

# Volunteer Management in Sports Clubs in Europe

## OBJECTIVE

### What is it about?

While results on volunteer demographics and characteristics were already presented in a previous issue of our Quick Facts → [Quick Facts.2](#), the following paper will focus on volunteer management in sports clubs in Europe. Which measures and strategies sports clubs take to recruit and retain volunteers, and whether some of these strategies are more successful than others will be the guiding question.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### What is volunteer management?

There is no generally accepted theory of what exactly volunteer management is or what it should be, and different approaches to volunteer management are proposing different strategies, measures and processes to systematically support and promote sports volunteering.

In addition, the concept of volunteer management is not uncontroversial. For example, the term volunteer management itself may be criticised, as it may imply that volunteers are considered an economical resource. The approach may also be accused for attempting to transfer concepts from the for-profit sector to the voluntary sector.

Despite the fact that these are relevant issues, this theoretical debate has not been pursued within the scope of the SIVSCE project. Instead, an exploratory empirical approach was used to investigate what sports clubs in Europe do to cover their need for sufficient voluntary support and if the interest of those who want to or do volunteer are also met in this process.

## RELEVANCE

### Why should clubs and federations be concerned with volunteer management?

Voluntary work is the most important resource that allows sports clubs to exist and to offer interesting programs to their members. Although our data does not support the general thesis that voluntary engagement is in steady decline (crisis of volunteering), many sports clubs report to have difficulties in recruiting and retaining enough qualified volunteers (see below). This refers to sports volunteers in general and to elected positions on the board of sports clubs in particular. Therefore, the next logical question to arise is - what characterises the clubs that are more successful in recruiting and retaining volunteers than others, and how can clubs manage or support their volunteers effectively.

## METHOD

### How were the clubs' volunteer management strategies analyzed?

Comparative data was collected for the "*Social Inclusion and Volunteering in Sports Clubs in Europe*" - Project (SIVSCE). As part of this research two major surveys were implemented. The first one was answered by more than 35,000 sports clubs from 10 European countries. The second survey was designed as a follow-up in which more than 13,000 club members were interviewed. These club members were recruited from almost 650 clubs that were selected from the initial club survey. → [Quick Facts.1](#)

Sports volunteering was a central topic in both surveys. To quantify the level of sports volunteering a volunteer per member ratio was calculated and clubs were asked if the number of volunteers has increased or decreased over the last five years. This quantitative development of volunteering was put into perspective with other problems and challenges of the participating sports clubs. In addition, club representatives were asked for details regarding their attitudes towards volunteering as well as their volunteer management strategies. For those clubs that also participated in the member survey, the volunteer management activities at club level could be connected to the individual volunteer's satisfaction with the conditions for sports volunteering in the club.

The underlying evaluation logic is described in figure 1. The assumption is that the clubs implement different measures to motivate and support their volunteers as a reaction or result of the actual level of voluntary support from their members. The quantity and quality of their volunteer management strategies should have an influence on how volunteers perceive the conditions for sports volunteering in the club, and higher levels of volunteer satisfaction should then entail higher levels of voluntary support → [Fig. 1](#).

## Evaluation Logic – Volunteer Management

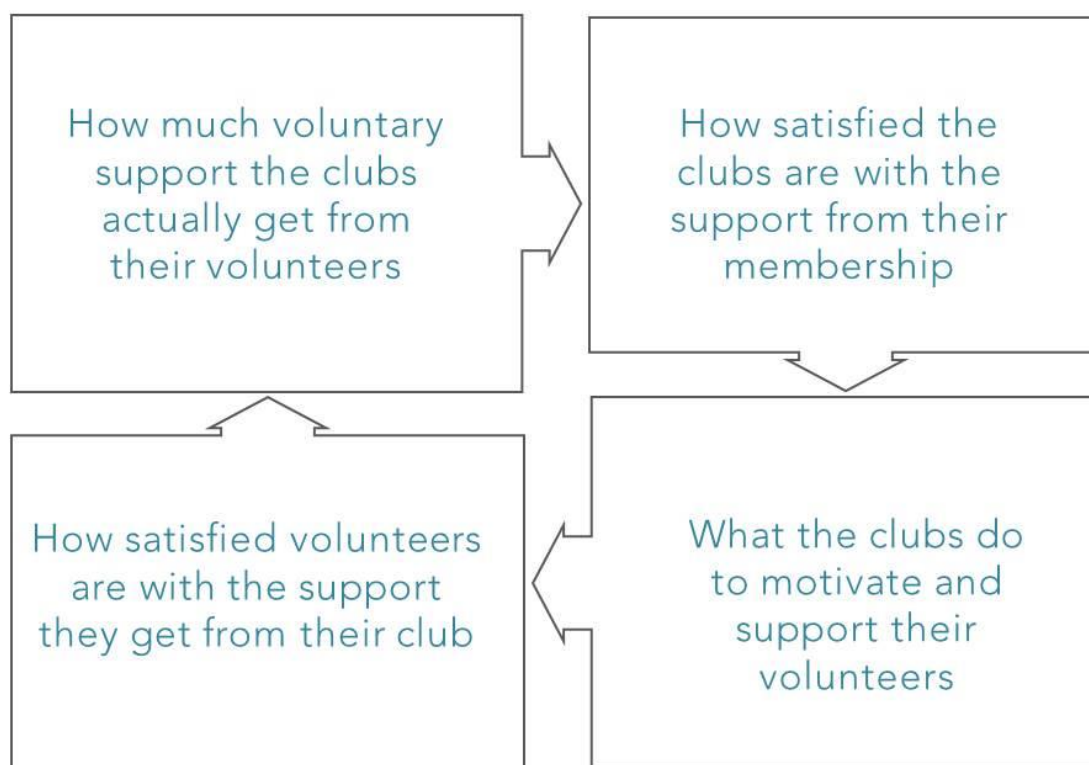


Fig. 1: Evaluation logic regarding volunteer management in sports clubs

## RESULTS

### How much voluntary support do sports clubs actually get from their volunteers?

On average the relative share of volunteers in fixed position compared to all members, and the relative share of volunteers who support the club on a more flexible basis (helping hands) is 19% in both categories → [Tab.1](#). Thus, nearly four out of ten members support their club as a volunteer. Figures from the member survey suggest even higher numbers; however, this may be explained as a potentially higher commitment of volunteers to fill in the questionnaire.

Tab 1: Volunteers in fixed and no fixed positions (share relative to members, sorted descending by the share of volunteers).

	ALL	ESP	HUN	NED	DEN	ENG	BEL	NOR	POL	SUI	GER
Volunteers in fixed positions (Share relative to all members in %)	19	23	22	21	20	20	19	19	18	14	13
Volunteers not in a fixed position (Share relative to all members in %)	19	18	16	13	14	6	18	16	13	25	17

The frequency of voluntary work in the club does not vary a lot between countries. On average more than four out of ten volunteers are active at least once a week as a volunteer and approx. five percent volunteer five days a week or more.

On average, volunteers report spending 173 hours per year on voluntary work in the club with figures reaching from 119 hours in Switzerland to 292 hours in Poland → Fig.2. The 173 hour average equals a full month of work if the standard of a 40 hours week is used for comparison.

Just as interesting as the absolute number of hours and the differences between countries is a comparison between the mean and the median values. For all countries the median value (the value which splits the group into halves) is significantly lower than the mean value. This indicates that for all ten countries, a core group of very engaged volunteers spends a lot of hours on voluntary work, while a larger group of volunteers spend significantly less time working for their respective clubs.

### Hours spent on voluntary work in the club per year and volunteer

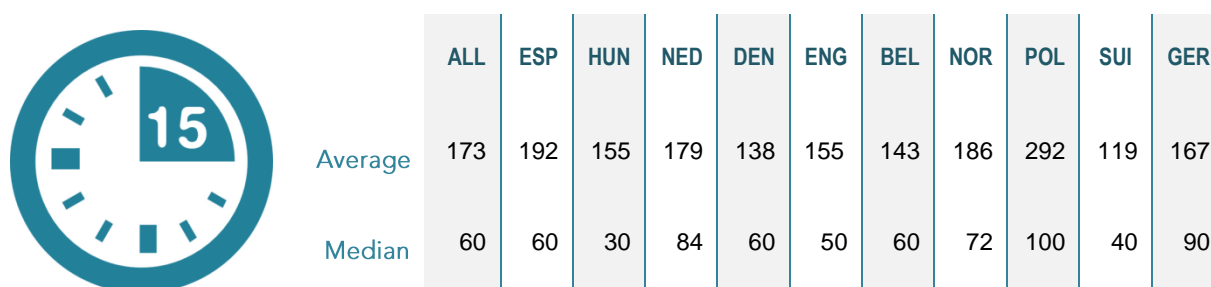


Fig. 2: Hours spent on voluntary work in the club per year and volunteer

The sports club survey also shows that sports volunteering has been relatively stable. In most countries, 60 percent or more of all sports clubs report that within the last five years the number of volunteers in their club has been roughly the same → Quick Facts .2. This however only refers to the number of people and not to the hours spent on voluntary work.

## How satisfied are sports clubs with the support from their membership

There is generally a very high agreement among sports club representatives that volunteering plays an important role in their club, not only as a resource but also as a social value. Across most of the countries there is a majority of clubs that ascribe to the ideal that their clubs should be run exclusively by volunteers. Only clubs in Poland rather disagree with this statement → Fig.3.

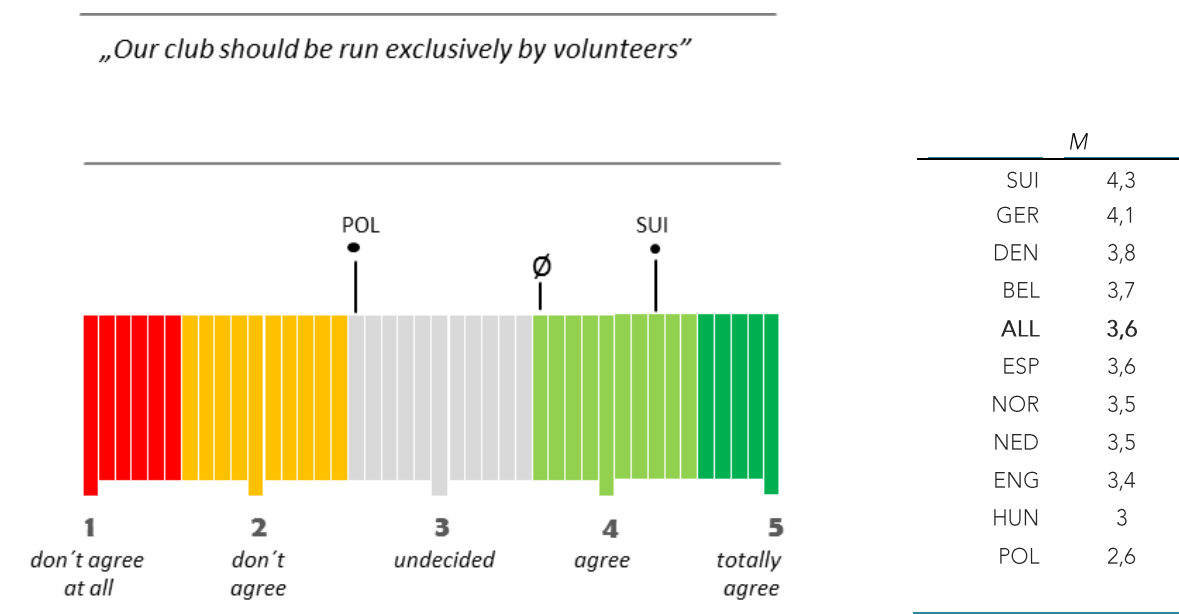


Fig. 3: Club's attitudes and expectations on volunteering

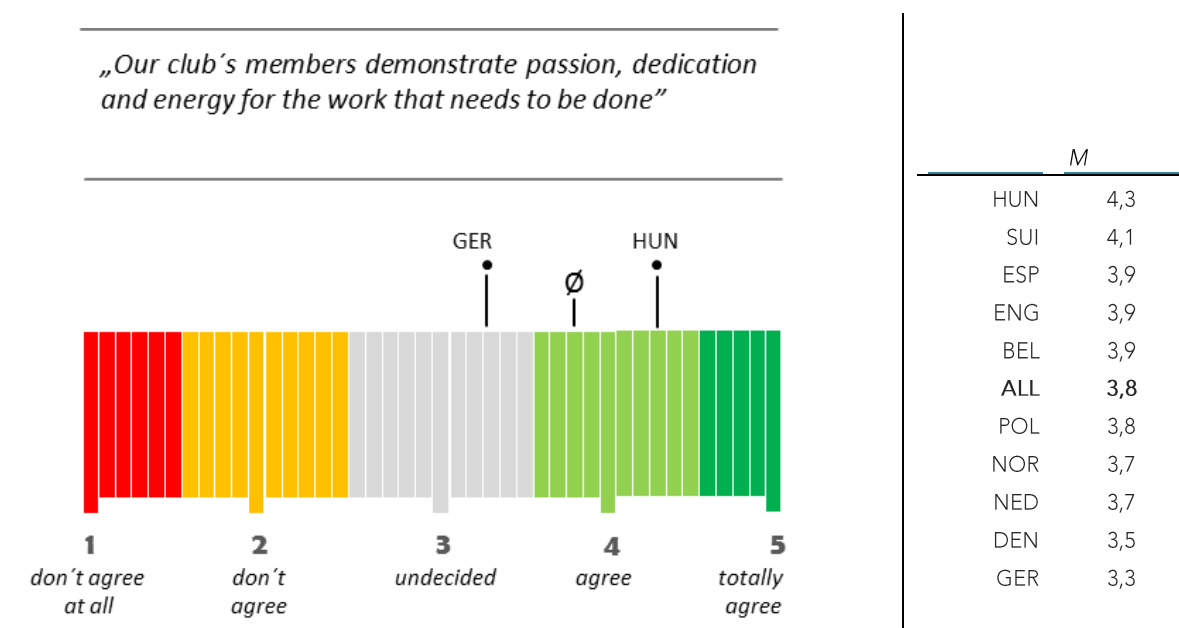


Fig. 4: Club's satisfaction with support from their membership

In all countries, club representatives are generally satisfied with the support the clubs get from their membership. However, in some countries a larger number of club representatives do not agree to the statement that their members demonstrate enough passion, dedication and energy for the work that needs to be done in the club → Fig.4. This accounts in particular for Germany and Denmark where expectations that the club should be run exclusively by volunteers are rather high.

### Is the recruitment and retention of volunteers a problem for sports clubs?

The club survey reveals that having enough human resources is perceived as one of the main challenges of many sports clubs. This accounts for all areas in which volunteers are involved (e.g. as coaches, referees etc.) but most of all it is the case for volunteers on the board level. Recruiting and retaining seems to be a bigger challenge in Germany, Denmark and Switzerland while only few clubs Belgium seem to be affected → Fig.5.

Despite these differences, there are sports clubs in all ten countries which describe the recruitment and retention of volunteers on the board level as an existential problem for their club. Compared to the results above, it is quite interesting that the number of clubs with such an existential challenge on the board level is highest in Germany (15%), Switzerland (11%) and Denmark (8%) while in all other countries the rate is 5% or less. This might be seen as an indicator that there is a correlation between the attitude that the club should be run exclusively by volunteers and their report of the existence of crucial problems on the board level. However, the data of the club survey reveal no correlation between the two factors. And clubs with existential problems in recruiting and retaining volunteers on the club level do not show higher values for the opinion that the club should be exclusively run by volunteers. Thus, the specific tradition of volunteering cannot explain the differences between the countries.

Another aspect that was analyzed in this context was the role of paid management: Can a paid manager reduce the existential problems of volunteering on the board level? The results on the club level show that there are no differences according to whether a club employs a paid manager or not. Thus, there must be other, more specific factors that are relevant for existential problems in the field of volunteering.



“How serious are certain problems in your club at the moment?  
 - Recruitment/retention of volunteers at the board level”

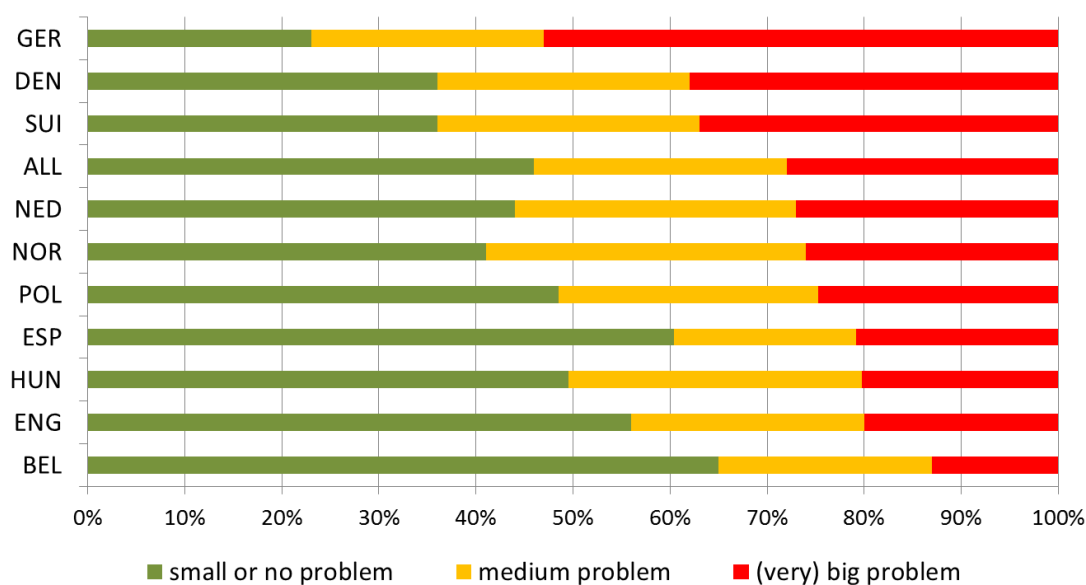


Fig. 5: Perceived problems of sports clubs: Recruitment/retention of volunteers at the board level

## What are clubs doing to recruit and retain volunteers?

First of all it is worth noting that sports clubs in Europe are actively trying to recruit and retain volunteers.

Almost 9 out of 10 clubs are implementing at least one specific activity to recruit and retain volunteers. Only 13 percent of all clubs say, they would not do anything in particular → Fig.6. The figures here reach from 6 percent in Norway to 19 percent in Spain with one big exception: 44 percent of sports clubs from Belgium say they do nothing in particular to recruit and retain volunteers. This is interesting because the clubs in Belgium are also the ones which least frequently report to have problems in this area.

In a majority of the clubs across all ten countries, the primary way to recruit volunteers is carried out through the existing networks of current volunteers and the volunteers are encouraged verbally (more than 50% of all clubs in nearly all countries). In contrast, only a minority of the clubs tries to recruit volunteers from outside the existing club members (only between 7% and 25%) → Fig.7.

Around one third of the clubs explicitly express their expectations to receive voluntary support from members (38%) or parents of children in the club (28%).

Formal measures such as having a written strategy for volunteer recruitment or assigning this task to a volunteer or paid staff member with specific responsibility for volunteer manage-

ment are even less common. Only 14 percent have assigned such a position and a mere 7 percent report to have some kind of written volunteer strategy.



Fig. 6: Share of clubs with at least one activity to recruit and retain volunteers

All in all, the more traditional forms of recruiting and retaining volunteers of personally contacting and encouraging the members of the club are much more common than more formal measures, like payment for qualification, written strategies or specific volunteer management.

*“What measures is your club taking to recruit and retain volunteers?”*

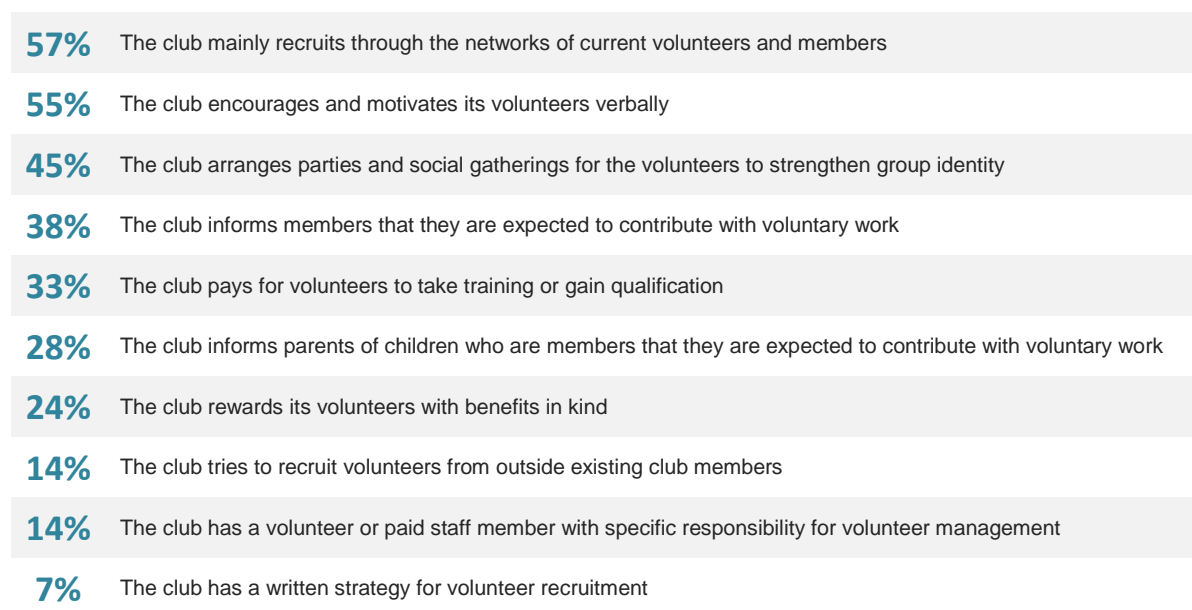


Fig. 7: Measures to recruit and retain volunteers

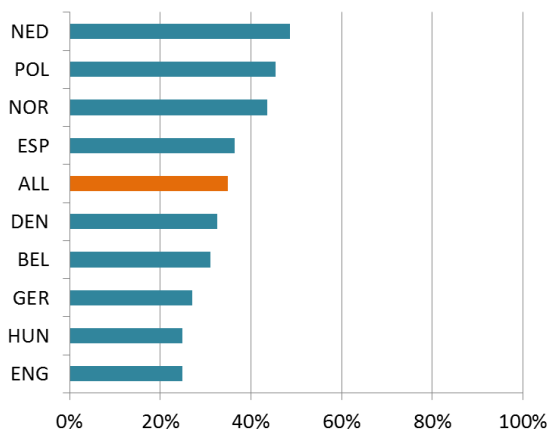
However, there are very large differences between participating countries. Clubs in England for example seem to be much more open to formal measures of volunteer management than



clubs in the other countries. Paying for qualification of volunteers is another example: This concept is obviously well established in all of the “older” sport systems, while clubs in the “younger” sport systems of Poland, Hungary and Spain make less use of this approach → Fig.8a-f.

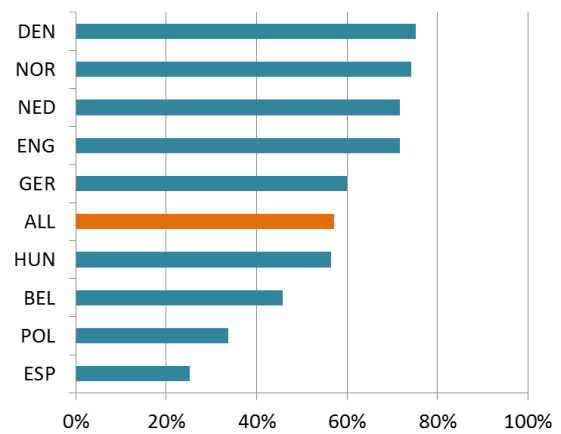
If we look at all clubs across countries again, nearly all the measures presented are more common in clubs with a larger number of members. Particularly clubs with more than 500 members use the different possibilities to recruit and retain volunteers more often, probably because they have a larger need of volunteers and more problems to recruit volunteers without any effort. In contrast, 25% of the clubs with less than 50 members do not do anything in particular for recruiting and retaining volunteers. Only the concept that members are expected to contribute with voluntary work is more common in smaller clubs. Presumably, the social pressure to engage for the club community is bigger in clubs with fewer members where nearly every member is known personally.

*The club informs members that they are expected to contribute with voluntary work*



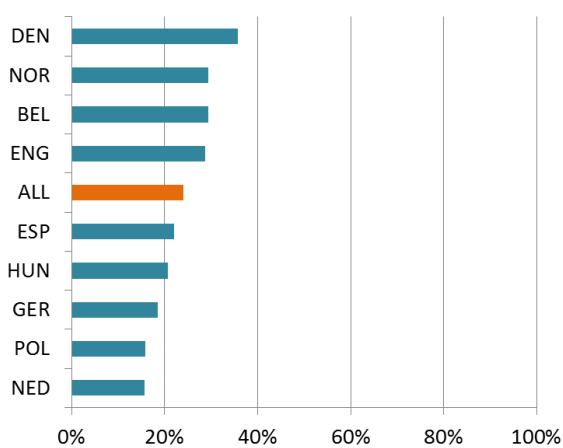
*Fig. 8a: Measures to recruit and retain volunteers by country*

*The club mainly recruits through the networks of current volunteers and members*

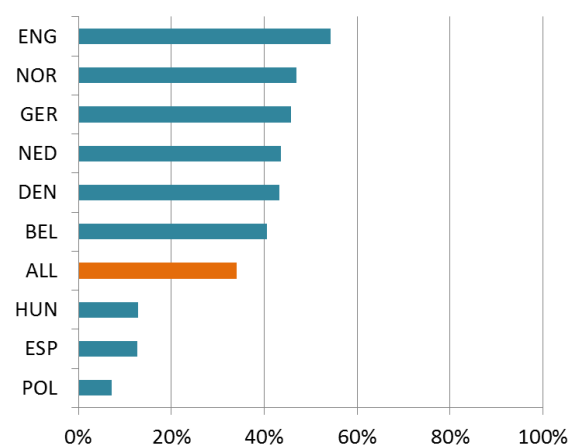


*Fig. 8b: Measures to recruit and retain volunteers by country*

*The club rewards its volunteers with benefits in kind*

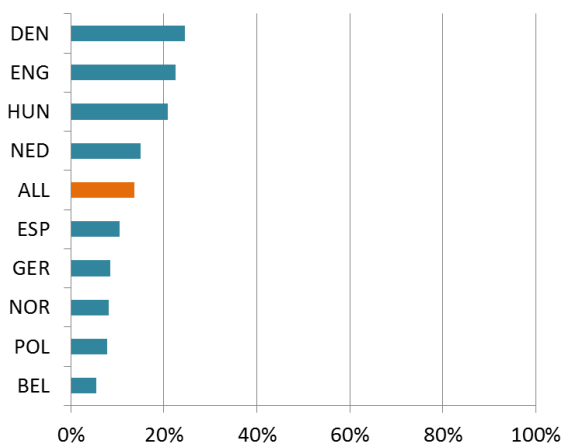


*The club pays for volunteers to take training or gain qualification*



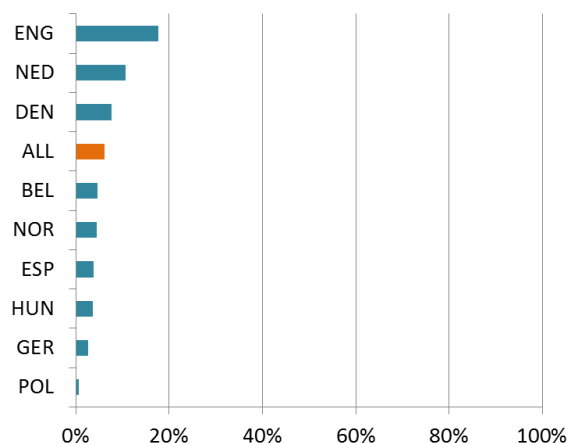
Clubs with a full or half time paid management more often take the more formal measures to recruit and retain volunteers, like having a responsible person for volunteer management, benefits in kind, written strategy. Probably, these clubs are more open for innovations and the paid manager supports the implementation of such measures.

*The club has a volunteer or paid staff member with specific responsibility for volunteer management*



*Fig. 8e: Measures to recruit and retain volunteers by country*

*The club has a written strategy for volunteer recruitment*



*Fig. 8f: Measures to recruit and retain volunteers by country*

## How do volunteers perceive the conditions for volunteering in their club?

The values in Table 2 show that across all 10 countries volunteers find their tasks interesting and challenging and their work as a volunteer appreciated. In general they can carry out their work autonomously, are informed about major club affairs and are supported in their voluntary work by other club members. Only fringe benefits and payments for voluntary work are rather not characteristic for the situation of volunteers in sports clubs in Europe.



Photo: Bent Nielsen/DGI Fotoarkiv

Although there are differences between countries, the picture of how volunteers perceive the conditions for volunteering in their club is still rather similar across Europe. However, there are a few noticeable exceptions. This includes for example the comparatively low agreement of volunteers from Hungary regarding the appreciation they get from their club, the lower level of autonomy that Danish volunteers perceive to have in their role or a certain lack of constructive feedback for volunteers in the Netherlands → [Tab.2](#).

Tab 2: Circumstances and conditions for volunteers in the club

*To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the work you do as a volunteer in the club?*

1 = strongly disagree → 5 = strongly agree

	ALL	BEL	DEN	ENG	GER	HUN	NED	NOR	POL	ESP	SUI
My work as a volunteer is appreciated	4,2	4,2	4,3	4,5	4,1	4,4	4,1	4,3	4,0	4,0	4,2
The tasks are interesting and challenging	4,0	3,9	4,0	4,1	4,0	4,2	3,7	4,1	4,0	4,2	4,0
I can carry out my work autonomously	3,9	4,0	3,3	3,8	4,3	4,2	3,9	3,6	3,9	3,9	4,3
I am informed about major club affairs	3,9	3,9	3,5	4,2	3,9	4,3	3,6	3,8	3,9	4,1	4,1
Other club members support my work as a volunteer	3,9	3,8	4,0	4,2	3,7	3,8	3,7	4,0	3,9	4,1	3,9
My problems and concerns as a volunteer are taken seriously	3,8	3,7	3,8	3,9	3,8	3,9	3,5	3,6	3,7	4,0	3,8
The club honors me for my voluntary work	3,6	4,2	4,1	3,1	3,1	2,8	4,0	4,0	3,4	3,9	3,3
I get constructive feedback from the club management/board	3,4	3,5	3,3	3,3	3,2	3,8	2,9	3,3	3,6	3,9	3,2
I get fringe benefits (e.g. reduced membership fee)	2,3	2,5	2,5	2,2	1,8	1,9	2,1	1,9	2,5	2,3	2,9
I get some payment for my voluntary work	1,9	2,2	1,7	1,4	2,0	1,9	1,9	1,4	2,5	2,2	2,2



Photo: Brian Nonbo/Dansk Firmaidræt

## How satisfied are volunteers with the support they get from their club

Overall, the majority of volunteers in sports clubs in Europe is satisfied with the circumstances in which they operate. In all countries, at least 60% of the respondents are satisfied or even very satisfied with the circumstances in the club. However, minor differences regarding single aspects of volunteering in the club (see above) seem to sum up to somewhat bigger differences in overall satisfaction of volunteers. Highest levels of satisfaction can be found in Belgium and Poland while Germany and Hungary are at the end of this ranking → Fig.9.

*“How satisfied are you with the conditions for volunteers in the club?”*

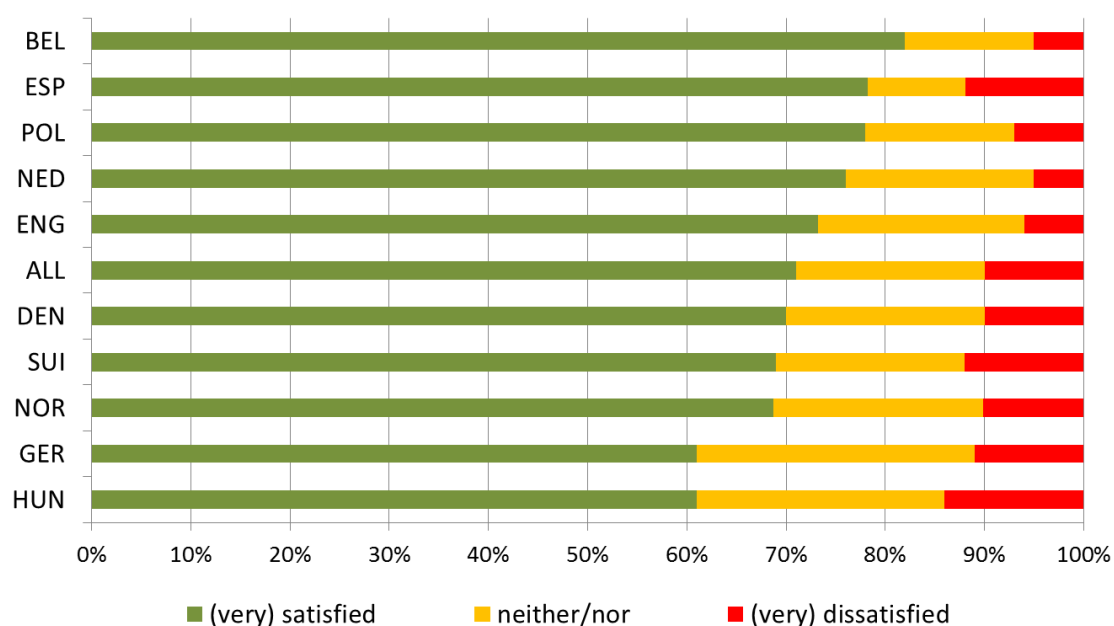
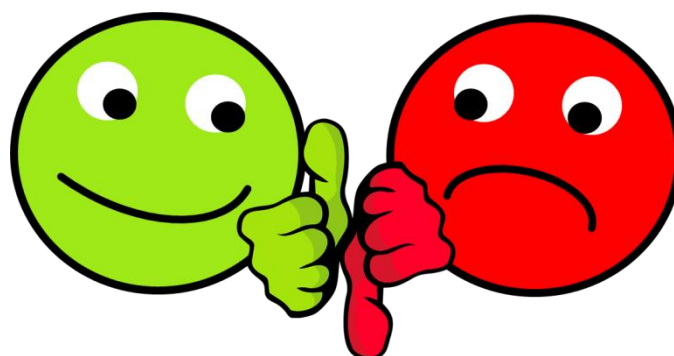


Fig.9: Overall satisfaction with conditions for volunteers



What is interesting in this context is that not every single issue related to the situation of volunteers in the club has the same influence on overall satisfaction of volunteers. Soft factors like the appreciation of the work that is done, show a higher correlation with overall satisfaction than factors that are linked to the activity or potential incentives → Fig.10.

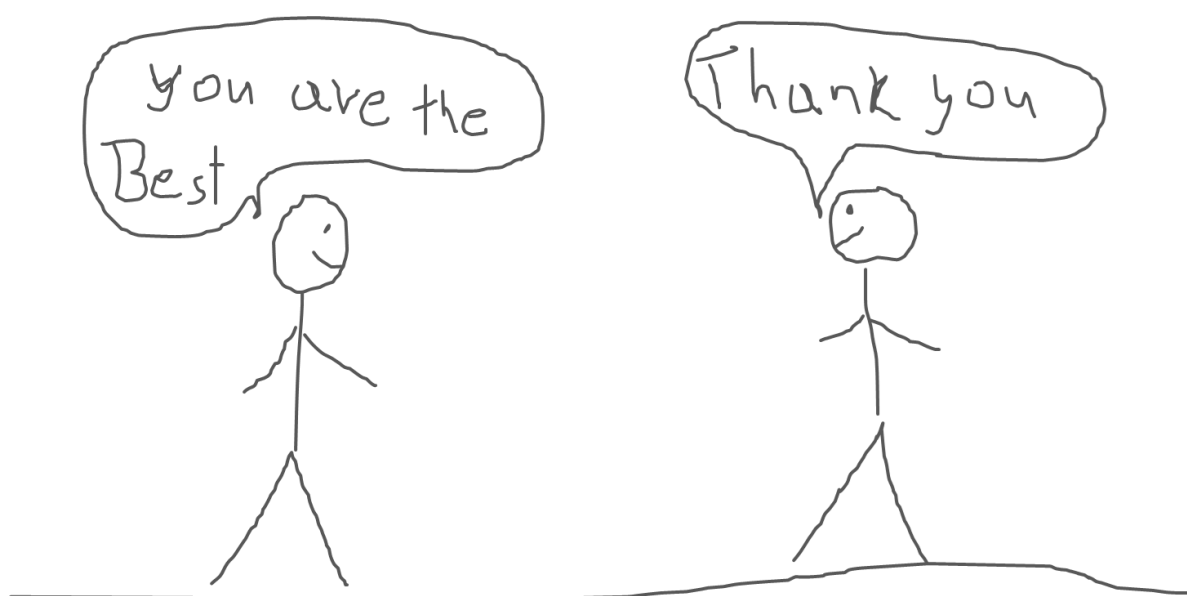
---

How strong is the correlation between single items and overall satisfaction of volunteers with the conditions for volunteering in their club?

high	■ My work as a volunteer is appreciated
	■ My problems and concerns as a volunteer are taken seriously
	■ The club honors me for my voluntary work
low	■ I get constructive feedback from the club management/board
	■ I am informed about major club affairs
	■ The tasks are interesting and challenging
none	■ I get fringe benefits (e.g. reduced membership fee)
	■ I can carry out my work autonomously
	■ I get some payment for my voluntary work

---

Fig.10. Relevance of single aspects of volunteering to overall satisfaction of volunteers



## What are the most promising volunteer management strategies?

Clubs that also reported an increase in the number of volunteers more frequently, take the following measures relatively more often:

- having a person responsible for volunteer management,
- giving benefits in kind to the volunteers,
- recruiting through the networks of current volunteers.

Thus, it can be assumed that these measures help to recruit and retain volunteers more efficiently.

However, the correlations are only weak, and for other measures, e.g. written strategy for volunteer recruitment, paying volunteers for qualification and training, there are no relevant effects.

The analysis of different dimensions of voluntary work shows that all measured aspects are relevant for the volunteer satisfaction. The comparison of the satisfied volunteers with the unsatisfied volunteers demonstrates that the most relevant factors are

- recognition (volunteer work is appreciated and honored)
- leadership (feedback and information) and
- support of volunteers

whereas material incentives as well as interesting tasks and autonomy play a less important role in volunteer satisfaction.

The specific conditions for volunteering are much more relevant than other determinants, like the frequency of volunteering and the hours of volunteer work. Volunteers who work more regularly (at least once a week) are only slightly more satisfied than volunteers who engage just once or twice a year; and there is no correlation between satisfaction and workload (hours per month) of regular volunteers.

Finally, it is interesting to have a closer look at the relevance of structural conditions in the club for volunteers' satisfaction. The size of the club (number of members), as well as having a paid management has no significant effect on the satisfaction of volunteers. For the different measures to recruit and retain volunteers (e.g. responsible person for volunteer management, written strategy for volunteer recruitment) we also do not observe any relevant effects.

---

All in all, the conditions for volunteering as perceived by a single volunteer is the main determinant for volunteer satisfaction and successful recruiting and retention of volunteers. Thus, it is not enough to implement a certain measure or process for promoting volunteering at the organisational level, but also to reach all volunteers with it. Then a club can be successful in recruiting more volunteers and particularly in retaining the current (satisfied) volunteers.

---

## QUICK FACTS FOR SPORTS CLUBS

Research on sports clubs should also be research for sports clubs. With the "Quick Facts for Sports Clubs" series, the partners of the "SIVSCE-Project" want to take this claim into account.

Selected results of the study are represented in this series in such a way that they provide the responsible persons in the clubs and federations with a quick overview of the gained insights, and highlight the most relevant points for the sports sector.

The description deliberately follows the principles of clear language and systematic presentation and limits itself to only the most important aspects and insights.

Readers who are interested in the complete and detailed results of the study can refer to the website for the corresponding research reports, scientific publications and quick facts on other topics → [www.sdu.dk/sivsce](http://www.sdu.dk/sivsce)

## AUTHORS

The results presented in the *Quick Facts for Sports Clubs* are based on the joint research carried out by the following authors and institutions:

Adler Zwahlen, Jenny; Albrecht, Julia (University of Bern, SUI); Breuer, Christoph (German Sport University, GER); Bürgi, Rahel (Lamprecht und Stamm Sozialforschung und Beratung AG, SUI); Claes, Elien (KU Leuven, BEL); Elmose-Østerlund, Karsten (University of Southern, Denmark, DEN); Feiler, Svenja (German Sport University, GER); Gerbert, Angela (Lamprecht und Stamm Sozialforschung und Beratung AG, SUI); Illmer, Daniel (DOSB Leadership Academy, GER); Ibsen, Bjarne (University of Southern Denmark, DEN); Lamprecht, Markus (Lamprecht und Stamm Sozialforschung und Beratung AG, SUI); Llopis-Goig, Ramon (University of Valencia, ESP); Nagel, Siegfried (University of Bern, SUI); Nichols, Geoff (University of Sheffield, ENG); Perényi, Szilvia (University of Physical Education Budapest and University of Debrecen, HUN); Piatkowska, Monika (Josef Pilsudski University of Physical Education in Warsaw, POL); Scheerder, Jeroen (KU Leuven, BEL); Seippel, Ørnulf (Norwegian School of Sports Sciences, NOR); Steinbach, Dirk (DOSB Leadership Academy, GER); van der Roest, Jan Willem (Mulier Institute, NED); van der Werff, Harold (Mulier Institute, NED)



UNIVERSITAT  
DE VALÈNCIA



NIH NORGES  
IDRETTSHØGSKOLE



KU LEUVEN

SDU  
UNIVERSITY OF  
SOUTHERN DENMARK

u<sup>b</sup>  
UNIVERSITÄT  
BERN

mulier institute

DOSB FÜHRUNGS  
AKADEMIE



Deutsche  
Sporthochschule Köln  
German Sport University Cologne  
Institut für Sportökonomie  
und Sportmanagement  
Institute of Sport Economics  
and Sport Management



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

