

Developing your Project Managements skills through being a Volunteer ¹

Alfonso Bucero

I found several definitions of a volunteer in the literature. For example, the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as a person who voluntarily undertakes or expresses a willingness to launch a service. The Cambridge dictionary says that a volunteer is somebody who does something to help other people willingly and without being forced or paid to do it. My definition of a volunteer is somebody who has internally the need of helping others dedicating some personal time and effort to succeed without expecting nothing in exchange, and feel so well doing it. Some worldwide professional associations use volunteers to develop and expand their professional added value. Some professionals always expect to be paid when they collaborate or help other people in an initiative or a project. I believe that depending on the culture, those expectations vary. The truth is that my experience of playing the role of a volunteer in a professional project management association has been, and still is, very positive for my professional development. I wanted to share with you my personal experience.

My story

When I first joined a professional project management association in 1993 (The Project Management Institute - PMI), I had the opportunity of attending a PMI Congress in San Diego. I was astounded by the many people who attended, and I was surprised to be the only Spanish professional who attended. I could not understand that; I promised to find out how vital project management practice and interest in Spain during those years (the 1990s).

As an international project management practitioner and frequent traveller, I had the opportunity to meet many colleagues from different countries and found the common professional passion among most of them. As soon as I came back to Spain, I searched for some interested colleagues in project management. I discovered ten people coming from different firms (e.g.: NCR, HP, IBM, and some Spanish Engineering and Construction companies). We all wanted to move the project management profession forward and were interested in founding a professional association. We were willing to dedicate some of our free time and effort to doing it. That initiative started in 1997 and had peaks and valleys in its component interests, agreements, behaviours, and reactions until the PMI Madrid Spain Chapter was chartered in 2002. The professional colleague Jose Antonio Puentes was the Chapter Sponsor and then the first President. I was honoured to be a founder member. A typical behaviour I observed was that our unique objective was to contribute to moving our profession forward in Spain.

Before creating our first Spanish PMI Chapter, I knew about the LIM (Leadership Institute Meeting), a yearly meeting for PMI volunteers who were members or officers of one Chapter or were seriously thinking about forming one. In those meetings, I discovered a vast window of

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opportunities to contribute, collaborate, share and learn. So, if you want to learn skills to advance your career, volunteering may be a good option. When you volunteer, you have an excellent opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others.

Along 29 years of being a PMI member, I served as a PMI volunteer in different roles, Chapter Sponsor, President of two Chapters (Madrid and Barcelona), member of the Leadership Advisory group, Regional Mentor, PMIEF EMEA representative, and now a member of the PMI Madrid Spain Chapter Council. I periodically contribute, as a volunteer, by presenting webinars and delivering PM presentations worldwide. I spent much time reflecting upon my behaviour as a volunteer, and I identified my purpose to help organizations and individuals improve their attitudes for more successful projects.

I do not feel like a champion or a winner. Helping people and facilitating people to succeed is part of my spirit. Project management is my passion, and it is what I try to transmit to other people. But to convince you that you should be a volunteer, let me share some of the benefits I found.

The benefits

As soon as you play a volunteer role as a project manager, I am sure that you will find some of the following benefits. But you will be able to develop some skills that would be more difficult to be extended if you were not playing that role.

1. It gives you a sense of purpose

You may be able to find your purpose through volunteering and becoming part of something greater than yourself. I firmly believe that helping others can give your life new meaning and keep you mentally stimulated. As a project manager, you must identify your professional purpose.

2. Provides a sense of community

Volunteering will help you feel connected to those you are helping in the community. This experience may make you want to get involved with other aspects of your community, such as local politics or advocating for programs you believe are essential. For instance, I contributed to and supported the “women in project management” initiative in Spain.

3. Meeting new professionals

Volunteering is a great way to meet new professional colleagues and strengthen existing connections with friends, co-workers, or even competitors. As a volunteer, you’ll typically interact with people from diverse backgrounds, which allows you to learn other approaches and experiences. I always defend that anyone could be your teacher; we can learn from any colleague if we have our ears open. Sharing a common interest will help you build closer relationships with those around you.

4. Increases your social skills

Volunteering gives you a chance to talk to new people and sharpen your social skills. By spending a lot of time working with others and using social skills, like active listening and relationship management, you will have the opportunity to develop your future personal and business relationships. It is an excellent opportunity to develop your influence skills quickly and naturally. Remember that you must deal with people and obtain good results as a project manager, so you need to build your influence. You can do it.

5. Improves self-esteem

Volunteering may boost your self-esteem and self-confidence. Doing something you feel is worthwhile and valuable for your community gives you a sense of accomplishment that may help you feel more fulfilled about your life and any future goals. I always try to take the initiative and offer my time and effort to contribute, and I need to feel that I can add value to my peers and colleagues through my small grains of contribution to any project I work on.

6. Teaches you valuable skills

The training and hands-on experience you gain while volunteering can help you learn new skills and build upon ones you already have. For instance, during my experience as a PMI volunteer, I gained valuable communication, public speaking, marketing, and other hard and soft skills that have been a great asset to my professional career.

7. Provides job prospects

Along with acquiring valuable skills and experience, you may also meet people while volunteering who can become your mentors or at least a part of your professional social network. If you choose to pursue a career in the area you're volunteering in, the connections you make also may help increase your job prospects. Through my LIM contacts, I met hundreds of professionals worldwide and found some business opportunities.

8. It brings fun to your life

Many people use volunteering to pursue their hobbies while making a difference. Volunteering for organizations like PMI may also give you a renewed sense of creativity and motivation that carries over to your personal and professional life. Projects can be fun, and learning to achieve them is critical for professional and social success.

9. Can help you be happier

It often feels good to contribute to projects and organizations that mean something to you. These good feelings can help lessen stress, anger, and anxiety in your life. Volunteering will provide you with the tools to be a happy and well-rounded individual. Building bonds and connections with people you volunteer with also may counteract any social isolation.

10. It gets you out of your comfort zone

You may overcome the personal challenges of leaving your comfort zone and doing something new with people you may not know through volunteer work. You may face various problems to solve as a volunteer that require you to exercise critical thinking skills that aid your personal development. This particular aspect has been essential in my professional and volunteer career.

Conclusion

Being a volunteer can contribute to your professional development. Reflect upon your generosity. Are you ready to share or give for free to your peers part of your insights as an experienced project manager? If you are, welcome to the club of professional givers. I believe that our professional lives are transactions composed of “giving and taking.” We need to give first before receiving something. The principal value is that if you give without expecting anything in exchange, you will receive thousands of more things, non-financially tangible things, but things that add value to our professional lives and purpose. Please join a project management professional association as a volunteer, give, share, help, and contribute if you believe so. Your reward will be immense; you will learn more and more, sharpen your hard and soft skills, grow professionally, get some fun, and be happier with yourself. Do it today, and tomorrow will be better and better for you.

About the Author



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