last decade. A psychological contract is the unwritten contract between an employee and his employer that entails their perceptions of the employment relationship and the reciprocal obligations of both parties derived from this relationship (Guest & Conway, 2002; Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1998). In general, different types of psychological contracts can be distinguished (Rousseau, 1989). On the one hand, a typical transactional psychological contract focuses on the well-specified economic consequences of the employment relationship (e.g. additional payment, working conditions) and implies a limited personal job involvement. The relational psychological contract type, on the other hand, mainly contains unwritten implicit expectations between the employee and the employer (e.g. personal development possibilities in exchange for loyalty) based on the emotional involvement of both parties. The transactional psychological contract is more closely related to the economic exchange perspective, whereas the relational psychological contract fits in with the social exchange relationship. In addition to these two well documented psychological contract types, a third form is recently suggested: the ideological-infused contract. This contract is based on the expectation of the employee that the organization (s)he works for is committed to and invests in a valued cause or adheres ideological principles (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003). Through this kind of contract, the employee performs well so that the organization can realize this valued cause.

Volunteers perform a job or task without being paid for it at all, whether they work for a profit, non-profit or voluntary organization. Due to the absence of financial payment, the content of their transactional contract, if existing at all, seems to have a very limited scope. Consequently, it seems obvious that volunteers will develop a vast social exchange relationship with their 'employer'. In exchange for volunteering, some of their personal needs become fulfilled: they receive opportunities to learn and develop themselves within new environments, they can express and direct their humanitarian concerns for others, etc.. Within this social exchange relationship, the occurrence of a relational as well as an ideological-infused psychological contract seems plausible.

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Especially this last contract type may be of particular relevance to volunteers. However, contrary to the bulk of studies examining the motives for volunteering (Clary et al., 1998), literature and research on the psychological contract of volunteers is rare (Farmer & Fedor, 1999; Liao-Troth, 2005). Therefore, the present study will examine the psychological contract of volunteers and its implications more in detail, in an attempt to extend the existing empirical research.

To be able to compare the psychological contract of volunteers with that of paid employees, data of both groups are currently being gathered using an on-line questionnaire. All participants are working within the same medium-sized organization, situated within the private non-profit sector in Belgium. This allows us to control for the role of organizational characteristics on our results.

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