

Volunteering: a Route to the Students Professional Development

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Abstract: *The young people involved in volunteering have greater chances to find a job. They acquire knowledge and skills that they can use in their future job. Therefore, their chances of employment will be higher than those of young graduates who have no work experience. The purpose of this paper is to determine if students' involvement in volunteering has a positive influence on their future professional career.*

This paper examines the linkage between volunteering and professional development, by analyzing the students' opinion regarding the impact that volunteering has on their personal development, skills, qualification, work experience and future career perspectives. For this purpose, during the academic year 2016-2017 the research was conducted using a questionnaire on the population of 197 students of the Faculty of Administration and Public Management from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. In order to reach the survey's goal, descriptive statistical analysis was performed. A strong correlation between volunteering and students' professional development is observable in all explored aspects. Gaining work experience, acquiring communication skills, adapting to new work environment and developing one's personal curriculum vitae are considered important for the students' future professional career. These results should be used as a base for promoting volunteering in the academic and business environment.

Keywords: career opportunities, professional experience, employment skills, impact of volunteering on employability

JEL: I25, I29, L31, L39

Introduction

People who have lost their jobs or who are still employed but want to change their profession or those who re-enter the labor market after a long period of absence need new qualifications and skills (Street, 1994).

In this context, the volunteering ensures the development of specific skills (Knepper et al., 2015) transferable to the labor market, enhancing the employability of participants (Păceșilă, 2015). Volunteering is an important factor in creating a competitive labor markets in Europe (Bocănială, 2014), in developing education and professional training (Hager and Brudney, 2004), as well as in rising social solidarity (Păceșilă, 2017). The volunteer has the opportunity to practically experience the field of activity for which he prepares within the formal education

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system (Federația VOLUM, 2016; University of California, Career Service Center, n.d.). Although involvement in voluntary activities cannot guarantee a paid job (Paine et al., 2013), volunteering gives individuals the opportunity to gain skills customarily required for interviews (Janey et al., 1991): work team, resource management, communication and networking, project management. Furthermore, volunteering should be considered a creator of social capital (Wilkinson and Bittman, 2002; Handy and Mook, 2011; Pro Vobis, 2017) because volunteers have the opportunity to meet people from various fields (Campaspe, 2015) building a network of contacts (Fitzsimmons, 1986) which can be extremely useful in their professional activity. On the other hand, the growing number of people involved in voluntary activities could be an advantage for the NGO sector which receives free labor from people with important skills. Therefore, many studies recognize the significant economic value of volunteering (Brown, 1999; Sajardo and Serra, 2011; Toraldo et al., 2016). As regards volunteers, not all of them are aware of the professional experience gained through volunteering (Automation Industry Association, 2010). Volunteering allows volunteers to quickly identify the profession that fits them best while enhancing the personality and experiences that the individuals express through their CV (Reitman and Williams, 2001).

However, with few exceptions, most programs and volunteer activities are not designed to meet learning and professional development objectives, but are focused on community needs. Among the exempted programs there is the European Voluntary Service, a European Commission program that promotes the participation of young people in transnational exchanges. (Tinact.ro, n.d.). This program enables young people to carry out voluntary activities in organizations from another EU country than their country of residence, from EU neighborhood or from another partner country in the world. Due to this fact, since 2012, the Faculty of Administration and Public Management from Bucharest University of Economic Studies introduced the discipline “Management of Non-Governmental Organizations” in curricula of its two undergraduate programs: “Public Administration” and “Sociology - Human Resources”.

The purpose of this paper is to determine if this discipline that promotes students’ involvement in volunteering could have a positive influence on students’ future professional career. Based on our research results, we could propose the introduction of this discipline in other programs curricula of Bucharest University of Economic Studies.

1. Literature review

There is considerable support in the literature regarding the link between volunteering and professional development, numerous studies empirically and quantitatively exploring the positive signals sent by volunteering in the labour market.

The concept of voluntary work as a tool for professional development is supported by many researches analyzing the positive effect of volunteering on the

likelihood of people gaining employment (Chambre, 1989; Heidrich, 1990; Janey et al., 1991; Hirst, 2001; Cook and Jackson, 2006; Handy and Mook, 2011).

Moreover, a consistent body of research approaches volunteering as a desire to improve career opportunities (Katz, Rosenberg, 2005; Prouteau, Wolff, 2006; Barron, Rihova, 2011; Paine et al., 2013; Aydinli et al., 2016) and to acquire new skills (Low et al., 2007; Handy et al., 2010).

In this context, many studies have shown that students involved in volunteering acquire different skills applicable to a wide range of situations: decision making, leadership, creative thinking, strategic thinking, conflict resolution etc (Astin, Sax, 1998; Astin et al., 1999; Coen et al., 2014). Therefore, according to Freeman (1997) and Aydinli et al. (2016) an employer who has to choose between several candidates equally qualified for a position could use the experience and skills acquired through volunteering as criteria for selection.

In fact, an important part of literature focused on describing the positive impact of volunteering on employability (Gay, 1998; Low et al., 2007; Paine et al., 2013; Coen et al., 2014) as well as on the development of employability skills among all age groups and professional categories (Hirst, 2001; Maranta, Sladowski, 2010; Keough, 2015).

Although, in general, possessing specific skills is not required for participating in volunteering activities, certain situations involve proper training as well as the same level of responsibilities and stress as in a job (Brown and Zahrly, 1989; Knox, 2000; UTM Career Centre, 2016). Thus, volunteering has a significant contribution in finding a job (or) a better paid job by the employees (by gaining knowledge and new qualifications) as well as in maintaining the current job.

In this context, theoretical papers and empirical evidence (Thomas, 2001; Jones, 2005; Brook et al., 2007; Lough et al., 2009) suggest that many people involve in volunteering in order to acquire various skills necessary for getting employment, such as: communication and persuasion, flexibility and adaptability, negotiation and problem solving, proactivity, organizational spirit, leadership, time management, etc.

Increasingly interested in the motives driving individuals to volunteer, other authors explored the connection between volunteering, social networks and employment (Carlin, 2001; Gunderson, Gomez, 2003; Katz, Rosenberg, 2005; Ziemek, 2006; Hustinx et al., 2010). In this regard, they reached the conclusion that individuals participate in volunteering activities in order to enhance social relations with other people who share career interests, activities, backgrounds or real-life connections which could later be used to get a job.

2. The legal framework for volunteering in Romania

Volunteering has begun to be promoted in Romania since 1990 in parallel with the democratic changes within the society. It was regulated for the first time in 1995 by the volunteering law no. 195/2001 which aimed at promoting citizen participation in volunteer activities organized by public institutions or private non-profit entities. Furthermore, the normative act provided a definition of volunteering

as well as information about the volunteering agreement, volunteer rights and obligations.

The law suffered numerous modifications in the first decade of its entering in force. Despite these changes and its real contribution to progresses in the field, the law no. 195/2001 republished had many shortcomings and contradictions particularly regarding the meaning of terms, the volunteers rights and obligations, the settlement of the volunteering agreement, as well as in the recognition of the volunteering role in the social and individual development (Bocănială, 2014). This subsequently led to a new volunteering law, namely the law no. 78/2014 on the regulation of volunteering in Romania which repealed the old law.

According to the new law, the voluntary activity is carried out at the request of the host organization which shows its willingness to work with volunteers. It may justify the refusal of the candidate request to become a volunteer, depending on the requirements specified in its status or on the type of activity conducted (Dančišinová et al., 2017).

This law relies on the positive implications of participation in voluntary activities and provides the necessary leverage regarding the integration of young volunteers in the labor market. It also recognizes the social function of volunteering and its role in the development of education and professional training as well as the value of these initiatives contributing to increasing the competitiveness of the labor market. The text of the law includes special provisions regarding the support of volunteering initiatives by local government authorities (Păceșilă, 2016).

As regards volunteering regulation, the new law on volunteering brings an important change. Thus, the volunteering activity is recognized for the first time as professional experience depending on the type of activity, provided that it is conducted in the field of graduated studies. In this regard, the organizations working with volunteers should fulfill some obligations, including signing a volunteering agreement and issuing certificates of skills acquired through volunteering. The volunteering agreement does not provide seniority and does not allow the inclusion of volunteering in the social insurance system or in the pension system because it is not a paid activity.

Moreover, according to this law, if two or more candidates have equal scores in competitions for jobs, the employers may give additional points to those who have one or more certificates of volunteering issued under the law, but only if they represent selection criteria.

The new law on volunteering covers an important gap in professional development, especially for the younger generation. The benefits also extend to non-governmental organizations, which depend largely on such activities. According to Crângașu (2014), the legislature's intention was to better define an objective system for assessing the experience and skills acquired during the volunteering activities in order to help young people to get a job easier.

Furthermore, the recognition of volunteering activities as professional experience could have long term effects in the citizens mentality, encouraging

people in the labor market to expand their professional horizons. In fact, Romanian employers are pleased with the new law and argue that multinational corporations prefer young people who worked in NGOs, leading projects, managing budgets and people instead of young individuals having a drawer full of diplomas. According to those private entities, young people involved in volunteering activity can integrate more easily into a team and are able to assume responsibilities within the company (Spridon, 2014).

3. Objectives and research methodology

The aim of this section is to provide information about our research and to justify the reasoning behind our approach.

Although there are many studies that examine the link between volunteering and professional development, there is a paucity of literature on this aspect in Romania. This research addresses this gap in the literature by analysing the involvement of students of Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Faculty of Administration and Public Management in volunteering activities as well as the effects of this involvement on their professional development.

Our data have been gathered from a questionnaire distributed during the first and second semester of the academic year 2016-2017. The questionnaire was designed to address several aspects such as: the reason for participating in volunteering activities, the impact of volunteering on the future professional career, the skills acquired during volunteering, etc.

The questionnaire comprises seven questions, two of them containing several sub-questions and it takes around five minutes to be filled in. Although the questionnaire contains a mixture of questions, such as multiple choice, grid and checkbox questions, they are simple and use an unambiguous language.

The established target population for the research was composed of second and third year students from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Faculty of Administration and Public Management, as well as of graduates of this faculty. In order to make this population aware of the study we distributed the questionnaire during the course of Management of Nongovernmental Organizations and we also contacted our department colleagues to help us in distributing it during other courses.

Furthermore, we contacted the graduate students by phone or email and they agreed to send out information about the online survey. Our method used to distribute the questionnaire brought success. On closing the survey, a total of 197 responses have been collected.

The statistical analysis of data have been performed by using IBM SPSS statistics v. 20. Therefore, two categories of information have resulted:

- respondents identification data: age, gender, level of training, type of graduated or graduating specialization
- contribution of volunteering to the development of respondents skills and knowledge valued by the employer.

In order to achieve a more complex analysis, the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) has been used. This method allows to identify the relationship between variables.

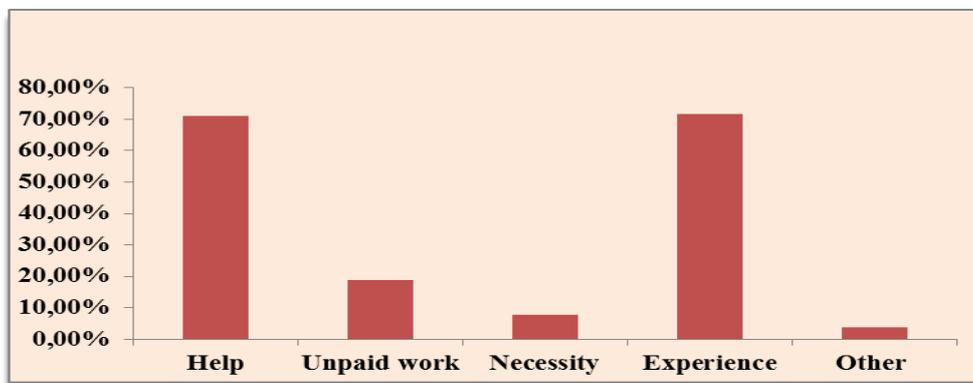
4. Results

A total of 197 respondents were interviewed. 84.8% of them were female and 15.2% male. The sample included individuals with ages between 19 and above 30. Almost all respondents (97.5%) were aged 19-22, while a small number of them were aged 23-26 (1.5%) and above 30 (1%).

4.1. Statistics for the questionnaire

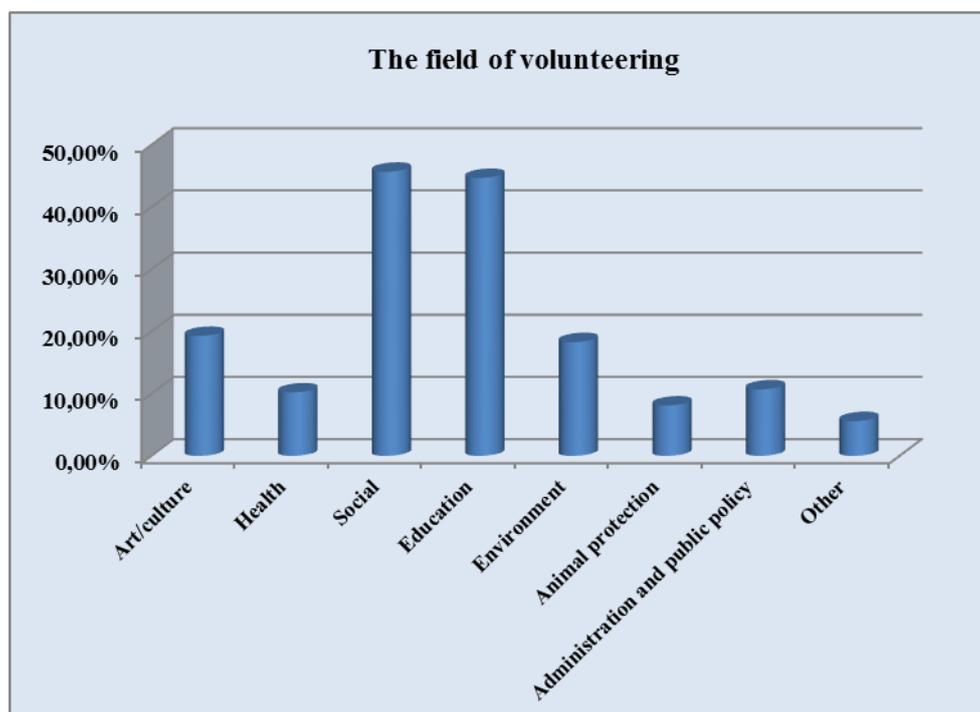
The respondents of this study are mainly undergraduate students: 99% of them reported attending a faculty, while the remaining 1% reported attending a master program or a doctoral school. As regards the type of specialization, 59.4% are attending the specialization Public administration, while 40.6% are attending the specialization Sociology - Human Resources. Almost half of the respondents (47.2%) dedicate between 15 and 20 hours per year to volunteering, while 32% try to spend between 20 and 40 hours per year. Only 20.8% dedicate more than 40 hours per year to their volunteer activities, namely the equivalent of at least a week in a full-time job. Figure 1 shows the respondents preferences as regards the meaning of the volunteering concept. Most of the people surveyed associate the concept of volunteering with help and experience. Their preferences could be explained by the fact that volunteering offers the opportunity to combine work into a concrete project, and thus to gain practical experience, with the involvement in activities for helping those in need.

Figure 1. The meaning of the volunteering concept



(Source: Authors)

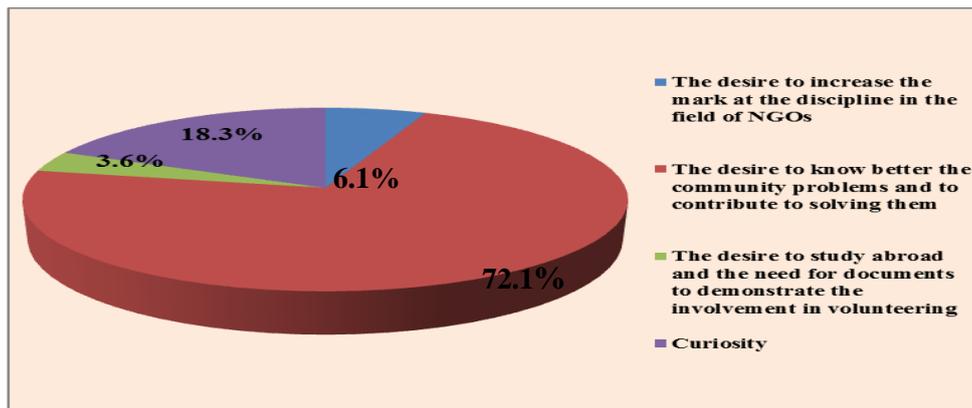
Figure 2. The field of volunteering



(Source: Authors)

The areas in which the students of the Faculty of Administration and Public Management have volunteered are shown in Figure 2. The highest percentages are registered by the social field, followed by education, art/culture and environment. These options are due to either students' preferences or teachers' recommendations. A high percentage of the respondents (72.1%) involve in volunteering because they wish to know better the community problems and to contribute to solving them (Figure 3). Mainly, volunteering increases self-confidence, especially among young people. The help provided by volunteers to the others in particular and to the community in general, gives them a sense of fulfillment and inner satisfaction, while the teamwork and an organized environment creates them a sense of belonging, pride and identity. All these elements give the volunteers a positive outlook on life and a general well-being which allows them to focus better on the future goals. As regards curiosity, the slightly higher percentage of respondents (18.3%) could be explained by the fact that many students of the Faculty of Public Administration and Management come from rural area or small towns where the concept of volunteering is unknown and not promoted or it is not supported by organizations in the field. In this case, there are no ways of communication; there is not a community or a group that focuses on creating opportunities for volunteer involvement.

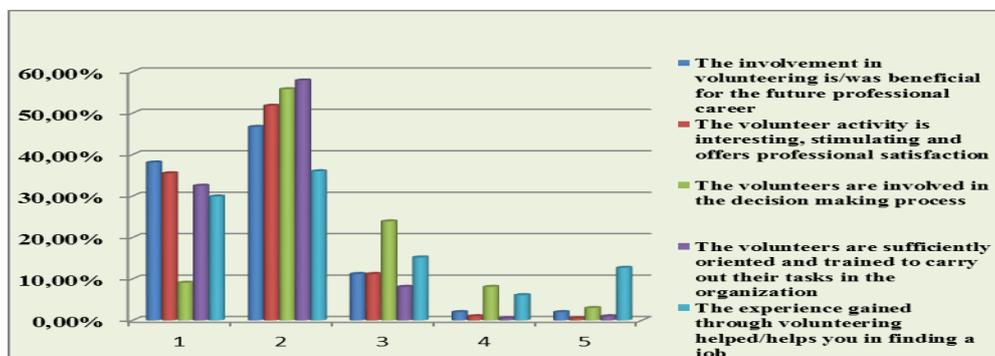
Figure 3. The reason for volunteering



(Source: Authors)

Question six examines the perceptions of the respondents regarding volunteering, as it is shown in figure 4. The vast majority of respondents (84.8%) consider that involvement in volunteering is beneficial for their future career to a large or a very large extent, compared to 13.2% who does not attach too much importance to this involvement. Similarly, 87.3% of the total respondents agree with the benefits of volunteering to a large or a very large extent, compared to 12.2% who have checked to a small or to a very small extent. A similar situation occurs with the other sub-points of this question, but the percentage of those who checked to a very large extent or to a large extent is a little bit smaller. Therefore young people are aware that volunteering is the most effective way for choosing the right career path, as well as a handy option for those who have not yet reached the age to be legally employed.

Figure 4. The opinion of the respondents regarding volunteering

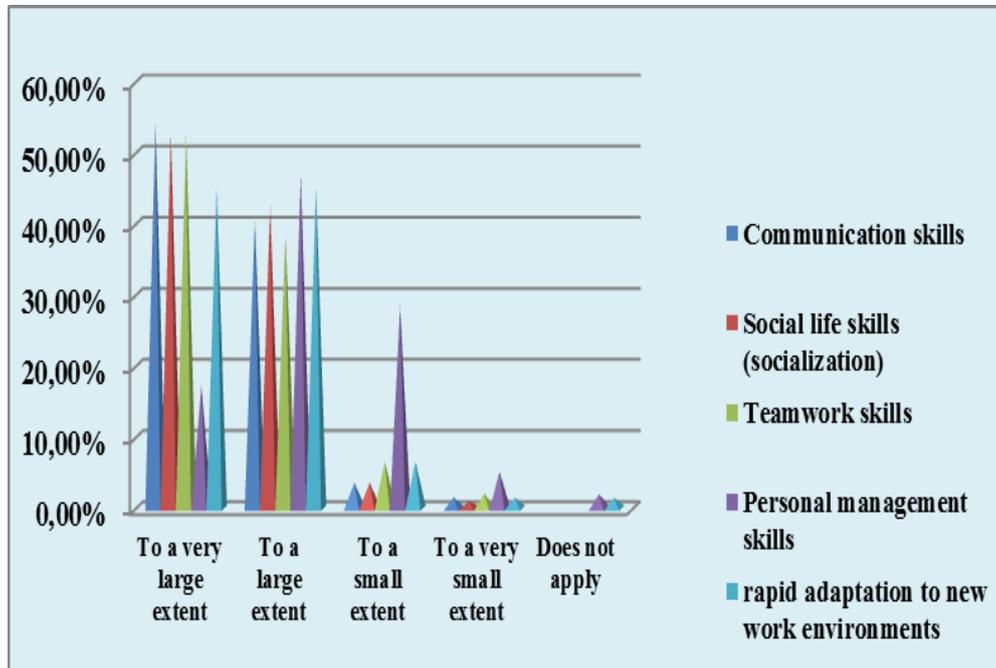


Legend: 1 - to a very large extent; 2 - to a large extent; 3 - to a small extent; 4 - to a very small extent; 5 - does not apply

(Source: Authors)

Analysing the skills acquired through volunteering (Figure 5), it could be concluded that a high percent of those surveyed consider that volunteering has a great contribution in acquiring skills.

Figure 5. The skills acquired through volunteering



(Source: Authors)

The involvement in volunteer activities could be seen as a form of social learning, even if it is often unaware. Volunteering has extraordinary educational valences, is a form of learning through practical action generating the acquisition of knowledge and skills. According to Bosfi (2014), whether we are talking about an inductive learning that starts from general situations - or from theoretical knowledge - that are then translated into specific practical activities, whether we are talking about a deductive learning that starts from particular examples later translated into general rules or theoretical concepts, volunteering appears as the best way of learning practical things.

Volunteering is not a rigid and formalized process; it has the charm of flexibility and free choice of the volunteer as regards most of his work's features. That is why volunteering has often become the way young people get with their future job. Without wishing to prejudge the formal education system, we should recognize that it often lacks the practical side of learning, which many young people choose to experience by involving in volunteer activities.

4.2. Analysis of the relationship between two variables

The paper analyses the influence of the respondents' identification data (age, gender, level of training, type of specialization) on the responses of the questions. The relationship between the number of hours dedicated to volunteering per year and the responses is also taken into account. The interpretation of the data relies on the coefficient of significance Sig (p) calculated with the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Generally, values beneath 0.05 are considered relevant for the research.

The application of this method has highlighted no strong correlation for the following questions: no. 2 (the meaning of the volunteering concept), no. 4 (the volunteering field), no. 5 (the reason for volunteering), no. 6 (the involvement of volunteering in the decision making process; the experience gained through volunteering), no. 7 (the skills gained through volunteering: socialization, teamwork, rapid adaptation to new work environments). In this case, the data from the study show a Sig (p)-value greater than that mentioned in advance, namely 0.05. Therefore the study is not significant because the relationship between variables does not exist. The alternative hypotheses are rejected and the null hypotheses (H₀) are accepted:

- H₀: There is no influence of the respondents age on the the importance of volunteering in the professional development.
- H₀: There is no influence of the respondents gender on the the importance of volunteering in the professional development.
- H₀: There is no influence of the respondents level of training on the the importance of volunteering in the professional development.
- H₀: There is no influence of the respondents type of specialization on the the importance of volunteering in the professional development.
- H₀: There is no influence of the annual number of hours dedicated to volunteering on the volunteering's importance in the professional development.

Taking into account the above-mentioned aspects, it should be noted that there are no statistical differences among respondents regarding the importance of volunteering for their professional development.

All students participating in this research, irrespective of age, gender, level of training, and type of graduated or graduating specialization, number of yearly volunteer hours, consider that volunteering allows accumulating job-relevant knowledge that represents an asset when they need to prove their value to an employer.

Furthermore, five correlations have been recorded for question no. 6 (6.1. the involvement in volunteering is beneficial for the future professional career; 6.2. the volunteer activity is interesting, stimulating and offers professional satisfactions; 6.4. the volunteers are sufficiently oriented and prepared to carry out their tasks in the organization) and question no. 7 (the skills gained through volunteering: communication and personal management). In this case the data from the study show a Sig (p)-value less than that specified in advance, namely 0.05.

Therefore the study is significant because the relationship between variables really exist. The null hypotheses are rejected and the alternative hypotheses (H1) are accepted:

- H1: Benefits of volunteering for the future professional career is influenced by the respondents gender.
- H1: Characteristics of the volunteer activity (interesting, stimulating, offering professional satisfaction) is influenced by the respondents gender.
- H1: Volunteers orientation and training to carry out their tasks in the organization is influenced by the respondents gender.
- H1: Skills gained through volunteering (communication) is influenced by the respondents' gender.
- H1: The skills gained through volunteering (personal management) is influenced by the respondents' specialization.

Table 1. Analysis of variance according to the respondents' gender

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig. (α)
Benefits of volunteering for the future professional career * gender	Between groups	1,993	4	0,498	4,083	0,003
	Within Groups	23,438	192	0,122		
	Total	25,431	196			
The volunteer activity is interesting, stimulating, etc. * gender	Between groups	3,664	4	0,916	8,080	0,000
	Within Groups	21,767	192	0,113		
	Total	25,431	196			
Volunteers orientation and training to carry out their tasks * gender	Between groups	2,177	4	0,544	4,494	0,002
	Within Groups	23,254	192	0,121		
	Total	25,431	196			
Skills gained through volunteering (communication) * gender	Between groups	1,661	3	0,554	4,494	0,004
	Within Groups	23,771	193	0,123		
	Total	25,431	196			

(Source: Authors)

Table 2. Analysis of variance according to the respondents' specialization

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig. (α)
Skills gained through volunteering (personal management) * specialization	Between groups	5,276	4	1,319	5,996	0,000
	Within Groups	42,237	192	0,220		
	Total	47,513	196			

(Source: Authors)

Taking into account the results mentioned above, it should be noted that there are some differences regarding the opinion of male and female respondents about volunteering and its role in the professional development. Such differences

could be explained by the distinction between male and female character.

Most women are creative, intuitive and diplomatic, having excellent communication and persuasion skills. Usually, men fail in solving a conflicting situation because of their pragmatic and logical approach, while women have success by appealing to the emotional, sentimental and human side (Botezatu, 2008). Men are more objective and rational than women who are more impulsive and emotive. This is beneficial when it comes to finding fast and efficient solutions. Moreover, men have a more objective attitude compared to women who sometimes tend to be more subjective. Men are more direct, but women are more diplomatic and are looking for alternative ways to say something without risking of hurting or offending the others. In some cases, men can express their authority more easily while women tend to be more gentle and conciliatory. Furthermore, according to Păceșilă (2015), men and women have distinctive opinions regarding cooperation, change of experience, partnerships. Females are more opened to collaboration as well as more concerned about setting and meeting goals.

As regards the skills gained through volunteering (personal management), the differences in responses arise due to the type of graduated or graduating specialization. The opinions and visions of students studying Public Administration are distinct from those studying the disciplines of Sociology - Human Resources specialization. This situation could be explained by the differences regarding the disciplines studied. The Public Administration specialization prepares students to manage public affairs at local, regional or national level. It is an area linked to the public policy formulation and decision-making process as well as to public budget planning. This specialization is a combination between legal and economic knowledge, on the one hand, and the administration of funds and public goods, on the other. Human Resource Management is an area dedicated to strategies and techniques of efficient use of people. The specialization of Sociology - Human Resources is focused on the development of one's own personality, both in the professional plan and in the valorization of the individual's the skills. This specialization prepares specialists in studying the fundamentals, mechanisms and consequences of human behavior. They will be able to facilitate the ongoing adaptation of individuals, groups, communities and organizations to the challenges induced by social change.

5. Conclusions

The fundamental contribution of this paper refers to analysing the involvement of students of Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Faculty of Administration and Public Management in volunteering activity in order to determine if such involvement is beneficial for their future career success. The research shows that volunteering has a great contribution to the students' professional development in a certain area helping them to experience new things and to develop themselves, in other words, to invest in their own person. The difficult situations that may occur in volunteer activities contribute to gaining

professional experience as well as to adapting to new work environments.

The research is limited because it focuses only on the students and graduate students of Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Faculty of Administration and Public Management. Therefore, the results are not necessarily representative at national level and should be followed by other studies in the field. However, this research could help the academic and business environment to better understand the overall importance of volunteering for the students' future career.

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