

A Social Credits Platform for Volunteers

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1 Introduction

In recent years, the former Dutch welfare state has been transformed into a participation society [1]. As support from the government decreases, citizens are increasingly expected to be self-managing. Since not everyone is able to be self-managing, there is an increasing demand for help offered by volunteers. Although the number of volunteers in the Netherlands is relatively stable, the amount of time per volunteer has decreased over the past couple of years [2]. Most volunteers traditionally come from the wealthier, more educated segment of society and are likely to be female, married with children, 50+, and active in religion [3, 4]. In order to meet the increasing demand for volunteers, either the amount of time spent per volunteer should be increased, or new groups of volunteers should be attracted.

The Dutch foundation “Possible Today” started an initiative aimed at motivating (potential) volunteers: Social Credits for Volunteers. This is digital platform, based on block chain technology, connects volunteers with projects. The platform uses a digital currency -Social Credits- to appreciate and reward the efforts of volunteers. The currency can be exchanged for discounts or other value, offered by organizations and stores that feel involved with the community. An important feature of this system is the opportunity for volunteers to draft a social curriculum vitae.

The aim of this study is to generate recommendations for Possible Foundation about how the Social Credits Platform should be designed and deployed in order to persuade (potential) volunteers to spend (more) hours on volunteering. Therefore, the following research question is answered: ‘*What motives, desires and barriers traditional and less traditional volunteers have in regard to appreciation and reward for volunteering?*’

2 Review of the Literature

Literature [5] shows that volunteering fulfils various kinds of needs, such as social needs, career (job-related benefits), understanding (learning or practicing skills), values (altruistic or humanitarian concern), protective (reducing guilt or escaping personal problems), and enhancement (gaining satisfaction from personal growth). This implies both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation [6]. According to literature [7], extrinsic

rewards, like Social Credits, could undermine intrinsic motivation. Ariely, Bracha and Meier [8] found, besides intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, also image motivation as a drive for prosocial behaviour (including volunteering). This refers to an individual's tendency to be motivated by others' perceptions. The Social Credits system can support both extrinsic and image motivation. Another relevant psychological issue concerns the difference between social norms (applying in social contexts) and market norms (applying in business contexts) [9]. Although we are accustomed to pay for a meal in a restaurant, we do not pay a friend who cooked us dinner at his home. In line with this, people sometimes rather work for free than for a small financial reward because a financial reward is often seen as an indicator of 'what they are worth'. This principle explains the difference between appreciation (social norm) and reward (market norm), and affirms the importance of careful deployment of material rewards.

3 Methods and Results

To answer the research question, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted with (non-) volunteers from the traditional segment, volunteers with a distance to the labour market (as representatives of the less affluent segment), and students (as representatives of the young segment). The following is a summary of the findings.

Respondents in all segments mentioned 'personal benefit' as the main reason for volunteering. As one of the respondents said: *'It brought back the smile on my face'*. All the aforementioned needs [5] were affirmed in the interviews. This confirms the assumption that volunteering is driven by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. As a consequence, the risk of undermining intrinsic motivation by Social Credits can be seen as realistic but not major. Providing volunteers with the opportunity to donate earned credits to charity could reduce this risk significantly.

In all segments 'appropriate content' was a critical factor for volunteering. *'It should fit your expertise and skills'*. Therefore, in order to attract participants, the opportunity to choose the best fitting project from the platform should be stressed.

In all segments 'appreciation' was defined in immaterial terms like 'a smile' or 'a simple thank you', thereby confirming the social context of volunteering. *'It is far more important 'to be seen' than to get material rewards.'* Although this could be explained as social desirability, it is in line with a study [10] in which volunteers preferred intangible over tangible rewards. This seems to confirm the 'social context' of volunteering and affirms that Social Credits should be positioned as a form of appreciation (fitting social norms) rather than as a reward (fitting market norms).

The initial reaction of traditional volunteers and respondents with a distance to the labour market to the Social Credits Platform was reluctant. *'Too much trouble'* and *'invasion of privacy'* were mentioned as objections. In the second instance however, the latter group affirmed to appreciate material 'extras' and mentioned to expect that the platform could increase the status and prestige of volunteering.

So besides focus on transparency (because of concerns about privacy) Possible Foundation should pay attention – in terms of the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology [11] to 'ease of use' of the platform and -for the traditional segment- 'perceived usefulness'.

Students mentioned that Social Credits do not outweigh their need for paid work. They were less critical about privacy and more interested in the social curriculum vitae. If this concerns image motivation [8] the amount of earned credits –being an extrinsic reward- should not be mentioned on the social curriculum vitae because for image motivated behaviour, rewards could dilute the signal to others. Finally, students expect that registration on the platform will increase the commitment of volunteers.

Further research, like monitoring a pilot with the platform, should offer more insight in the user experiences of the platform.

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