

# For struggling organizations, fostering social connections can help recruit and retain scarce volunteers

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At a time when America needs volunteers more than ever, to tackle social problems from homelessness to disaster recovery, fewer people

have been volunteering.

The number of [volunteers](#) for nonprofit and community-based organizations [declined recently](#) for the first time in decades, from 30% of the population in 2019 to 23% in 2021. That's according to AmeriCorps and the U.S Census Bureau, which have tracked rates of volunteerism since 2002.

New research from Yifan Yu, assistant professor of information, risk, and [operations management](#) at Texas McCombs, offers ideas on how volunteer-driven organizations could turn things around. The key, he says, is in connections.

"Volunteers are like trees with deep roots in their nonprofit organizations," he says. "The more connections or 'roots' volunteers have with each other in different social layers, like communities and schools, the more likely they are to continue volunteering."

Yu and co-authors Jane Tan of Southern Methodist University and Yong Tan of the University of Washington analyzed the volunteer activity logs of 827,260 Beijing-area residents from 2011 to 2019.

Their data came from a Chinese crowdsourcing platform run by the Beijing Volunteer Service Federation, which connects volunteers to nonprofit organizations. Such digital matchmakers, including [VolunteerMatch](#) and [Catchafire](#), have become increasingly common in the U.S., Yu says.

The logs allowed Yu to investigate what factors encouraged volunteers to stay or leave. "Our study takes a close look at why people decide to volunteer, why they keep doing it, and why they choose to move to a new nonprofit organization," he says.

His main finding was that social or relational connections were a powerful predictor of volunteer behavior. Other findings include:

- Volunteers were more likely to continue volunteering at a nonprofit organization and to volunteer more frequently, if they had existing connections to the people there.
- Those with multiple connections—such as overlapping work, neighborhood, or schooling ties—were 27% more likely to remain involved than those with a single connection.
- The more connected a volunteer was at an organization, the less likely that person was to move to another. Having multiple connections made one 9% less likely to leave—good news for younger groups that compete with more established ones for help.

These insights might help nonprofits better forecast volunteer behavior and devise strategies to keep them engaged, Yu says. A volunteer who's at risk of becoming inactive could be assigned to a project with a neighbor or co-worker.

Crowdsourcing platforms could exploit another finding: Someone who has volunteered with multiple kinds of organizations is more likely to try an unfamiliar one.

"Personalized recommendations can help," he says. "Managers can recommend volunteering opportunities at newer, small, and less well-known nonprofits."

Though the data were China-specific, the researchers also surveyed American and British volunteers online, confirming the results could be generalized to other cultures.

Yu's findings aren't limited to the world of volunteering, he adds.

Understanding the importance of social and relational ties might also help companies manage paid workers.

"In a [technology company](#), employees may hold multiple relationships," Yu says. "They can form mentor-mentee relationships, be friends, live in the same community, and collaborate on the same project.

Understanding such relationships may help predict employees' mobility, satisfaction, motivations, and work performance."

The research is [published](#) in the journal *Information Systems Research*.

**More information:** Yifan Yu et al, Understanding Volunteer Crowdsourcing from a Multiplex Perspective, *Information Systems Research* (2024). [DOI: 10.1287/isre.2022.0290](https://doi.org/10.1287/isre.2022.0290)

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