In Search of Strategy

UNIVERSALISTIC, CONTINGENT, AND CONFIGURATIONAL ADOPTION OF VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

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The canon of volunteer administration contends that adoption of specified practices separates effective from ineffective programs. Alternatively, structural contingency and strategic human resource management theories suggest that managers make adoption decisions based on how organizational circumstances dictate the applicability or efficacy of particular practices. We test propositions that universalistic adoption of "best practices," contingent adoption of practices, and configurational adoption of bundles of practices are associated with program outcomes of recruitment ease, retention of volunteers, and the net benefits that volunteers bring to organizational operations. With all sets of tests garnering limited empirical support, we conclude that human resource practice in volunteer administration is loosely coupled with outcomes, but that some organizations do—and many more should—manage according to the singular context of their institutional and external environments.

Keywords: *volunteer management, strategy, contingency*

THE PROFESSIONAL FIELD OF VOLUNTEER ADMINISTRATION advocates a core set of best practices, such as interviewing volunteers, matching them to assignments, supervising volunteer activities, and recognizing their contributions to organizations. Repeated across trainings, field manuals, textbooks, and research, these core practices take on an official (normative) character, with those entities adopting such practices seen as exemplary in volunteer management practice (Hager 2013). In contrast, nonprofits, public agencies, congregations, or other volunteer-involving entities that do not adopt these administrative practices are viewed as deficient and out of step with normative practice. Suchman (1995) describes how "sector-wide structuration dynamics generate cultural pressures" (572) that define which peer organizations are seen as legitimate in their operations. For some organizations, normative conformity is sufficient reason to adopt prescribed practices. These practices may or not translate into strategic outcomes.

In broad veins of research in human resource management, adoption of prescribed management practices can translate into measurable outcomes in one of three ways. When a canon of best practices applies uniformly to a field of organizations, those practices are said to be *universalistic.* Alternatively, some practices may apply better than others, and strategic

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organizations may buck normative expectations to adopt only those practices that meet their needs. When organizations adopt practices according to an organizational characteristic or condition, those choices are said to be *contingent.* When organizations adopt a bundle of management practices common to situational needs and in alignment with broader institutional operations, those choices are said to be *configurational* (Martín-Alcázar, Romero-Fernández, and Sánchez-Gardey 2005; MacDuffie 1995). The research questions underlying this article concern (1) whether common volunteer management practices are applicable and essential to all organizations, and (2) whether nonprofit organizations are strategic in their adoption of practices that work best for their organizations.

The Best Practices Assumption

Efforts to describe, develop, and evaluate practices in volunteer administration have led to a variety of models that nonetheless converge on common practices. Safrit and Schmiesing (2012) identify a dozen models dating to 1967 that are strikingly similar in elements covered: identification of roles, recruitment, selection, placement, orientation, training, supervision, recognition, and evaluation. Brudney and Meijs (2012) describe the work of several scholars who identify seemingly universal practices for volunteer management. Connors (2012) includes these elements in what he calls the "volunteer management process," and describes them collectively as "the fundamental management model" (xxii).

These practices are further codified by the field's observers and advocates. For example, the Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement (2012) promulgates organizational standards for volunteer involvement, including screening, orientation, training, supervision, recognition, and evaluation. Nonprofits in step with these standards are defined as up to code, while those that are not in step fall short of it. In the United Kingdom, accreditation standards certify organizations as "Investing in Volunteers" (2010) when they adopt prescribed practices. These codifications emphasize adoption of practices rather than outcomes derived from the practices.

Chadwick-Coule (2011) identifies this exaltation of best practices as part of a *managerial* or *modernist* paradigm that employs "key lessons . . . from organizational theory" to "provide prescriptive instructions for . . . improving performance" (34). She is heavily critical of this paradigm because it tends to emphasize practices that may not apply to all, or even many, organizational situations. Nonetheless, evidence of the codification of these management practices, and the segregation of organizations that do not conform to them, is easy to find. McCurley and Lynch (2011) note research in the United Kingdom that reports a majority of volunteers who had not been interviewed before their volunteer assignments. They label the finding as "odd" and the best practice of interviewing as "neglected" (102). We ourselves have fallen prey to this pervasive assumption: we (Hager and Brudney 2008) have professed to be "surprised" (25) to find that most US nonprofit organizations have not adopted various best practices to a large degree, and consequently asserted that nonprofits have rudimentary and underdeveloped volunteer management structures. Kyrwood and Meneghetti (2010), Machin and Paine (2008), and Bradner (1995) are other examples of the *modernist* paradigm at work in volunteer resource management, where one set of relatively uniform practices defines exemplary administration.

The underlying assumption that these widely endorsed best practices are best for and apply to all nonprofits is worthy of exploration. The conceptual critique of this assumption has been offered by several scholars, including Meijs and Ten Hoorn (2008), Rehnborg (2005),

Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003), Rochester (1999), and most recently Studer and von Schnurbein (2013), who present a synthesis of contingency approaches. Macduff, Netting, and O'Connor (2009) assert that different social missions spawn different organizational cultures that call for different managerial expectations. They identify *traditional volunteer programs* as those where modernist management models and standard best practices might fruitfully be applied. "Practitioner literature for decades has promulgated a business-based human resource management model for the traditional volunteers," they write (409). "This regularly occurring, prescriptive, linear, predictable system reflects traditional volunteer management in which functionalism prevails" (410). However, the traditional environment is but one kind of space in which volunteers operate. Unpaid participants in *social change volunteer programs* might more properly be thought of as activists rather than as volunteers. Recruitment of activists might resemble the recruitment of traditional volunteers, but "interviewing" for "positions" does not fit the social change program model. As a best practice, interviewing is lost on this kind of volunteer program.

The point is more stark for Macduff et al.'s (2009) *serendipitous volunteer program*, which features no predetermined set of expectations to oversee. They cite the growing trend in episodic volunteering, where short-term, periodic, and event-based volunteers require fundamentally different management models from those advocated in the best practices canon. Indeed, a decade ago McCurley and Ellis (2003) questioned explicitly whether the field is using an outmoded model. Macduff and colleagues sum up the serendipitous volunteers as those who appear unheralded with "I have a few hours. I believe in what you do. Put me to work" (413), and point to the first Barack Obama presidential campaign as an example of the mobilization of serendipitous volunteers. For these types of volunteers and organizations, applications, background checks, and training have little to no usefulness or meaning. The authors suggest that volunteer resource managers in these cases must create relevant processes as needed rather than implement predetermined best practices. Brudney and Meijs (2012) review the conceptual foundations of other contingency and configurational approaches.

The *best practices assumption* holds that effective volunteer management programs can be judged according to whether they have adopted the expected practices, regardless of outcomes. Traditional volunteers and volunteer programs may very well benefit from adoption of these practices, but many organizations may adopt them to satisfy normative expectations rather than strategic needs. These conditions provide the basis for our null hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis* 0: Adoption of best practices in volunteer administration is unrelated to program outcomes.

Universalistic versus Contingent or Configurational Adoption

The field of practice holds prevailing assumptions that core volunteer management practices should be adopted by all nonprofit organizations that engage volunteers. Conceivably, the canon of practices may have more than normative utility, with all practices generally improving program outcomes, or different practices improving different outcomes, for nonprofits actively engaged in management of volunteers. This reasoning leads to the first competing hypothesis, which we label the *universalistic hypothesis*:

> *Hypothesis* 1: Adoption of best practices in volunteer administration improves program outcomes.

Law or regulation impose some management practices: hospital administrators have little choice of whether hospital volunteers will be afforded liability coverage. However, where strategic decision-making is concerned, the universalistic hypothesis contradicts a half-century of structural contingency theory, which suggests that performance dictates when organizations should adopt the strategies that fit their task environment and structure (Akingbola 2013a; Drazin and Van de Ven 1985). It also stands in contrast with prevailing conceptions of strategic human resource management theory that observe patterns of adoption related to environmental conditions and internal consistency (Ketchen, Thomas, and Snow 1993; MacDuffie 1995). However, nonprofit organizations are often sufficiently different from typical businesses that application of business concepts and structural relationships can be problematic (Beck, Lengnick-Hall, and Lengnick-Hall 2008; Tucker and Parker 2013; Tucker, Thorne, and Gurd 2013). For example, Akingbola (2006) concludes that nonprofit organizations are not typically strategic in their approach to human resource management. Guo et al. (2011) contend that "volunteer-dependent" organizations approach human resource management in substantially different ways from the bureaucratic organizations for which the principles of strategic human resource management have been developed. Consequently, the extent to which nonprofit organizations adopt volunteer management practices for outcomes-relevant reasons is an open empirical question. We advance two competing hypotheses—the *contingency hypothesis* and the *configurational hypotheses*—to guide exploration of the extent to which nonprofit organizations adopt specific practices consistent with organizational conditions and program goals:

> *Hypothesis* 2: The relationship between practice adoption and program outcomes is contingent on organizational conditions.

> *Hypothesis* 3: The relationship between practice adoption and program outcomes stems from adoption of strategically relevant bundles of practices.

Delery and Doty (1996) provide a framework for investigating the extent to which practice adoption conforms to theoretical expectations for human resource management. According to their formulation, organizations and fields that do not reflect strategic adoption instead adopt prescriptive best practices. Our null hypothesis holds that prescriptive adoption of best practices currently tends to trump strategic adoption of appropriate volunteer management practices among nonprofit organizations in the United States. An example is that *formal recognition of volunteer contributions to organizations* is promulgated as a practice recommended for all kinds of organizations working with all kinds of volunteers. Delery and Doty label as *universalistic* the perspective that certain practices should be universally applied or adopted across all management situations. Other examples include the "best practices" of screening and matching volunteers to positions and supervision of and communication with volunteers, recommended universally for all organizations. The competing perspectives (and hypotheses) acknowledge that for organizations that rely predominantly on short-term, episodic volunteers, these practices may be less appropriate or effective.

The universalistic hypothesis (H_1) will be supported when organizations adopt volunteer management practices that are generally related to positive organizational outcomes.

If universalistic adoption has merit in the development of the capacity to manage volunteers, then adoption of various practices should be rewarded in recruitment ease, retention gains, or other benefits associated with the engagement of volunteers in nonprofit organizations. The competing hypothesis, following from structural contingency and strategic human resource management theories, is that organizations may adopt or choose not to adopt particular strategies given different organizational characteristics or situations (Akingbola 2013b; Ridder and McCandless 2010). Organizations may strategically reject normative practices when they recognize that a given practice does not contribute to its outcomes. Indeed, human resource management (HRM) is viewed as *strategic* only when adoption of administrative practices is shown to result in positive outcomes: HRM becomes *S*HRM. Delery and Doty label this view the *contingency perspective.* If universal adoption of practices is unrelated to outcomes, then adoption might still be strategically contingent (H_2) or configurational (H_3). If none of these hypotheses are borne out, then the null hypothesis of normative adoption of practices regardless of outcomes will gain support.

Adoption decisions can be contingent on any number of organizational and environmental forces. To test the *contingency* hypothesis in this article, we consider two factors: the prevailing age of the organization's volunteers and the intensiveness with which the organization uses volunteers in its operations. Age of volunteers influences the culture and motivations of the volunteers (Francis and Jones 2012), the work that gets done (Principi et al. 2013), and, ideally, the management decisions of the volunteer program. Alert managers will recognize and react to the differential motivations of younger and older volunteers. We propose that organizations more reliant on younger volunteers should make rational decisions that reflect a greater need for formal recognition and supervision (Fisher and Ackerman 1998) and appreciation for the enthusiasm of volunteers who aid in the recruitment of others. *Formal recognition of volunteer contributions to organizations* may add value to organizations that use older volunteers, for example, but may be more important to organizations that rely on younger volunteers who gain more from social approbation. In this case, we expect organizations more reliant on younger volunteers to be rewarded by recognition activities more than organizations that rely on older volunteers, who may choose to forego formal recognition entirely.

For a second test of the *contingency* hypothesis, we propose that particular volunteer management practices will be more valuable to organizations that use volunteers more intensively than organizations that use volunteers primarily in temporary, interim, or occasional situations. Volunteer intensiveness is an organizational characteristic (Hager and Brudney 2011) that reflects both the number of volunteers that the organization engages and the number of hours that those volunteers collectively work. With greater scale comes greater bureaucratic demand (Urban Institute 2004), including written policies that differentiate and define volunteer positions, training for paid staff on working appropriately and productively with volunteers, and screening and matching volunteers to assignments that fit both the needs of the volunteer worker and the nonprofit in which he or she works. We expect that organizations that act strategically with respect to human resources will adopt these management practices primarily when the increasing scope and scale of volunteer involvement call for them.

The test of the *configurational* hypothesis is more straightforward: we profile empirically derived groups of organizations that adopt some volunteer management practices and eschew others. If adoption of a bundle of human resource practices is a strategic decision, then we should be able to observe benefits in how their adoption relates to the outcome measures.

We look to survey data to discern whether universalistic, contingent, or configurational adoption helps us to understand the relationship between human resource practice in volunteer administration and critical outcome measures.

Data

Data for this study come from a nationally representative survey of US public charities (Urban Institute 2004; Hager and Brudney 2004). We drew a sample of 2,993 of the 214,995 organizations that filed Form 990 with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in 2000. Since federally exempt charities with less than $25,000 in annual gross receipts were not required to report to the IRS at that time, those smaller organizations are not part of our sampling frame. We selected our sample within annual expenditures strata, oversampling larger organizations to ensure sufficient representation in the study. We also sampled proportionately within major subsector of operation, such as health, social services, and the arts. Post-stratification weights help ensure population representation within these expenditure and subsector strata; all analysis in this article draws on weighted data.

Princeton Survey Research Associates International (PSRAI) conducted telephone interviews with volunteer administrators or executive managers in the sampled charities in late 2003. PSRAI first called all organizations to verify that they were a going concern and to obtain the name of a volunteer administrator or other official who could speak authoritatively about the organization's operations. We mailed an information letter to the 80 percent of sampled organizations with whom we were able to complete that initial call. PSRAI then called the named representatives to collect study information. Interviews averaged 20 minutes; interviewers read all items and response options. Respondents could skip questions or choose "don't know" options and were allowed to ask clarifying questions during the interview. Adjusting for entities that were defunct or could not be verified as working organizations in the initial call, the response rate for the study was 69 percent.

Roughly four in five responding organizations (81 percent) reported the use of volunteers, not counting volunteers serving on the board of directors. These 1,361 organizations constitute our study subjects. We asked these organizations about a broad range of ("best") practices regarding their volunteer programs that had been firmly established in the literature. These practices constitute the traditional human resource architecture for the support of volunteers: written policies and job descriptions for volunteer involvement; training for paid staff in working with volunteers; liability coverage or insurance protection for volunteers; recognition activities for volunteers; regular collection of information on volunteer numbers and hours; training and professional development opportunities for volunteers; screening procedures to identify suitable volunteers and to match them with appropriate tasks or jobs; and regular supervision of and communication with volunteers. Adoption of each practice is measured as a three-category ordinal variable, with "not adopted" scoring 0, "adopted to some degree" scoring 1, and "adopted to a large degree" scoring 2.

We add two other variables that are not part of the traditional practice canon but may be central to a range of management models: the use of volunteers to recruit other volunteers (0: no extent; 1: some extent; 2: great extent) and the percentage of work-time that a paid volunteer resource manager spends on volunteer management.

Outcome Measures

As discussed earlier, we conceive adoption of human resource practices as *strategic* to the extent that those practices are associated with program outcomes. We consider three outcome measures: recruitment ease, retention of volunteers, and the relationship between the challenges and benefits of hosting volunteers.

Recruitment ease is the inverse of an index of recruitment problems (Hager and Brudney 2011). The measure incorporates three issues. First, we ask if *recruiting a sufficient number of volunteers* is a "big problem," a "small problem," or "not a problem at all." We similarly ask about the issue of *recruiting volunteers with the right skills and expertise* and the issue of *recruiting volunteers available during the workday.* For each question, a "small problem" response contributes a value of 1 to the summative measure, and a "big problem" response contributes a value of 2. The measure ranges from 0 (for 18 percent of organizations responding "not a problem at all" to all three measures) to 6 (for 6 percent of organizations responding "big problem" to all three measures). To create a positive measure, we recode the problems measure into an ease measure by reversing the scores.

Retention of volunteers is measured from a single survey question (Hager and Brudney 2008). We asked respondents, "Of the volunteers that worked with your organization one year ago, approximately what percentage would you say are still involved as volunteers?" Nearly 3 percent said zero, and 17 percent said all were retained, but most fell somewhere in between. The median charity reported an 80 percent retention rate; the mean is 73 percent.

Net benefits is a measure of the value of volunteers that subtracts an index of challenges in managing volunteers from an index of the benefits that managers believe that volunteers bring to their organizations. Figures 1 and 2 present the items in these indices. The net benefits measure is described in full in Hager and Brudney (2005). It ranges from a value of –12 for organizations fully challenged on all measures with no benefits from volunteers to a value of 16 for organizations fully benefitting on all measures with no challenges from volunteers. The mean is 6.5 with a standard deviation of 4.7.

Analytic Approach

Project interviewers asked respondents the extent to which their organizations had adopted each of the nine volunteer management practices; paid staffer time spent on volunteer

Figure 1. Percentage of Charities That Cite Various Challenges as Big or Small Problems

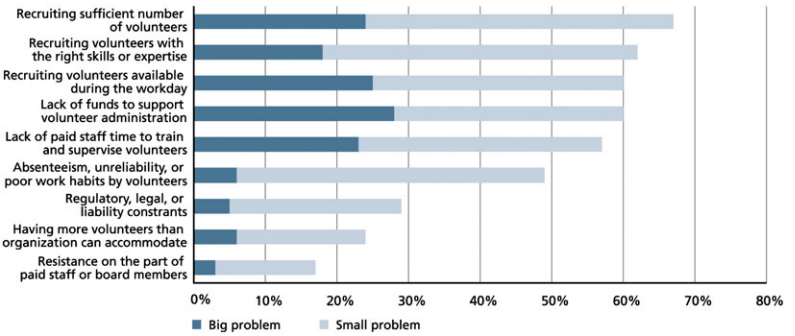
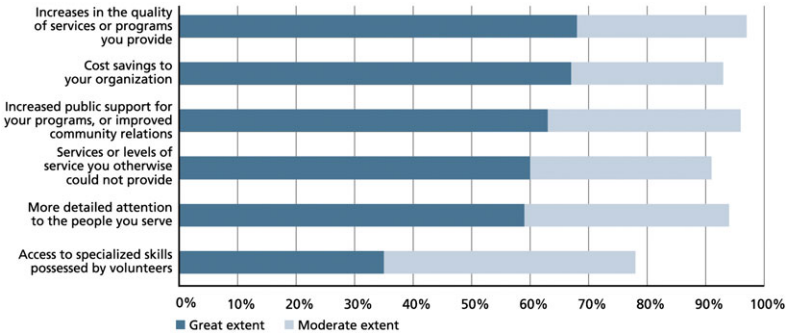


Figure 2. Percentage of Charities That Believe Volunteers Are Beneficial to Their Operations



resource management is a proportion ranging from 0 (none) to 1.0 (100 percent). Following Delery and Doty (1996), our approach is to enter groups of variables in stages, a procedure known as hierarchical regression modeling. This procedure allows us to estimate whether and how much a group of variables relating to the volunteer management architecture contribute to outcome measures over and above the effects of control variables or other preceding stages.

The management practices under study are certainly not the only forces that contribute to volunteer program outcomes. To take into account unobserved heterogeneity, we include three control variables in each of our models. These variables have been shown to be related to outcome measures of volunteer management capacity in these data, and each might be considered a candidate for further contingency studies of volunteer management practice adoption. One control variable is the *size* of the organization, measured as the natural log of its annual expenses as documented in the survey respondent's Form 990 in 2000 (the sampling year).

A second control variable is degree of *staff focus*, measured as the natural log of the ratio of the number of staff to the number of volunteers, as reported on the survey. The third control variable takes into account the differences between organizations reliant on commercial revenues (fees and contracts) and those reliant on donative revenues (contributions and grants). The variable is the *proportion of total revenues from donative sources*, as reported on Form 990 in 2000. Table 1 reports descriptive statistics for outcome measures, volunteer management capacity measures, and the control variables.

Testing the Universalistic Perspective

Table 2 displays results of tests of the *universalistic* hypothesis (H_1). In stage 1 of each hierarchical regression model we enter the three control variables into three separate equations, each predicting a different outcome measure: (1) recruitment ease, (2) volunteer retention, and (3) net benefits. The significant changes in R^2 for the control variables as indicated in Table 2 show that these variables contribute to the explanation of the outcome measures over a model with no predictors. In each model two of three controls display statistically significant relationships with the outcome measures, underlining the fact that different conditions influence relevant outcomes in different ways.

In stage 2 we add the volunteer management practices to each model. The significant change in R^2 for this stage illustrates that these variables collectively improve performance over the controls-only model (stage 1). For the retention and net benefits models, where control

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	*Standard Deviation*	*Range*
Outcome Measures			
Recruitment ease	3.6	1.8	6
Retention of volunteers	71.2	28.8	100
Net benefits	6.5	4.7	28
Volunteer Management Capacity			
Written policies	1.3	0.7	2
Training for paid staff	0.7	0.7	2
Liability coverage	1.1	0.9	2
Recognition activities	1.2	0.7	2
Regular data collection	1.3	0.8	2
Training for volunteers	1.0	0.7	2
Screening and matching	1.4	0.7	2
Supervision and communication	1.7	0.5	2
Volunteers used to recruit	1.3	0.7	2
Time VRM spends on volunteer management	27.1	33.8	100
Contingencies			
Percentage of volunteers under age 24	17.9	24.1	100
Volunteer intensiveness	5.6	2.8	11
Controls			
Size: LN(Expenditures)	13.3	2.1	15.5
Staff-focus: LN(Ratio of staff to volunteers)	0.4	0.8	5.3
Proportion of revenues from contributions	0.5	0.4	1

Note: VRM= volunteer resource manager, LN= value calculated as natural logarithm.

variables alone show independent predictive potential, the addition of volunteer management practices collectively explain 8 and 7 percent, respectively, of the variance in these outcomes measures (above and beyond the control variables).

Individually, only the practice of using volunteers to recruit other volunteers displays statistical significance when explaining the recruitment ease outcome. Unexpectedly, the effect is negative, perhaps reflecting the value of dedicated staff in maximizing volunteer recruitment efforts. Four practices also explain retention, and four explain net benefits achieved with volunteers, with some overlap. Greater adoption of formal recruitment activities is associated with both retention and greater net benefits from volunteers. In contrast to the negative influence of volunteers used in recruiting on the ease of recruiting, this role has positive returns for net benefits and retention of volunteers over time. Supervision and communication is statistically significant in the latter two models, but positive for net benefits and negative for retention. We have speculated elsewhere (Hager and Brudney 2008) that supervision can undercut retention by shortchanging the autonomy that many volunteers desire in their avocational work. Beyond these points of overlap, liability coverage is associated with retention, and dedicated staff time from a volunteer resource manager with net benefits.

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Tests of the Universalistic Hypothesis

	Recruitment Ease		*Retention*		*Net Benefits*	
	Change in R^2	β	*Change in R^2*	β	*Change in R^2*	β
Stage 1: Controls	.01*		.04***		.08***	
Size: LN(Expenditures)		.07*		−.03		.02
Staff-focus: LN(Ratio of staff to volunteers)		−.05		−.17***		−.29***
Proportion of revenues from contributions		−.06*		−.11***		−.07*
Stage 2: Volunteer Management Capacity	.02**		.08***		.07***	
Written policies		−.06		−0.05		−.02
Training for paid staff		.05		−0.05		.01
Liability coverage		−.05		0.06*		.02
Recognition activities		−.00		0.21***		.09**
Regular data collection		−.04		−0.03		.03
Training for volunteers		−.03		−0.01		.02
Screening and matching		.01		0.03		.04
Supervision and communication		.04		−0.08**		.08*
Volunteers used to recruit		−.09**		0.17***		.08**
Time VRM spends on volunteer management		.03		−0.01		.10**

Note: Significance of change in R^2 tested by difference in F between models (ANOVA); standardized betas (β) reported from the step at which variable is entered into the equation. VRM= volunteer resource manager, LN= value calculated as natural logarithm.
**p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.*

All other practices call into question the extent to which adoption of best practices has direct, universal benefits for nonprofits that seek to provide management support for their volunteers. Overall, H_1 receives only modest support in these data. We next examine whether adoption is strategically contingent (H_2) or configurational (H_3), or if volunteer management practices are truly decoupled from organizational outcomes.

Testing the Contingency Perspective

The *contingency* perspective argues that volunteer management practices contribute to practice only under relevant conditions, and that organizations primarily adopt practices based on their understanding of those conditions (H_2). Following Delery and Doty (1996), these contingency predictions can be evaluated by determining whether a condition–strategy interaction term increases the level of explained variation in the hierarchical regression analysis in an additional stage of the model.

As discussed previously, one situational characteristic that might lead organizations to strategically choose some practices and reject others is the prevailing age of their volunteers. In our study, this concept is measured by asking study respondents to estimate the percentage of organizational volunteers under age twenty-four (an arbitrary study marker for 'youth'). As indicated in Table 1, the mean value is 17.9 percent of volunteers, and the variable displays the full range from no volunteers to all volunteers under age twenty-four.

Another condition that may influence strategic adoption of volunteer management practices is the scope and scale of volunteer use. *Volunteer intensiveness*, described in full in an earlier article in this journal (Hager and Brudney 2011), is based on a property–space analysis that cross-tabulates the reported number of volunteers in the organization over the past twelve months and the number of hours that its volunteers collectively work in a typical week. Organizations with few volunteers working few hours score low on the measure, and organizations with many volunteers working many hours score high. Organizations with moderate levels of volunteers and hours, as well as those that score high on one dimension and low on the other, score in between. Values range from 1 (low intensiveness; 6.2 percent of cases) to 11 (high intensiveness; 1.8 percent), with a mean intensiveness of 5.6.

We choose two tests among a much larger array of forces or conditions that may confront managers interested in aligning human resource practices with outcomes. The first tests whether organizations reliant on younger (or older) volunteers might adopt practices relevant to younger (or older) volunteers in their efforts to ease recruitment and maximize retention and net benefits from volunteers. Table 3 reports the results from this test. The first model indicates that the introduction of the *volunteer age* variable in stage 3 does not improve prediction of recruitment ease over and beyond the influence of the control variables and the volunteer management capacity variables. Similarly, the interaction terms, introduced to test for contingency effects, do not attain statistical significance. If managers take the prevailing age of volunteers into account when making decisions about the adoption of conceptually relevant volunteer management practices, these decisions do not seem to pay dividends by easing recruitment.

The net benefits model warrants a similar conclusion because of the lack of statistical significance among the interaction terms, and despite the fact that the main effect of the percentage

Table 3. Hierarchical Regression Test of Contingency Hypothesis: Age of Volunteers

	Recruitment Ease		*Retention*		*Net Benefits*	
	Change in R^2	β	*Change in R^2*	β	*Change in R^2*	β
Stage 1: Controls	.01**		.04***		.08***	
Stage 2: Volunteer Management Capacity	.01**		.06***		.06***	
Recognition activities (centered)		−.02		.18***		.14***
Supervision and communication (centered)		.02		−.10***		.11***
Volunteers used to recruit (centered)		−.10***		.15***		.09***
Stage 3: Main Effect—Percentage of Volunteers under Age 24	.00	.02	.15***	−.39***	.01***	−.09***
Stage 4: Interactions	.00		.00		.00	
Volunteers under age 24 × Recognition activities		−.06		.03		.01
Volunteers under age 24 × Supervision/ communication		.00		−.05*		.03
Volunteers under age 24 x Volunteers used to recruit		.02		.01		−.01

Note: Control effects reported in Table 2 are included in Table 3 models, but are omitted from the table to conserve space; significance of change in R^2 tested by difference in F between models (ANOVA); standardized betas (β) reported from the step at which variable is entered into the equation.
**p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.*

Table 4. Hierarchical Regression Test of Contingency Hypothesis: Volunteer Intensiveness

	Recruitment Ease		*Retention*		*Net Benefits*	
	Change in R^2	β	*Change in R^2*	β	*Change in R^2*	β
Stage 1: Controls	.01**		.04***		.09***	
Stage 2: Volunteer Management Capacity	.01*		.00		.03***	
Written policies (centered)		−.08**		−.02		.07*
Training for paid staff (centered)		.05		−.02		.08**
Screening and matching (centered)		.01		.05		.10**
Stage 3: Main Effect—Volunteer Intensiveness	.00	.05	.01**	.10**	.04***	.23***
Stage 4: Interactions	.00		.00		.00	
Intensiveness × Written policies		.00		.04		.01
Intensiveness × Training for paid staff		−.03		−.01		−.02
Intensiveness × Screening and matching		.02		−.03		.03

Note: Control effects reported in Table 2 are included in Table 3 models, but are omitted from the table to conserve space; significance of change in R^2 tested by difference in F between models (ANOVA); standardized betas (β) reported from the step at which variable is entered into the equation.
**p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.*

of volunteers under age twenty-four independently contributes to the explanation of net benefits. The retention model, however, provides the one small piece of support for the contingency hypothesis. In stage 3, we see that reliance on young volunteers makes retention difficult. In stage 4, we learn that organizations that rely on younger volunteers and that give less attention to supervision and communication see greater retention of volunteers over time.

The second *contingency* tests concern whether managers make adoption decisions based on the intensiveness of their use of volunteers. The results are outlined in Table 4. The effects shown in stage 3 indicate that volunteer intensiveness has an independent and positive influence on retention and net benefits. However, none of the interaction terms in any of the three models display statistical significance. If managers take the intensiveness of their volunteer use into account when making decisions about the extent to which they have written policies and job descriptions for volunteer involvement, training for paid staff in working with volunteers, or screening and matching of volunteers to appropriate assignments, these adoption decisions do not pay dividends in recruitment ease, retention, or net benefits of volunteers. The effect of volunteer intensiveness may be better understood as a universal predictor of program outcomes rather than a contingency that drives human resource practice decisions. Given these two specific tests, H_2 receives only this modest and qualified support.

Testing the Configurational Perspective

The configurational perspective argues that managers adopt bundles of human resource practices that they believe are best aligned with outcomes and other organizational processes (H_3). Testing this perspective first requires that we isolate groups of organizations with common profiles of volunteer management practice adoption. Our profiles are created through *k*-means cluster analysis of the eight categorical measures (core volunteer management practices) listed in Table 5. Our choice of the number of clusters (four) is neither theoretically nor empirically driven: they are illustrative for purposes of presentation.

Table 5. Four Configurational Profiles of Volunteer Management Practice Adoption

	Cluster			
	1	*2*	*3*	*4*
Written policies	+		+	
Training for paid staff		–		–
Liability coverage	+	+	–	–
Recognition activities	+			
Regular data collection	+		+	–
Training for volunteers				–
Screening and matching	+		+	
Supervision and communication	+	+	+	

Note: + indicates that cluster member has very high likelihood of adopting a practice (mean greater than 1.5 out of maximum 2.0); – indicates the cluster member has very low likelihood of adopting a practice (mean less than 0.5 out of a maximum of 2.0).

Cluster 1 (weighted n = 391) features the organizations most prone to adopt prescriptive practices. We define the cluster's bundled practices as those that its members are most or least likely to adopt. Whereas adoption is measured on a three-point scale ranging from 0 (no adoption) to 2 (adopted to a large degree), we include in the bundle those practices for which the cluster mean adoption is 1.5 and above (positive adoption; +) as well as those practices for which the cluster mean adoption is 0.5 and below (negative adoption; –). Cluster 1 therefore is identified as those organizations that bundle adoption of written policies and job descriptions, liability coverage for volunteers, recognition activities, regular data collection on volunteers, screening and matching volunteers to assignments, and regular supervision and communication with volunteers.

Clusters 2 and 3 are defined by a mix of adoption of specific practices as well as high likelihood of choosing not to adopt a particular practice. Cluster 2 (weighted n = 296) includes those organizations that emphasize liability coverage and communication with volunteers but show little need to train paid staff for working with those volunteers. Cluster 3 (weighted n = 294) includes those organizations that emphasize written policies and job descriptions, regular data collection on volunteer activities, screening and matching volunteers to assignments, and communications with volunteers, but are unlikely to offer (or perhaps need) liability coverage for volunteers.

Cluster 4 (weighted n = 273) features those organizations that are least prone to adopt prescriptive practices. They are not likely to adopt any of the eight practices in this analysis, but they are particularly likely to *not* adopt four of them: training for paid staff, liability coverage for volunteers, regular data collection on volunteer activities, and training for volunteers. Cluster 4 members are minimalists in their volunteer administration.

The logic of our test of the configurational hypothesis (H_3) is that cluster members who adopt a bundle of practices should see specific outcome measure gains from those particular practices. For example, since Cluster 1 organizations are more likely to adopt recognition activities (and other bundled practices), then Cluster 1 organizations should be able to see dividends in recruitment ease, retention, or net benefits of volunteers from recognition activities (and other bundled practices). Similarly, if cluster members have chosen not to emphasize a particular

practice, then members who do adopt should see penalties (negative effects) on its outcomes. For example, because Cluster 2 organizations do not emphasize training for paid staff in working with volunteers, the members who choose to adopt it (ostensibly for normative reasons) will see null to negative influence on recruitment ease and other outcome measures.

The empirical tests of the *configurational* hypothesis are indicated in Table 6 (recruitment ease), Table 7 (retention), and Table 8 (net benefits). Overall, the sporadic effects do not provide strong support for the configurational hypothesis. In Table 6, four of eighteen volunteer management capacity measures achieve statistical significance in relation to the outcome measure of recruitment ease. Nonetheless, these four effects are new and in the hypothesized directions. In Table 2, screening and matching does not have a universal impact on our overall sample of nonprofit organizations. However, in Table 6, screening and matching pays dividends in recruitment ease for those organizations (Cluster 1) that emphasize adoption of this practice, among others. In contrast, the other five practices emphasized by Cluster 1 are not significantly associated with recruitment ease, and three of these (nonsignificant) effects are negative, not positive. Cluster 3 illustrates similar results, with supervision and communication paying off in this configuration, but three of the four other effects reporting negative. However, the significant effect of liability coverage *should* be negative: Cluster 3 members generally do not need it, so those who adopt this practice pay the expected penalty in recruitment ease. The other significant effect in Table 6 occurs when Cluster 4 members choose to provide training for their volunteers. Because adoption is not expected for this cluster, this practice harms recruitment ease for this group.

Table 6. Hierarchical Regression Tests of Configurational Hypothesis: Recruitment Ease as Outcome

	Cluster 1		*Cluster 2*		*Cluster 3*		*Cluster 4*	
	Change in R^2	β	*Change in R^2*	β	*Change in R^2*	β	*Change in R^2*	β
Stage 1: Controls	.01		.00		.03		.01	
Size: LN(Expenditures)		.08		.03		.02		.08
Staff focus: LN(Ratio of staff to volunteers)		.01		−.01		−.06		−.06
Proportion of revenues from contributions		−.04		−.05		−.16**		−.04
Stage 2: Volunteer Management Capacity	.05**		.01		.08***		.03	
Written policies		−.01				−.04		
Training for paid staff				.03				.08
Liability coverage		−.10		−.10		−.18***		.03
Recognition activities		.02						
Regular data collection		−.02				−.07		−.03
Training for volunteers								−.04*
Screening and matching		.18***				.06		
Supervision and communication		.04		.05		.17**		

Note: Significance of change in R^2 tested by difference in F between models (ANOVA); standardized betas (β) reported from the step at which variable is entered into the equation.
**p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.*

Table 7. Hierarchical Regression Tests of Configurational Hypothesis: Retention as Outcome

	Cluster 1		*Cluster 2*		*Cluster 3*		*Cluster 4*	
	Change in R^2	β	*Change in R^2*	β	*Change in R^2*	β	*Change in R^2*	β
Stage 1: Controls	.06***		.07***		.04**		.06**	
Size: LN(Expenditures)		−.13*		−.04		−.07		−.11
Staff-focus: LN(Ratio of staff to volunteers)		−.10		−.23***		−.17**		−.16*
Proportion of revenues from contributions		−.20***		−.01		−.07		.03
Stage 2: Volunteer Management Capacity	.09**		.01		.03		.03	
Written policies		.04				−.03		
Training for paid staff				−.07				−.03
Liability coverage		.03		−.09		.06		−.00
Recognition activities		.21***						
Regular data collection		.02				.11		−.06
Training for volunteers								−.16**
Screening and matching		.05				.03		
Supervision and communication		−.09		−.06		−.10		

Note: Significance of change in R^2 tested by difference in F between models (ANOVA); Standardized betas (β) reported from the step at which variable is entered into the equation.
**p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.*

Significant effects are even sparser in the configurational tests of influence on volunteer retention and net benefits. Table 7 displays Cluster 1 members' benefits from recognition activities (not surprising, due to its universal effect) and the penalty that Cluster 4 members pay for investing in training for volunteers.

Table 8 reports results of the configurational test on net benefits. For the heavy practice adopters in Cluster 1, net benefits are higher from recognition activities and regular data collection. Recognition activity is expected from its universal influence on net benefits (Table 2), but this is the only place in our study where data collection has a significant relationship with an outcome measure, which provides some testament to the configurational approach. However, the only other significant effect in Table 2 derives from Cluster 2's emphasis on supervision and communication, a finding muted by our earlier observation regarding the universal influence of supervision and communication on net benefits. So, despite sporadic validation of specific relationships, the effects supporting the configurational hypothesis are sparse overall. Consequently, we judge the support for H_3 in these data as generally weak.

Discussion and Implications

The results of this study both validate and defy our expectations. In light of structural contingency and strategic human resource management theory we might expect the universalistic, best-practices orientation of the volunteer management field of practice to garner very

Table 8. Hierarchical Regression Tests of Configurational Hypothesis: Net Benefits as Outcome

	Cluster 1		*Cluster 2*		*Cluster 3*		*Cluster 4*	
	Change in R^2	β	*Change in R^2*	β	*Change in R^2*	β	*Change in R^2*	β
Stage 1: Controls	.05***		.09***		.12***		.06***	
Size: LN(Expenditures)		.01		−.11		−.06		−.03
Staff−focus: LN(Ratio of staff to volunteers)		−.23***		−.23***		−.33***		−.23***
Proportion of revenues from contributions		−.08		−.02		−.13*		−.09
Stage 2: Volunteer Management Capacity	.08***		.03*		.01		.00	
Written policies		.06				−.01		
Training for paid staff				.00				.00
Liability coverage		−.05		−.08		.04		.05
Recognition activities		.18***						
Regular data collection		.10*				.05		−.00
Training for volunteers								−.00
Screening and matching		.09				.03		
Supervision and communication		.09		.13*		.05		

Note: Significance of change in R^2 tested by difference in F between models (ANOVA); standardized betas (β) reported from the step at which variable is entered into the equation.
**p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.*

limited support and instead observe the beneficial effects of managers making strategic decisions about which volunteer management practices to adopt. Yet, several popular practices demonstrate universal value that cannot be explained away by contingency tests. Both the formal use of recognition activities for volunteers and the use of volunteers to recruit other volunteers show broad value for retention and net benefits of volunteers. Thus, we cannot reject out of hand the best-practices identification of exemplary volunteer management programs, but instead recognize the seemingly universal value of some practices in achieving positive outcomes in those programs. That said, the *universalistic argument* does not explain the adoption of all practices for all organizations, at least regarding their relationship to relevant outcomes. For many, the answer lies elsewhere.

In a few specific cases, contingency and configuration bundles shed some light. The negative influence of supervision and communication on retention noted among the universalistic tests in Table 2 gains some clarity in the contingency test presented in Table 3. Dissatisfaction with (too much) supervision and communication appears to be a particular issue among organizations that rely on younger volunteers. In her review of literature, Shields (2009) characterizes young volunteers as focused on personal interests, demanding freedom of choice, and interested in popular culture. Whereas the *traditional* generation, which represents the oldest workers and volunteers, appreciates a top-down, military-like command structure (Wilson and Foltz 2005), Generation Y is characterized as media oriented and adaptive, less responsive to rules and authority (Johnson and Johnson 2010). That these younger volunteers might resist supervision and seek autonomy and self-determination in their volunteer work is

to be expected. We also expect nonprofit managers reliant on young volunteers to recognize these characteristics in their dominant demographic and adapt human resource practices accordingly. That they tend to do so in their supervision and communication practices is testament to a strategic orientation. However, the fact that this example is the only evidence of contingent adoption uncovered in our study highlights Akingbola's (2006) conclusion that management decisions are decoupled from strategic outcomes in many nonprofit organizations. This notion is not dispelled by the configuration tests, where a handful of effects do not provide strong evidence that strategic bundles lead consistently to tangible outcomes.

That adoption of certain volunteer management practices cannot be explained by either universalistic or strategic connections to central outcomes raises questions about why organizations therefore adopt them. We acknowledge that other contingency factors may return different results. Myriad factors might be at play, such as age of the organization, support for the volunteer program, policy area, and so forth. Also, a more fine-grained cluster analysis may uncover bundles that pay off for specific organizations. Nevertheless, we are led back to our introductory remarks regarding the normative influence of the best practices "canon," which serves as an imprimatur of effective management regardless of actual outcomes. Three decades ago, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) observed that normative pressures can cause organizations to adopt practices that make them appear more professionalized, regardless of whether those practices serve the organization (or its clients) in more practical ways. To the extent that the field of volunteer administration has converged on a set of normative expectations for best practices, organizations will feel pressured to keep up appearances by adopting those practices. Manifestations of "volunteer management capacity" may owe as much to institutional isomorphism as strategic human resource management. Our null hypothesis (H_0) that adoption of best practices in volunteer administration is unrelated to program outcomes cannot be dismissed by the tests presented in this article.

Even if this condition defines the field, it does not hold for all organizations in it. In addition to the universalistic, contingent, and configurational perspectives examined in this article, strategic human resource management also recognizes a broader (and harder to define and measure) *contextual* perspective (Martín-Alcázar et al., 2005) that reflects Chadwick-Coule's (2011) rejection of the *managerial* or *modernist* paradigm. That is, rather than emphasizing the adoption of specific practices and the relationship with contingencies and other practices, the contextual perspective emphasizes the role of managers in broad assessments of history, institutional and environmental forces and processes, personalities, and a broad assessment of what outcomes matter to which actors. The contextual perspective replaces the platitudes of management with the complexity of institutional arrangements. Practice adoption, then, becomes as much a matter of complex understanding of organizational systems as adherence to normative standards. Although our study points to a decoupling of volunteer management practice from relevant institutional outcomes, some practice adoption can likely be explained by managers making smart decisions in the context of their operations.

We urge managers in the field of volunteer administration to cultivate this contextual view. Certainly, we must be cautious regarding the promulgation of a single set of practices that are said to apply to all organizations. Rather, organizational leaders should exercise caution with regard to adoption of volunteer (or other) management practices that have unproven value for their organizations. Normalization of a set of best practices can cause organizations to adopt practices that are not useful to them, and marginalize organizations that fail to adopt them, even though the practices may not be relevant or improve performance. In its place, we urge

recognition of the contextual complexity of organizational environments (both internal and external) and the variety of viable configurations of management practices that apply in different ways to those environments. In their study of strategic adoption of appropriate human resource architectures, Lepak and Snell (2002) differentiate four different human resource configurations: commitment-based, productivity-based, compliance-based, and collaborative. In Macduff et al.'s (2009) differentiation of traditional, social change, serendipitous, and entrepreneurial volunteer environments and the distinct volunteer management architectures required in each of them, organizational environments that engage volunteers are at least as varied. Indeed (and ultimately), a contextual view treats each organization as unique.

To reinforce this contextual perspective, we suggest a "tool box" approach to volunteer administration. Available to the volunteer administrator is a range of (universal) tools or best practices that have been proposed for the field, thought to bring about desirable outcomes. Although our empirical analysis suggests relatively little empirical utility of these practices across a variety of conditions, volunteer administrators should be aware of them and use (or not use) them according to the particular organizational context they confront. In our view, the job—and artistry—of the volunteer administrator is to determine whether, how, and where these practices may work in their specific organizational circumstances, and adopt, adapt, or even discard them accordingly. We likewise encourage organizational leadership to allow them the latitude as professionals to do so. In the end, able practitioners will combine an intimate knowledge of their organizations and surrounding circumstances with a careful assessment of the best practices available to arrive at unique and fruitful combinations of practices that maximize recruitment, retention, and the benefits that those volunteers bring to their operations.

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