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Keep the libraries running! The crucial role of the volunteers

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Abstract

Keeping life stresses away would improve the quality of life, especially in challenging times like the current Covid-19 pandemic. The role of reading in dealing with critical phases of people's lives is remarkable. Public libraries as local information centers encourage reading habits in children and remove gaps between those who are well-informed and those who do not. To continue to fulfill the educational mandate and keep libraries running, addressing the issue of volunteering is necessary. Without the voluntary commitment of the public, a substantial number of libraries may not be able to survive. Focusing on the Austrian library landscape, this study provides recommendations on volunteerism in libraries which are based on interviews and literature analyses.

Keywords: libraries, volunteering, voluntary work in libraries



1. Introduction

The immediate effects of reading on reducing stress are surprising. According to a study conducted towards 22 stress-plagued students, a 30-minute reading session lowers blood pressure, heart rate and feelings of psychological distress (Rizzolo et al., 2009). A study even found out that people who read live longer than those who do not. It was observed that readers have a lower risk of mortality up to 20 percent (Bavishi et al., 2016). This shows that the healthy and life-enhancing effects of reading should not be understated.

Public libraries stimulate people's enjoyment of reading and foster reading competence even among young children. They offer access to information to all people regardless of their economic situation. This helps prevent the gap between those who are well-informed and those who do not by serving as a tool for promoting the equality of opportunities (Gill et al., 2004).

Nowadays, public libraries face many challenges caused by technological advancements. Some of these challenges include digitization, flood of information, budget cuts, staff reductions and changes in users' habits and demand (Schuring, 2017).

The future of public libraries seems to be inextricably tied to the voluntary work because most of the employees in libraries are indeed volunteers. Therefore, it is safe to say that volunteers are likely to be indispensable for the library system. In fact, Austria's public library system is strongly influenced by voluntary work (Büchereiverband Österreichs, 2021).

This study involved interviews that were carried out at libraries in Lower Austria, which showed that librarians do recognize the benefits that volunteers bring to libraries. For example, there are more programs that can be offered with the help of volunteers. However, the study also reported that there were areas of tension between librarians and volunteers existing.

The interviews investigated the work of volunteers at libraries from different perspectives. The outcomes of the interviews provide the basis for the development of several recommendations. For instance, since the interviews concluded that the majority of library workers are female, a recommendation on how libraries could recruit men as volunteers is proposed.

The first section of this paper presents the landscape of the Austrian library system. The second section, meanwhile, outlines the outcomes of the interviews and the third section discusses the findings and presents the recommendations that could be considered by public libraries in Austria.

2. Austria's public library landscape

According to the statistics by Büchereiverband Österreichs, there are 1.185 public libraries in Austria, excluding special libraries and 43 branchless public libraries that do not provide up-to-date data. Whereas a proper library law that ensures the existence of public libraries does exist in 27 other EU countries, there is no such law existing in Austria. This is another reason for this study to dedicate more time and effort to the subject of volunteer work in public libraries. In Austria, the establishment and operation of public libraries are purely based on voluntary services supported by their providers, like municipalities, towns, and parishes. That is one of the reasons why public libraries in Austria are very different in terms of space, equipment, and staffing (bvoe.at; Leitner et al., 2009).

It was discovered that 189 of the 1185 public libraries in Austria are operated full-time in which at least one librarian is employed as a part-time staff, while 187 public libraries have at least one staff of the institution that supports them who is responsible for the operation of the library as part of his or her employment. This particular staff most likely comes from the

municipality. Meanwhile, 809 public libraries are operated by pure volunteers. (see Figure 1).

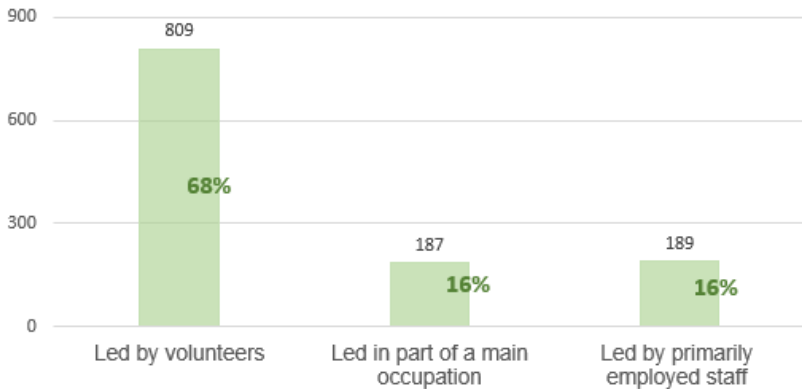


Figure 1. The high share of volunteer-led libraries in Austria

Source: own representation, underlying data from bvoe.at

A glance at the share of library users within Austria's population in 2020 showed that 21,8% of them were children aged between 0 and 13 years old, while 15,4% were teenagers and 5,8% were adults (see figure 2). This indicates that younger children are the main users of public libraries in Austria.

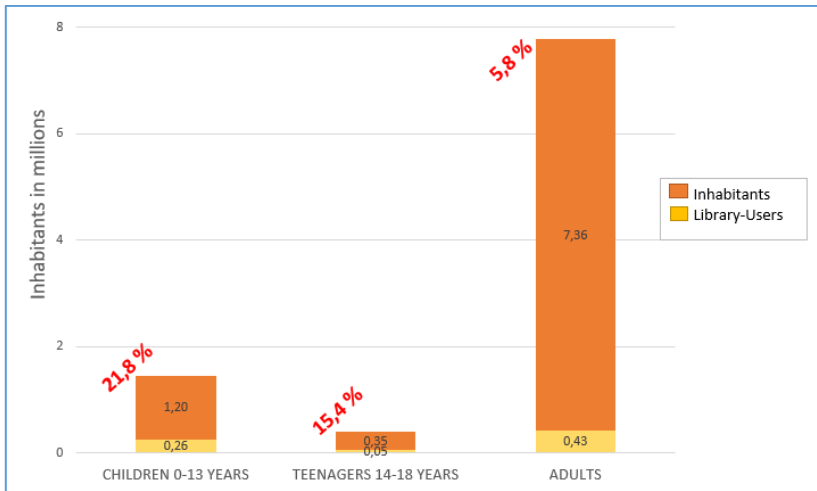


Figure 2. Share of library users in population in 2020

Source: own representation, underlying data from bvoe.at

3. Insights from interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with librarians in Lower Austria. The researcher analyzed the transcribed text precisely to identify any major theme and sub-themes that emerged from the data. The following section, meanwhile, presents the typical works carried out by volunteers at the public libraries in Austria.

3.1. Scope of work of volunteers

- Homepage maintenance (keeping the content up-to-date)
- Support with the children's afternoons
- Support with all work for which the librarians do not have time
- Graphical work (creating the logo, the posters, visiting cards)
- Book-inventory management

- Online library services registrations, de-registrations, and revisions
- Media purchase

3.2. Librarian's opinion on hiring volunteers

Throughout the interviews, the researcher came across a number of interesting and thought-provoking responses. When asked about her opinion on the idea that a library hires volunteers in addition to “normal” employees, for instance, a female head librarian of a public library that is open 7 hours a week and is operated by 15 volunteers and 1 man answered *“I found it hard to imagine, because there are those who get paid and those who don’t. But I think this could be a good opportunity for newcomers or people who are looking for additional employment because they don’t have to do everything; They can just do what they enjoy.”*

Another female volunteer manager of a library that is operated by 13 volunteers commented *“Well, my team that is falling apart at the moment because as a volunteer I cannot oblige them to do anything. They are members of the library, they read for free and they spend a lot of time doing it. Many volunteers think that if they do a service twice or three times a year and help out at an event, then that’s more than enough. If people were employed then they would have an obligation. Over the years I have come to know that it is difficult to work with so many volunteers because everyone comes and goes and does and does not do, and a little chaos develops.”*

3.3. Pros and cons of employing volunteers

Pros

- It offers more library programs
- It promises new inputs, more diversified ideas, and fruitful exchange
- It changes the team spirit

- It offers flexibility in content with no rigid plan in the background)
- It creates more flexible fields of application also in terms of time

Cons

- The volunteers are not additional, they take the hours from the employees
- There is no obligation for volunteers. A female head of library with 13 volunteers in total said “I have two female seniors as volunteers and they are currently contesting a little on who does more and who is more active and who does it better. One always looks for mistakes in the other. But as I said, they're volunteers, I'm glad I have them.”
- It takes extra effort to guide and lead the volunteers. A female manager of a library that was operated by three employees and four volunteers said “Even a volunteer must be led and directed in the same way as someone who is employed, and he must be just as reliable as someone who is employed. That means, I must be able to rely on the two ladies who bind the books, that they will be there on Wednesday morning, so that the books can be delivered on Monday.”
- It weakens the values of competency and professionalism since if anyone can do the job anyway, then there is no need for professional and full-time employees. A female library manager brought up the following example “if someone says, well, the volunteers can also hand out books, then I answer why, then all mothers can become teachers because they also have to do homework with the child in the afternoon.”

3.4. Possible motives for volunteering

- Personal satisfaction
- Love for the book
- Social life

- Form of contribution to society
- Skill-honing opportunity
- Sense of belonging to a community
- Learning experience
- Social interactions

3.5. Expectations of the volunteers

- Reliable
- Fluent in German. A female library manager described *“I don’t need a refugee who can’t speak German properly. It’s like when you have a bread seller who is allergic to bread. He should know a little about books, too.”* However, the following statement by a female library manager said *“I have no problems with that. I had a volunteer with me from Romania who unfortunately moved away, otherwise she would still be there. She had a little difficulty with the German language, but if she knows the program, I have no problem.”*
- Strong sense of responsibility
- Passionate about books
- Computer literate
- Enjoying contact with customers and children
- Team-oriented
- Regular attendance (also take part in team meetings)
- Must have time. Some interviewees found it important for the volunteers to allocate at least 3 hours a week to work in the library. A female library manager said *“It would be important to have three hours a week. Otherwise, the time is too short to even start anything.”* Another interviewee whose library is open 7 hours a week claimed that her volunteers invest an average of 2 hours a month for the voluntary work in the library. Another female head of a library, however, was more

relaxed on this matter. She said “I don't think there is any norm. As far as I understand it, the younger generation or those who have just committed to voluntary work are no longer committed to the long term anyway.”

3.6. Expectations

From the interviews, it could be concluded that there is one common expectation shared by interviewees, which is to have more male volunteers. A female library manager whose library has three employees and four volunteers said *“I would like to have a man in the team as a volunteer. But men don't work unpaid, I can tell you right now. Men only work paid, otherwise they don't work.”*

In reply to the question “if you take a man as a volunteer, what could be different then?”, she answered *“Well, if only women work together, the masculine note is missing. Just like when there are lots of men in the office, the feminine touch is missing. So, we could use a masculine note. Because of course men think differently than women.”*

4. Recommendations

The interviews showed that the role of volunteers in libraries is recognized and valued. There is also the awareness that there would be no rosy future for libraries in Austria without volunteers. There were, however, several uncovered areas that could be critically examined, leaving rooms for improvement.

Based on the outcomes of the interviews, the following recommendations were developed:

4.1. Increasing the share of male volunteers in libraries

First of all, it should be mentioned that the work in public libraries is not gender-related. To successfully recruit male volunteers, it may be necessary to determine specific, short-term tasks, projects, or events that they should handle and offer

positions that they find attractive. Options worth considering are in technology or business (Driggers et al., 2002). Managers should be aware that there are also short-term volunteers that tend to be recruited through participation in a specific event, such as a weekend library program. Such temporary episodic volunteers provide a few hours or not more than a day of their time on a one-off basis. Someone who may only work on a project-basis arrangement is most likely the same as an interim volunteer who is involved regularly but for a limited time period. (Rochester, 2006).

4.2. Matching the interests of a volunteer with the job requirements

The interviews show that most librarians are okay with having certain volunteers wanting to do certain jobs only. They consider the preferences and passions of the volunteers. But it was also mentioned that there are volunteers who only want to give little contribution. This perhaps has something to do with the fact that the activities are not tailored well enough to their interests. Therefore, it is important to understand the different types of volunteers. Is she or he a volunteer with the ability to learn? Is she or he a ready-made colleague? Is she or he a person that never rings in with excuses and never forgets things? Or is it about someone who likes to talk and who wants to be in constant contact with people? All these questions may help managers identify the right volunteers to recruit (Harvey, 2013).

4.3. Understanding the time commitment

The interviews showed that it is important for the librarians to make sure that the volunteers are regularly present so that they can take part in meetings from time to time and that the whole thing is worthwhile for the library. The tendency seems to be that they would rather have fewer volunteers who spend more time on this matter. To prevent misunderstanding, it is essential to understand the time commitment a volunteer can make. One-day clean-up or beautification activities require

little time and effort. Continuous and recurring activities should be given to people who have the necessary time for them (Grossman et al., 2002).

4.4. Realistically assessing training needs

The interviews showed that library managers would give training to volunteers if they are dissatisfied with their work. This implies that the training effort should not be underestimated. Without any initial or continuous training, the concept of volunteering does not work. Volunteers' prior understanding of program goals and their role in accomplishing those goals affects their work. This may increase their involvement in voluntary works. In addition, regular supervision is critical as it helps ensure that volunteers work effectively. The more time a manager devotes to interacting with volunteers, the better job they will deliver (Grossman et al., 2002). Identification with the work in the library can make them long-term volunteers who are willing to invest a lot of time in their volunteer role (Rochester, 2006).

4.5. Perceiving the variety of tasks

The statement made by one of the library heads who claimed that she could not imagine working with a refugee who speaks almost no German given that the number of tasks in a library is very diverse. There is often a broader variety of jobs than assumed. One example could be that a volunteer is sometimes needed to take care of the plants in the library (Driggers et al., 2002).

4.6. Understanding the volunteer's costs and benefits

It helps a lot to understand the total costs and benefits that a volunteer may offer to the library. The costs that volunteers may need to consider include the amount of time spent at the library, the amount of income that they may lose, and the amount of social interaction that they may give up. The benefits, meanwhile, may include their probability of gaining social reputation, potential of future employment, personal

satisfaction, and new experience in organization (Handy et al, 2000) and appreciation. The “NÖ Bibliotheken Award” shows how good the work can be rewarded, especially in the “Personal Commitment” category which is dedicated to volunteers who are willing to give their special commitment to the work (treffpunkt-bibliothek.at). The librarians, meanwhile, should also try to create incentives to provide some benefits to the volunteers.

4.7. Establishing a clear distribution of work between full-time workers and volunteers

Full-time employees expressed their concern over the risk of having their own hours deducted as the library recruits more volunteers. That being said, there is no need for them to worry that their professional competence will be called into question if the division of work between full-time employees and volunteers is clearly defined. In Germany, for instance, core library tasks such as information transfer, process or change management continues to be carried out by specialists and volunteers are hired for tasks that have nothing to do with primary librarianship (Kulzer, 2015).

5. Discussion

The fact that reading may have positive effects on health implies that the existence of public libraries as places of information is quite fundamental as they encourage people to read. However, without the proper commitment of volunteers, public libraries in Austria would face a sad future. This paper shows how important volunteers are for the Austrian public libraries. After a brief introduction to the Austrian library landscape, important insights from the interviews are presented. Citations from the interviewees are also outlined to provide clarifications on what actually happens in the real-life setting. In addition, some recommendations on how volunteer

work in public libraries could be organized in the future are also presented.

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