How Individuals Mentally Account For Work-Time Volunteerism: Putting the Work Into Volunteer Work

Debra Z. Basil, University of Lethbridge, Canada
Mary Runte, University of Lethbridge, Canada

A survey was conducted to assess how individuals mentally account for work-time volunteering, and what impact this has on personal-time volunteering. A nationally representative sample of 2,125 Canadians participated in the on-line survey. Results suggest that context and coordination impacts how individuals mentally categorize the volunteering activity. Involvement with the cause and motivation for volunteering impact mental categorization. A combined categorization approach (i.e. having one overall mental account for volunteerism) and higher involvement lead to increased personal-time volunteering as a result of work-time volunteering, whereas separate categorization leads to a reduction in personal-time volunteering as a result of work-time volunteering.

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Debra Z. Basil, University of Lethbridge, Canada
Mary M. Runte, University of Lethbridge, Canada

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Volunteering occurs during work time for many individuals. Companies are increasingly allowing employees to use work time for volunteering (Easwaramoorthy, Barr, Runte and Basil 2006). We examine this topic from the employees’ perspective to determine whether work-time volunteering is viewed as work, or volunteering, or some combination, and how this perspective impacts the quantity of volunteer work an individual performs overall.

One seminal volunteerism framework identified six fundamental motivations of volunteerism (Clary et al. 1998). We address how these motivations impact the categorization of volunteer work.

We use mental accounting to assess individuals’ categorization of volunteering. Both context (whether the volunteering is performed during work or on personal time) and coordination effort (whether the employee or the employer organized the volunteering) are expected to impact how individuals mentally account for their volunteerism.

When considering volunteering done during work time, categorization is somewhat ambiguous. It could be viewed as a work activity and/or as a volunteer activity. Individuals should prefer to categorize work-time volunteering in a manner that is hedonically most beneficial.

An individual’s motivations for volunteering should impact the mental accounting of volunteer time. If an individual is strongly motivated to volunteer, then the volunteering aspect of work-time volunteering should be somewhat more salient than the work-time aspect of work-time volunteering. If work issues are more salient to the individual than volunteer motivations, categorization should lean toward a work activity rather than a volunteer activity. As such we expect work-time volunteering to compose a unique mental account when volunteering motivation is low, but to be categorized into an overall combined mental volunteering account when volunteering motivation is high.

Similarly, if an individual is highly involved with a cause greater emphasis should be placed on the volunteering aspect of work-time volunteering. The individual would then be inclined to categorize work and personal-time volunteering into the same combined volunteering category.

Competing hypotheses are proposed regarding whether holding separate mental accounts for volunteerism will increase or decrease the tendency to substitute work-time volunteering for personal-time volunteering. Mental accounting suggests categories are relatively infungible (Thaler, 1999). If work-time volunteering and personal-time volunteering are viewed as separate accounts, mental accounting suggests that work-time volunteering would not substitute for personal-time volunteering. If instead they are viewed as part of the same volunteering account, an individual might reduce his or her personal-time volunteering if s/he begins volunteering during work hours.

However, this perspective does not take into account the fact that the value of volunteering is not equal for those who hold separate and combined mental accounts for volunteering. We have proposed above that those who hold one combined mental account for volunteering do so largely because they are involved and motivated to volunteer. If so, then it is likely that the opportunity to increase the behavior will be readily accepted. As such, we would not expect individuals who hold one combined mental account to reduce their personal volunteering when given the opportunity to volunteer at work, because they garner benefits from volunteering. These two competing hypotheses are tested.

Methods
A national survey was conducted. Respondents were recruited from an on-line research panel. The sample of 2,125 Canadian respondents was selected to be nationally representative in terms of age, gender and education. The survey contained a total of 47 questions. Questions addressed personal-time volunteering, work-time volunteering, and demographics.

Results
Volunteering that occurs during work-time was seen as less of a volunteer activity and more of a work activity, compared to volunteering that occurs after work. Volunteering organized by the employer was seen as less of a volunteer activity than volunteering organized by the employees themselves.

Higher levels of involvement enhanced the view that work-time volunteering and personal-time volunteering should be combined into one mental volunteering account. Also, three of the six motivations for volunteering suggested a combined accounting process. Overall this suggests that a higher level of involvement and motivation does encourage combining volunteerism into one mental account.

Those with high levels of involvement indicated a significant tendency to increase personal-time volunteering if allowed to volunteer during work-time. Those with low levels of involvement did not demonstrate significant changes in personal-time volunteering due to work-time volunteering opportunities. Those who use a separate mental account for work-time volunteering indicated a significant tendency to reduce personal-time volunteering as a result of work-time volunteering. Those who use a combined mental account for volunteering indicated a tendency to increase personal-time volunteering as a result of work-time volunteering.

Discussion
The context of the volunteering and the coordination of the volunteering effort impact how individuals categorize volunteer work. Volunteering will be seen as more of a work activity and less of a volunteer activity if it occurs during work hours and if it is organized by the employer.

The categorization of volunteering depends upon involvement and volunteering motivation. Individuals who are more involved with the cause tend to use a combined approach to mentally account for volunteering. Those who are less involved tend to view work-time and personal-time volunteering as separate accounts. Similarly, individuals who are more highly motivated to volunteer tend to utilize a combined volunteering account and are less likely to segregate work-time volunteering from personal-time volunteering.

How an individual categorizes volunteering impacts total volunteer hours. Those who use a combined account tend towards increasing personal-time volunteering as a result of work-time volunteering, whereas those who use separate mental accounts tend towards decreasing their personal-time volunteering as a result of work-time volunteering.
References
Easwaramoorthy, M., Cathy Barr, Mary Runte and Debra Basil (2006), “Business Support for Employee Volunteers in Canada: Results of a National Survey,” Published by *Imagine Canada* in conjunction with the *Knowledge Development Centre*.