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Managing volunteer engagement in reference to empirical research

1. Introduction

In Human Resources Management (HRM), we can observe the growing popularity of work engagement issues and its expansion into other areas of application. The interest in work engagement is also reflected in scientific discourse, which explores this issue from various perspectives – psychological, social (relational), and organizational ones (Kirsch, 2010).

The social context supports the increasing importance of work engagement and indicates new areas of its use. Thus, increasing economic prosperity highlights social inequalities that on one hand show a great need for pro-social activities and on the other provides opportunities to engage at both the individual (e.g., volunteerism) and organizational levels (e.g., corporate social responsibility – CSR activities). This is a great challenge for today's management, especially in third-sector organizations. Moreover, there are relatively few studies and publications concerning these issues, particularly in Poland; therefore, their examination can be very useful for leaders of non-profit organizations.

The aim of this paper is to identify and explain the terminology and concepts existing in the literature concerning engagement, as it is often confused by the interchangeable use of the terms engagement, commitment, and involvement (Hallberg and Schaufeli, 2006), and to study this phenomenon among a group of volunteers involved in the organization of World Youth Days in 2016 in Poland (WYD). During the organization of this huge event, numerous signs of a strong organizational commitment were observed; but above all, individual

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engagement was evident, which manifested in great enthusiasm and zeal of action, the will to go beyond the minimum social requirements, and to do something for a group (a particular organization, community, church, homeland, humanity, etc.) (Mrówka, 2010). This event revealed an enormous potential of energy, creativity, and teamwork, which are invaluable resources of all kinds of social groups and organizations.

2. Engagement, commitment, and involvement – the same or different?

In the literature, the concept of engagement is understood differently depending on the considered context and conditions of its application. In many cases, it is limited to purely intuitive recognition. Another popular practice is to define the concept for specific research or activities. In the literature, terms such as commitment, involvement, and engagement can be identified. Although they seem similar, each of them is used in a different context (Hallberg and Schaufeli, 2006).

Thus, the term "commitment" is used in relation to the mutual relationship of an employee and an organization. It expresses the commitment in terms of a sense of duty and emotional attachment, mostly to the organization (Robinson et al., 2004). Therefore, it is often cited as an organizational commitment occurring in three basic varieties – affective commitment, continuance commitment, and normative commitment (Łochnicka, 2015).

Then, the term "involvement" focuses on the participation of the organization's members in the process of forming a structure and the functioning of the organization (Łochnicka, 2015). In the literature, it is often used as job involvement. In this regard, this construct characterizes an individual; however, the level of this involvement is mostly determined by the organization.

In contrast, the concept of engagement refers to the emotional relationship that occurs between an individual and a group, although the emphasis is on shared goals and values in this perspective (Vance, 2006). Therefore, it is mostly recalled as work engagement. The literature identifies three dimensions of engagement: intellectual engagement, affective engagement, and social engagement (The Insights Group Ltd., 2014).

Commitment and engagement are very similar, and this is why they are distinguished in some publications whereas some authors consider them to be identical (Ferrer, 2005).

When analyzing engagement from the organizational approach, there are two fundamental perspectives: from the employer's and the employee's points of view. For managers, it is important to create employee engagement, as it is

connected with employee loyalty and the higher quality of work and efficiency, which turns into increased profits. In addition, it releases the potential of knowledge, experience, and creativity, which leads to increased innovation and a competitive advantage (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009). Moreover, research indicates that work engagement is also related to greater efficiency and better economic results (Łochnicka, 2015) as well as higher customer satisfaction, which is crucial for building a competitive advantage (Corporate Leadership Council, 2004). Finally, when increasing work engagement, employees can achieve a higher level of satisfaction with their efforts, developing their competencies – gaining new experience and skills as well as achieving a sense of fulfillment and validity in their work (Łochnicka, 2015). In both cases, engagement goes beyond a purely financial and formalized kind of relationship.

3. Engagement of volunteers

Findings show that a company where sustainability and corporate social responsibility is a central part of the managerial culture may be more attractive to potential employees (Jones and Willness, 2013; Albinger and Freeman, 2000). Recent research shows that 76% of employees (mostly millennials) consider a company's social and environmental commitments when deciding where to work, and 64% will not take a job if a potential employer does not have a strong corporate social responsibility (WorldatWork, 2016). And among the most popular social responsible activities within a company, employees are often motivated to do voluntary work for the local community.

In this context, volunteerism becomes an extremely important phenomenon from the engagement point of view, as it goes beyond the financial incentives in practice. In socially responsible (SR) organizations, employees share similar values and goals with the organization, and by the strong engagement in volunteer work for the local community, they are proud of what they do (Jones and Willness, 2013). Therefore, volunteers are by definition involved individuals who are ready to invest their personal resources (strength, time, knowledge, experience, etc.) to do "something more" for the community or organization (Mrówka, 2010).

The economic and political transformation that took place in the '90s in Poland supported the development of formal volunteerism. The Act on Public Benefit Activity and Volunteerism of 2003 introduced the official definition of a volunteer and sanctioned the legal side of volunteerism. At the beginning of the 20th century, volunteerism in Poland was characterized by dynamic growth reflected by the steadily increasing number of volunteers (Gumkowska et al., 2004). The growing popularity of volunteerism in Poland also contributed to a greater

public awareness, which meant that people began to recognize their community involvement (broadly defined) in terms of volunteer work.

Therefore, the way voluntary work is perceived has been transformed. What is more, the increase in the amount of work is not necessarily directly proportional to the increase in the quantity of volunteers; in fact, this number may even be smaller. This is why it should be assessed by both the number of volunteers as well as the action that took place as well as their results when assessing voluntary work. The period of the dynamic increase in volunteerism (expressed in the number of volunteers) has led to the real development of these pro-social activities. In 2012, voluntary activities were declared by every fifth Pole; since that time, the percentage of volunteers in Poland has remained stable (at around 20%). Another dimension of the development of volunteerism shows the constantly increasing number of businesses that appreciate and use the work of volunteers (Fig. 1). In 2006, around 40% of organizations benefited from the work of volunteers; in 2015, this percentage reached 61% of all organizations (75% of foundations and 59% of associations) (Adamiak et al., 2015). It can be assumed that volunteerism in Poland is growing and is becoming very popular; therefore, there is a need for research covering this stream.
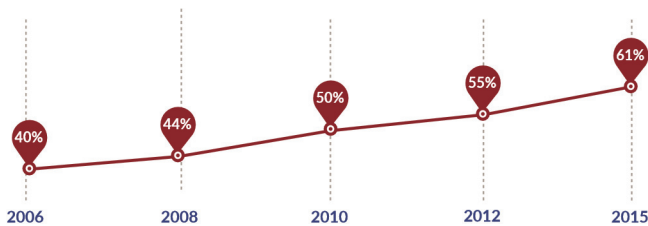

Figure 1. Percentage of organizations using volunteer work

Source: Adamiak et al, 2015.

4. Research methods

World Youth Days was an important event in the Church and in the society, and its organization in Krakow was a huge logistical and organizational challenge. It was financed by the voluntary offerings of the faithful of the Catholic Church in Poland and the contributions of pilgrims as well as sponsors. In terms of the proper administration, state authorities, transport and municipal organizations, and medical services were all involved to ensure security, proper logistics, and health. In the preparation and course of World Youth Days, many uniformed services were

involved; e.g., more than 20,000 police officers, nearly 20,000 firefighters and rescuers (PSP and TSO, respectively), nearly 1000 officers (BOR), nearly 12,000 border guard officers, and 5000 soldiers (Zasadzińska-Baraniewska et al., 2016).

World Youth Days was also a media event, as large media firms were involved in the organization and transmission of this event – Catholic Information Agency Sp. z o.o., Polish Press Agency SA, Polish Radio SA, Polish Television SA, and other smaller firms on a local scale. The WYD organization was supported by many sponsors and partners – the organizing committee of the WYD distinguished 27 different types of organizations and businesses and 13 supporting businesses and agencies of the public administration when sending a formal thanksgiving.

The nearly three-year period of preparation required a large amount of work performed mostly by volunteers. Therefore, a study of the volunteers who actively participated in the organization of World Youth Days can be a source of valuable information for the leaders guiding the work of volunteers for similar events (particularly because there is a research gap on this subject in Poland in the literature). This is why the research focused on an analysis of the engagement of volunteers in the context of their basic socio-demographic characteristics.

The research tool was a questionnaire survey consisting of main sections related to the engagement and future recommendations for managing and organizing similar events. The questionnaire contained 13 closed and 2 open questions. The sample was comprised of WYD volunteers from the area of Malopolska Province. Questionnaires were sent electronically via the coordinators and district offices, creating the organizational structure of WYD. In total, 220 returned questionnaires were obtained.

5. Empirical results

In the survey, three quarters of the respondents were women, which shows that, in the analyzed sample, volunteering women are more often engaged as compared to men. Almost half of the respondents were volunteers aged 19 to 25 years (45.2%), every fourth volunteer (24.7%) was in high school (16–18 years of age), and every fifth (19.6%) was more than 25 years old. The least numerous category of volunteers were high school students (10.5%) (Fig. 2). Middle school students were a very large group of supporting volunteers; however, they could not obtain volunteer status of WYD in its full meaning due to regulations[1].

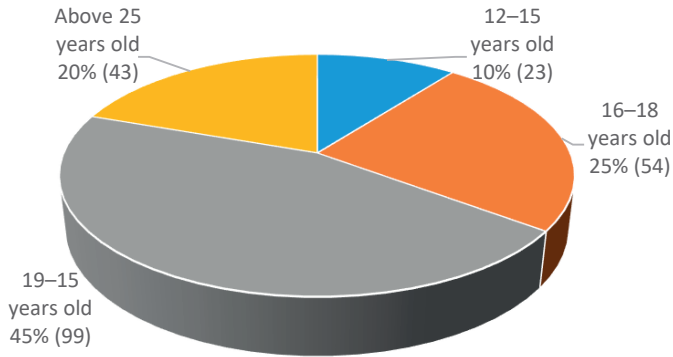[1] Adulthood was the condition of becoming a full volunteer.

Figure 2. Age of WYD volunteers

Source: authors' own research

When it comes to family status, most volunteers came from families with two (33.9%) or three (28.9%) children. Of all the respondents, 14.7% had three siblings and 11.9% had four or more. Every tenth volunteer was the only child (10.6%). This family structure corresponds with the models adopted by Polish families.

The largest group of respondents was volunteers came from urban areas with more than 20,000 residents (41.9%), and the smallest group came from rural areas and small towns with 500 inhabitants and fewer (1.8%). In the other categories, the percentages of volunteers were at similar levels (11–17%) (Fig. 3).
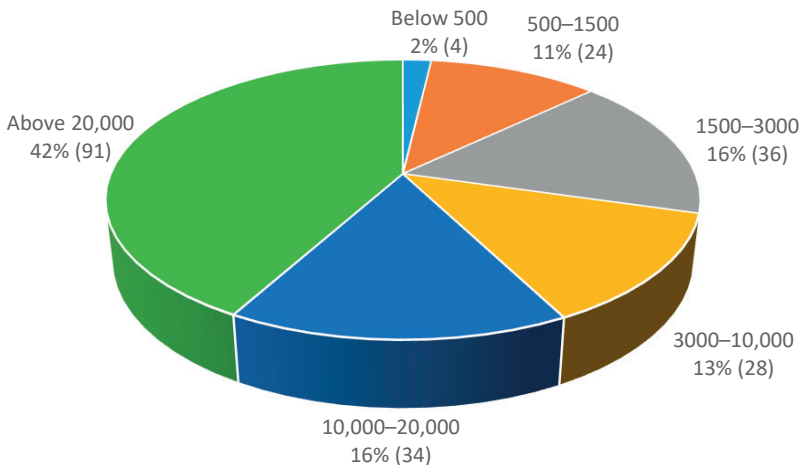

Figure 3. Number of inhabitants in places of residence of WYD volunteers

Source: authors' own research

An analysis of the research sample shows that the WYD volunteers were often those who have been already engaged in voluntary work in parish life. More than half of the respondents (52.8%) had taken an active part in various forms of voluntary activities for more than four years before WYD, and only 13% were not previously involved (Fig. 4).
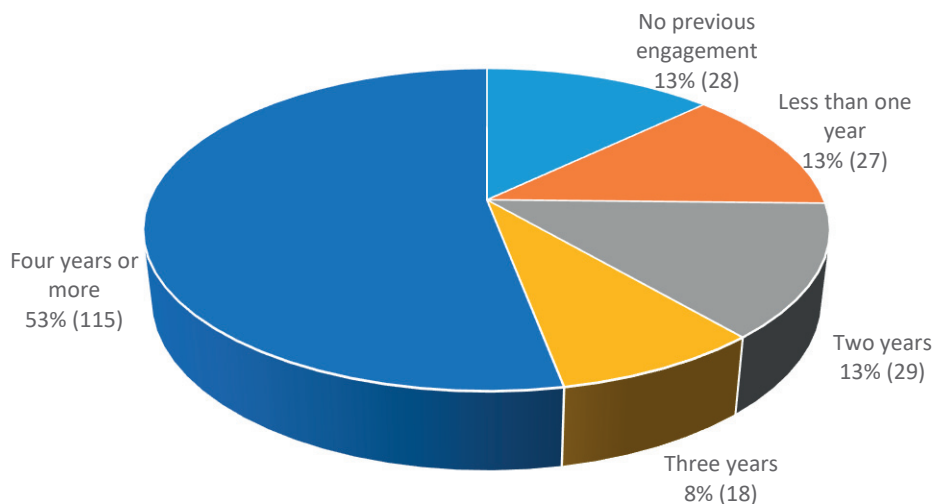

Figure 4. Period of previous engagement in voluntary work in parish life

Source: authors' own research

Moreover, this engagement was active rather than formal, because the vast majority (71.9%) always or almost always participated in regular meetings of their groups. The high degree of engagement evidenced by inclusion in most of the events organized by this group declared by 69.6% of the respondents (55.1% of them are often involved in the organization of these events, and 14.5% are involved as participants).

The WYD volunteer group was formed mainly by individuals who usually include a variety of additional activities in their daily routines. A lack of involvement to any initiative was declared by only 7.4% of the respondents. The most often undertaken activities by volunteers were those that aimed to develop their interests, such as playing, singing, art, sport, etc. (62.7%). Other forms of additional involvement were charities (36.4%), additional lessons (28.1%), activities of local government (25.3%), teaching support of younger colleagues (22.1%), and persistent volunteerism (16.6%) (Fig. 5).
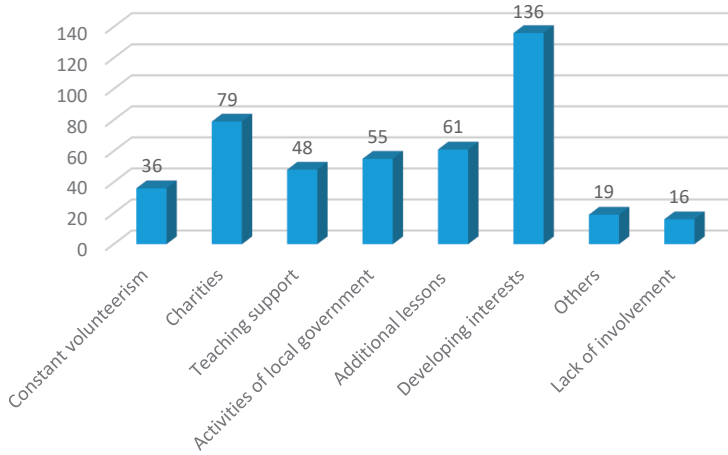
Figure 5. Other additional activities in daily routines

Source: authors' own research

When recruiting volunteers, among the most often mentioned reasons for voluntary activities was the desire to help (two-thirds of the respondents) and to participate in an historic event (59.4%). Many volunteers wanted to take the opportunity to do something important for the Church (55.7%) or for the country (24.7%). Some of the volunteers became engaged because of the influence of others (a priest or guardian – 20.5%, a relative or close friend – 16.4%, or a group of friends – 7.3%). Finally, some volunteers were looking for adventure (39.7%) or simply access to single events of WYD (25.1%), while others were guided by curiosity (26.9%) and even by boredom (0.9%) (Fig. 6).
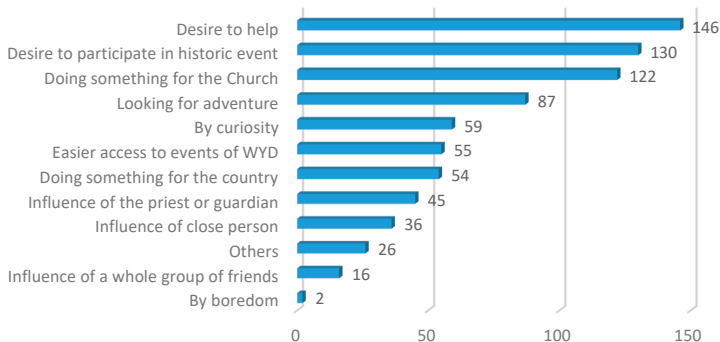

Figure 6. Reasons for WYD voluntary activities

Source: authors' own research

When analyzing the relationships between the different aspects of engagement, four gradable variables were included: the period of activity within the group, the frequency of participation in the meetings of this group, the degree of involvement in the events organized by this group, and the level of engagement in the organization of WYD. The strength of the links between them was analyzed on the basis of rank correlation coefficients (Spearman's rho, Kendall's tau, Goodman and Kruskal's gamma).

The tests did not show strong correlations between the levels of the different activity forms. The specific levels of significance between the particular indicators are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Relationship between different aspects of engagement

Relationship	Spearman's rho	Kendall's tau	Goodman and Kruskal's gamma
The period of activity within the group – The frequency of participation in the meetings	0.371240***	0.321722***	0.448558***
The period of activity within the group – The degree of involvement in group events	0.427695***	0.374009***	0.528329***
The period of activity within the group – The level of engagement in WYD	0.034137	0.029630	0.046341
The frequency of participation in the meetings – The degree of involvement in group events	0.472506***	0.422172***	0.579024***
The frequency of participation in the meetings – The level of engagement in WYD	0.038625	0.033267	0.050899
The degree of involvement in group events – The level of engagement in WYD	0.174654**	0.157067***	0.240837***

Source: authors' calculations (*** $p = 0.01$ **$p = 0.05$)

The strongest positive correlation was observed between the variables relating to the ordinary activities of the group – participation in regular meetings and the degree that volunteers engage in events organized by this group. Based on this relationship, the gradation of the engagement phenomenon can be confirmed – as there are individuals more and less engaged in their work. Individuals characterized by a higher level of engagement (commitment) are willing to engage

in various possible activities, as the engagement in the activity seems to be itself important. On the other hand, individuals who are characterized by lower levels of engagement are more likely to select those activities and engage only in those activities that suit them (and only to the extent that it is convenient to them).

A slightly weaker relationship occurred between the period of membership in a group and participating in the events and between the period of membership in a group and attendance at meetings. This correlation indicated that, at least to some extent, the time of membership in a group is reflected in the level of commitment. This may be associated with a greater commitment to the group and a growing sense of responsibility for the group and its activity.

This level of dependence could be also affected by the maturity of the individuals. However, the independent variables in our sample (age and period of involvement in the activities of the group) did not show a correlation (coefficient of rank correlation: -0.006354 [Spearman's rho], 0.002513 [Goodman and Kruskal's gamma], 0.001765 [Kendall's tau]). However, we can distinguish two kinds of maturity in this case: the first one is connected with age and personal experience (personal maturity), and the second is connected with membership within a particular group (membership maturity).

More attention, however, should be paid to the statement of variables (which did not show any relationship). In any case, this refers to the variable characterizing the level of engagement in the organization of WYD, which was independent from the prior level of commitment (involvement) in a group (as shown by the results obtained).

The dependence coefficients between the engagement period in a group and the level of involvement in the WYD as well as between the frequency of participation in group meetings and the level of involvement in the WYD were statistically insignificant. This observed regularity (a very low correlation or its lack concerned with the involvement in the WYD organization) is worth emphasizing and suggests an interesting direction for future research. However, it does not entail binding conclusions.

WYD was an important event that mobilized people with different levels of prior engagement – including those who were previously uninvolved. On the other hand, there were also people whose strong engagement to the current activities of their groups did not translate into a high proportion of their involvement in the organization of WYD. In practice, this means that the recruitment should not be narrowed to only the existing activists when looking for co-workers in the organization of a major event.

A series of independence χ^2 tests were also carried out, testing the relationships between the engagement dependent variable and the socio-demographic variables. Although the criteria of fulfilling of assumptions has yet to be met

(required minimum multiplicity of individual cells) and the size of the empirical abundance tables was large, the χ^2 test was used with the Williams correction in the analysis. An interesting regularity was observed – all of the variables determining the level of engagement proved to be independent of gender, numbers of siblings, and sizes of the places of residence. However, each of them showed a dependence on the age variable at the same time.

6. Discussion and conclusions

Volunteer work seems extremely important for the younger generation and can sometimes even determine their acceptance of a job (WorldatWork, 2016). Therefore, many business organizations and non-profit organizations are incorporating volunteer programs for their employees. The growing popularity of volunteerism indicates that this kind of work can provide multi-dimensional benefits for all stakeholders (leaders, volunteers, and local communities) as well as for the organization itself. However, to make this possible, it seems necessary to study this phenomenon to discover the profile of the volunteers and most suitable management tools to effectively manage their engagement at work. This is especially true since there is a lack of similar research in Poland in the literature. This is why the event of World Youth Days that was organized in Krakow was a great opportunity to study voluntary work, as it showed the great potential of young people when engaging in volunteering work.

The results of the research showed that women, people aged 19–25, and those with one or two siblings were most often engaged in volunteerism for the WYD. Most volunteers came from larger towns and had already been a member of a particular group for a long time while also taking on a variety of other activities. The most commonly reported reasons for inclusion in the organization of WYD were the desires to help, to participate in an important historical event, and to do something for the Church. It can be assumed that the growing environment supports the strong pro-social attitudes and involvement in volunteers, as sensitivity to the needs of others is something obvious and natural for those respondents with siblings. In addition, the larger the town, the greater the recruitment environment for volunteerism.

Analysis of the research results allowed us to formulate the following recommendations useful for leaders of teams of volunteers. Research has shown that, within the volunteers' groups, it is possible to use professional and modern management methods; in fact, volunteers are looking for professional management methods. The level of a volunteer's engagement is determined by various factors. Some of those factors refer to the volunteer's personality and abilities, but most

are centered on the functioning of the team (the proper organization of the team) as well as around the leader of the team (his or her attitudes and actions). When looking at the first dimension of the group of factors that determine whether a volunteer join a group, the respondents indicated good work organization of the team (without excessive bureaucracy), a favorable atmosphere, and the strong cooperation of all members in achieving clearly defined objectives. Then, in the second dimension, respondents emphasized that a leader must above all be involved in the same work (functioning group). He or she must show a high level of responsibility, motivation, and enthusiasm in leadership that inspires others. A good leader should be proactive, take the initiative, and lead the way to achieve the goals while at the same time not imposing these goals and not forcing the method of its implementation. Moreover, the respondents indicated that a leader must be a determined and decisive person (capable of making decisions) and at the same time should be open to the voices of other volunteers (bottom-up ideas and initiatives). When creating volunteer engagement, it is crucial to show the importance of volunteer work by the leader; therefore, a personal invitation to cooperate and thanking each individual is essential when managing a team of volunteers.

This article showed that the phenomenon of engagement among volunteers should be explored, as there is a niche in the Polish literature in this area. Developing a leader's skills in managing a team is much easier than creating a real leader's engagement. Therefore, research in leadership skills and the management of teams of volunteers could be valuable. However, limiting the research only to these aspects would distance the volunteers' studies from the significant area of development of the management. A professional approach to leading a team of volunteers can influence volunteer engagement, translating into the better effectiveness of the whole team or organization.

7. Research limitations and implications

This research whose results are presented in this paper was a pilot study and is subject to certain restrictions. It should be noted that the survey method assumed entirely the voluntary and anonymous filling-out of questionnaires. Therefore, when interpreting the results, it is important to take into account the possibility of some kind of selectivity that might have accrued in the responses, which will help avoid overly general and categorical conclusions. Although the questionnaires were sent to all of the volunteers from the districts covered by the study (thus, their availability was the same for all), it can be expected that

the respondents were those who were strongly involved volunteers – more active than those involved only formally.

Moreover, the engagement of volunteers from NGOs and business organizations (employee volunteerism) is not necessarily comparable. The potential to volunteer in an activity may be satisfied in various way; e.g., in charity organizations, NGOs, religious organizations, or employee volunteerism. This research does not directly apply to employee volunteerism, although exploration of volunteer management in general will help to understand the processes and issues and will also be helpful in further research.

Due to the small sample size (220 responses), the reliability of the results obtained and the degree of fulfillment of the test assumptions are low. Therefore, in the future, the results can be verified based on a larger sample.

It would be desirable to continue similar studies – however, from a wider research perspective – taking into account not only individual events such as World Youth Days but also the ongoing management process that uses volunteer labor (in particular, organizations in the third sector). Results of such studies would provide more guidance for the strong engagement of volunteers and effective management and will lead to increased benefits for all stakeholders.

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