

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT: THE ROLE OF VOLUNTEERS IN ACHIEVING SUCCESS IN A SOCIAL ECONOMY ENTITY

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Abstract: Currently, the number of social initiatives is increasing, and social economy entities are becoming more important. Therefore, a study of associations has been conducted. The main objective of the study is to review and verify the information and concepts related to association management. The second objective is to identify the motivations for participating in voluntary activities. These goals can be achieved on the basis of a review of the literature and a pilot study. It can be concluded that there are various concepts of non-governmental organization management and that their implementation is important for the efficient functioning of these entities. The pilot study indicates that volunteers' motivations include a desire to help others and that their effectiveness is based on the support of other volunteers.


Keywords: association, management, social economy, volunteering

JEL Classification: A13, L31

Introduction

Today, we observe a trend towards being more socially active by participating in different social enterprises and participating in charity. The increasing awareness of our impact on the lives of others leads us to focus more on the needs of people. In addition, dramatic events around the world have led to a growing number of community-minded initiatives.

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Within the economy, there is a sector in which people come first: the social economy. It focuses on achieving goals related to improving the quality of life of citizens. One type of organization operating in this sector is an association. Many associations rely on volunteer work to carry out their mission.

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Literature review

Based on the source literature, the social economy can be seen as a theoretical concept shaped by civic awareness and societal needs. The social economy originated in France in the nineteenth century as a term referring to entities that pursued social goals alongside, rather than solely, profit maximization. In the same century in Poland, we can find references to the social economy connected with foundations, associations, and cooperatives. Interest in this sector increased as a result of the systemic transformation that reduced the role of the state as an employer. New jobs were created mainly by private enterprises, while the scope of social care for employees decreased (Brzuska et al., 2017).

According to the Act on Social Economy of August 5, 2022, the social economy is an activity for local society in the field of professional and social reintegration, creating new jobs for people at risk of social exclusion, and providing social services. Those tasks are carried out by public benefit activities, business activities, and other paid activities (Ustawa o ekonomii społecznej, 2022).

The core of a social economy is human, and profits are used to achieve social goals. The target group includes people who cannot fully participate in social and professional life due to disability, age, mental illness, long-term unemployment, and poverty. The consequences of social exclusion affect communities and families. Entities of social economy are cooperative entities, non-governmental organizations, socio-professional reintegration units, and other similar entities such as foundations, associations, church entities, non-profit companies, rural housewives unions, and local government units' associations (Department of Social Economy, n.d.).

One of the social economy entities is an association whose operation is regulated by the Act of Law on Associations of April 7, 1989. An association is a self-governing, voluntary, permanent, non-profit organization. This unit independently states its aims, organizational structures, programs of action, and adopts internal acts. The operations are based on the social work of the association members. This entity can hire employees to conduct its affairs. Employees can also be association members (Ustawa Prawo o stowarzyszeniach, 1989).

An association is established by a group of people who share a common goal. It is a non-profit corporation, that is, a voluntary, self-governing, and permanent organization. It operates on the principle of continuity of purpose, which means that the association continues to exist regardless of changes in its membership (Brzuska et al., 2017).

An association can be established by at least seven people who elect the founding committee or the organization's authorities and adopt the statute. The association's assets consist of donations, bequests, inheritances, membership fees, income from the association's assets, income from its own activities, and public donations. The entity is entitled to conduct business activities in accordance with the principles set out in separate regulations. Income from these activities is allocated to achieve statutory goals and cannot be divided among the organization's members (Ustawa Prawo o stowarzyszeniach, 1989).

The association's activities may be based on the work of volunteers who are natural persons providing services voluntarily and without remuneration. The volunteer should have appropriate qualifications and meet the requirements specified for the given type and scope of services (Ustawa o działalności pożytku publicznego i o wolontariacie, 2003).

In the first quarter of 2016, 8.5% of people aged 15 and over engaged in volunteering in various organizations. These individuals most often were involved in activities for associations, similar entities, and foundations (Statistics Poland, 2016).

Additionally, in the first quarter of 2022, 28.4% of people aged 15-89 volunteered. Most of these people were people with higher education (Statistics Poland, 2022).

Like all organizations, the association must also properly manage the entity and, therefore, conduct appropriate activities to achieve its goals. It includes organizing, planning, motivating, making decisions, and controlling. An essential feature of the process is the efficient management of finances, people, physical, and intangible resources. However, management primarily concerns human resources. It involves providing them with appropriate resources, organizing their work, and motivating them (Brojak-Trzaskowska, 2024).

Motivating is the process of evoking and maintaining attitudes through the use of material and non-material incentives. Much attention is paid to the importance of factors other than remuneration on the level of motivation of the organization's members (Brojak-Trzaskowska, 2023).

Until recently, the concept of NGO management was not a popular theory. It was seen as a potential loss of ideas, voluntariness, and human connection. However, as the importance of the sector grew, so did the role of NGO management. The challenge is modern management without losing the mission, innovation, elasticity, and cooperative spirit. However, the need to use management tools results from many issues. First, external financial support requires the rational management of funds. Second, increasing demands from public and private funders require organisations to report on programme results, making strategic planning and budgeting essential. Third, relationships with the organisation's external environment must also be taken into account. The dilemma of managing NGOs concerns whether these organisations differ sufficiently from commercial and public entities to warrant the use of distinct management techniques (Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2006).

There are four management concepts for NGOs (Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2006):

- holistic concept of an organization – the main point is the relationship between the organization and its environment;

- normative concept of an organization – focuses on value development in addition to economic aspects;
- strategic and development concept – an organization is an evolving system with problems and opportunities that create management dilemmas;
- operational concept – focusing on everyday activities such as accounting and administration.

Additionally, there are four models of change in the management of non-governmental organizations (Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2006):

- scientific management model – using the most effective models;
- war on waste – improving the organization’s operation through collaboration, mergers, amalgamations, and other techniques from the commercial sector;
- watchful eye – public control and analysis through transparency as a form of discipline;
- liberation management – reporting results regardless of their size and structure.

Most often, work in non-governmental organizations is performed by paid employees and volunteers. Different motivations of volunteers influence the management (Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2006).

There are several reasons why people volunteer (Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2006):

- value function – meeting value-related needs;
- comprehension function – the desire to understand the world and develop personally;
- extension function – increasing self-esteem;
- career function – gaining experience;
- social function – belonging to a social group;
- defensive function – a way to deal with internal conflicts and problems.

In addition, volunteering among young people can have a positive impact on their social relations. Supporting others is also a way to help yourself (Lanza et al., 2025).

However, there are risks associated with certain types of volunteering. In some cases, too much and too intense activities can negatively impact health (Merkin & Orenstein, 2025).

Table 1 presents the conditions for good management in associations according to the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE).

Table 1. Conditions for good management in associations

No.	Condition
1.	Clearly defined goals, reasons for being, and ways to evaluate action stages. A sense of mission among all the people involved in the organization. Goals are a challenge for the entity.
2.	Continuous evaluation and improvement of activities. Finding a niche.
3.	Having a 5- to 10-year vision and being prepared for new trends.
4.	Business resource management, which includes financial management, short- and long-term planning, communication with the environment, and marketing.

No.	Condition
5.	Looking for sources of financing that ensure stability.
6.	Open-door policy for newcomers.
7.	An existing strong group of volunteers who are involved in the activities and goals of the association. Determining the contribution of paid employees and volunteers.
8.	An organizational structure that responds to changes in the environment and supports goals.
9.	A new perspective thanks to periodic changes in the management and leadership.
10.	Respecting members' needs. Taking care of contacts between association members to foster a sense of community.
11.	Applying a reward system and motivational techniques to the administrative staff. Supporting employee development.
12.	Publicity in the media and endorsement.
13.	A clear system of financial management, accounting, and financial control.
14.	Cooperation with similar organizations without duplicating programs and services.
15.	Ethics represented by people associated with the organization.
16.	Cooperation with international organizations.

Source: (Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2006)

Many organizations believe that highly motivated and active employees, members, and volunteers are sufficient to function. However, a lack of accountability, adaptability, and effectiveness can lead to insignificance and irrelevance. Entities fear losing values due to the adoption of management techniques from the private and public sectors. There are two ways: experimenting with management methods or introducing them gradually (Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2006).

A holistic approach to goal setting and integrating digital tools is crucial. Additionally, data analysis can help predict donor behavior (Cipriano & Za, 2025).

International research points to the lack of an appropriate financial model among nonprofit organizations. Furthermore, these entities are significantly dependent on government support, which may pose a threat to long-term sustainability. Therefore, revenue diversification is important (Ba et al., 2024).

The association manages not only its employees, but also its volunteers. Often, it is the actions of volunteers that determine the achievement of the organization's goals. Volunteers are not only a free workforce, but also confirmation that the organization carries out activities that are socially accepted, needed, and appreciated. For young people, it is a supplementation of knowledge from studies and a confrontation of skills with real needs within the entity's activities. NGOs with diverse activities need volunteers with different skills (Gruca, 2009).

The identification of volunteers with the organization is influenced by the alignment of values. These values need to be clearly visible in strategies and processes. Recognition from the private sector and the variety of tasks are also significant factors. Volunteer engagement is influenced by values, but also by appreciation from the organization's employees, as well as having independence in making decisions. Proper information flow within an organization is a crucial point in achieving volunteer satisfaction. Moreover, there should be a coordinator who supports and encourages autonomy (Güntert et al., 2022).

The European sector, which includes social enterprise, social economy, nonprofit institutions, as well as civil society and volunteering, has enormous power and reach. It is achieved thanks to the fact that this sector employs a huge number of volunteers (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2018).

Research methodology

The research methodology included a review of the subject literature, legal acts, and data from websites related to the theme of the article. Moreover, in order to achieve the aim of the article, a pilot study was conducted on a group of five volunteers of the WIOSNA Association and the Academy of the Future program who operate in the Silesian Voivodeship. The main objective of the study is to review and verify the information and concepts related to the management of associations. The second objective is to identify the motivations for participating in voluntary activities. The research was carried out in 2025.

The conducted study was a pilot study, intended as a preliminary verification of the question discussed and a preparation for further research in this area. The pilot study allowed me to verify the suitability of the type of study (survey), the correctness of the constructed questions, and provided assumptions for further questions. This will improve the effectiveness of the main study in the future.

The research tool used was an online survey prepared in the Microsoft Forms application. The survey consisted of a set of five questions that the respondents completed independently. Below is the survey used for the research.

Question 1. What motivates you to be a volunteer at the Academy of the Future?

- Willingness to help others.
- Willingness to get to know new people.
- Willingness to benefit from association events.
- Willingness to be part of the WIOSNA Association.
- Other.

Question 2. How long have you been at the Academy of the Future?

- This is my first edition.
- This is my second edition.
- This is my third edition.
- This is my fourth edition.
- I have more than four editions behind me.

Question 3. What is your age group?

- Under 20.
- 20-30.
- 30-40.
- 40+.

Question 4. What helps you the most to work efficiently as a volunteer?

- Materials from the association.
- Contact and support from other volunteers.

Question 5. What motivates you the most to perform and what do you consider the best form of encouragement and support from the association?

- Opportunity to gain experience and knowledge in many areas, such as project management, people management, etc.
- Events organized for volunteers.
- Events organized for those under our care, in which you can also participate as a volunteer.
- Gadgets, etc.

To analyze and evaluate the association's activities, five volunteers from the WIOSNA Association and the Academy of the Future program were asked to complete a survey. These individuals serve as volunteer coordinators in the Silesian Voivodeship by managing volunteer groups. I had access to this group of volunteers because I am a volunteer in the WIOSNA Association.

The WIOSNA Association, based in Krakow, is one of the largest non-governmental organizations in Poland. Its activities include projects such as the Noble Gift and the Academy of the Future. The organization states on its website that its activities are based primarily on the work of volunteers and financial support from donors (The WIOSNA Association, n.d. b).

The Academy of the Future was founded in 2003 to help children with low self-esteem and a lack of self-confidence. It is a space for children to meet with adults who are willing to dedicate their time to them and be wise companions (The Academy of the Future, n.d. a).

The program consists of several elements (The Academy of the Future, n.d. a):

- collaborating with schools to reach out to children who need support,
- recruitment and cooperation with volunteers,
- conducting regular volunteer-child meetings once a week,
- working on difficulties and developing the child's strengths.

The principles of working with children are (The Academy of the Future, n.d. a):

- motivation and appreciation,
- setting challenges,
- design, experience,
- understanding the cause and responding to it,
- giving the opportunity to co-decide,
- looking to the future and seeing the potential.

The management of the WIOSNA Association is based on encouraging and supporting its volunteers, who determine the organization's success. In addition, the entity has to take care of marketing and other initiatives to obtain financial support from donors. The association invites famous people to cooperative events to promote its programs. The Academy of the Future website provides extensive information about the project and examples of the outcomes of volunteering. The association conducts a professional recruitment process for volunteers consisting of an application, a recruitment interview, signing of a contract, training, and support (The Academy of the Future, n.d. b).

After the recruitment process, volunteers participate in a stationary or hybrid implementation. This is a form of workshop during which volunteers can learn the details of the program and meet other volunteers. Then the volunteer coordinator contacts new members to support them, but also to get to know them and be able to match them with a child. Integration meetings are also organized. During these events, volunteers can get to know the team. The association provides an e-learning system and other materials. Volunteers meet with children throughout the year during regular meetings. The association runs a system for reporting work with children. Volunteers must keep records of meetings with children and enter other required information into the system. In addition, various events are organized, such as visits to museums or workshops. The association also organizes large meetings where volunteers can meet members of the association and other volunteers. This includes team-building activities, workshops, and interesting conversations. There is also a special hotline, email box, and social media group for volunteers. Pedagogues and psychologists are also available (Basińska, 2025).

Volunteer coordinators lead a team of volunteers working with children, and together with this team implement the program in specific schools. Coordinators build teams and support volunteers. In addition, they delegate tasks, integrate, and motivate. Tasks include organizing meetings, recruiting children, and reviewing work. The coordinator is also a representative of the programme who cooperates with the school coordinator (The WIOSNA Association, n.d. a).

Results

Based on the research conducted, the following results were obtained. The answers to the first question about the motivation to be a volunteer are shown in Figure 1.

Question 1 has a multiple-choice option. According to the survey, the greatest motivations for volunteers are the desire to help others and meet new people. Attending association events is not a motivation for volunteers. Two volunteers indicated motivations other than those listed in the survey. They mentioned the desire to do something meaningful and the opportunity to learn more about themselves. An interesting finding from these results is the fact that only one of the participants indicated willingness to be a part of the WIOSNA Association as motivation. Therefore, it can be concluded that volunteers do not identify with the association and primarily focus on being part of the Academy of the Future program.

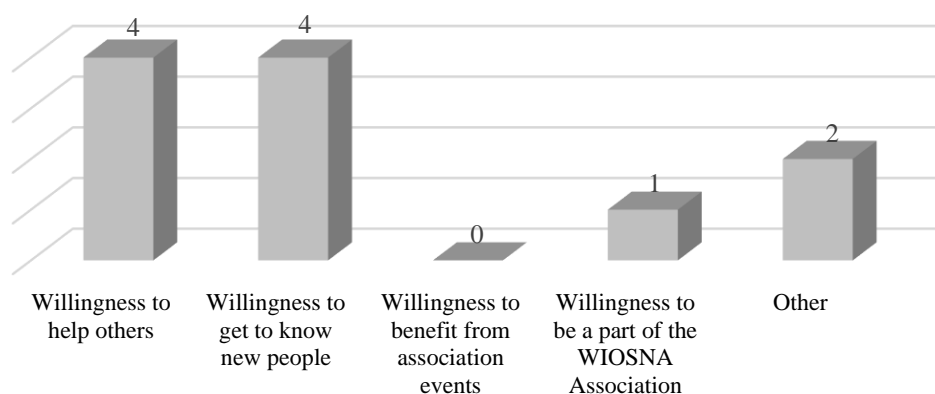


Figure 1. Results of the research regarding question number 1: What motivates you to be a volunteer at the Academy of the Future?

Source: Own study based on research

The second question concerns the duration of volunteering of the surveyed people. The results are presented in Figure 2.

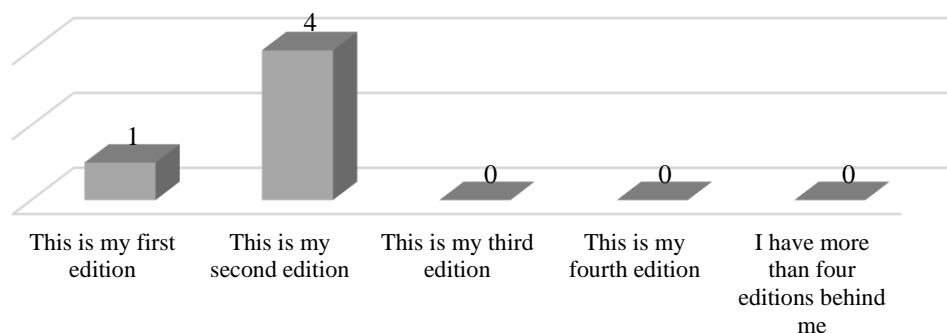


Figure 2. Results of the research regarding question number 2: How long have you been at the Academy of the Future?

Source: Own study based on research

Almost all research volunteers participate in the Academy of the Future for the second time. For one of the volunteers, it is the first edition of the program.

The third question concerns the age group of the respondents. The results are presented in Figure 3.

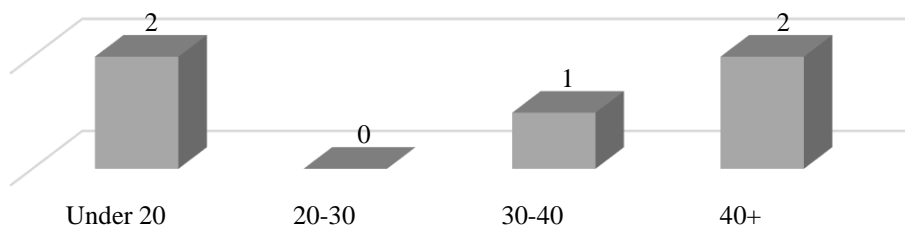


Figure 3. Results of the research regarding question number 3: What is your age group?

Source: Own study based on research

Two people were under 20 years of age, and two were over 40 years of age. One person was in the 30-40 age range. It can be concluded that volunteers are both very young and older people.

The fourth question concerns what helps volunteers the most to work efficiently. The results are presented in Figure 4.

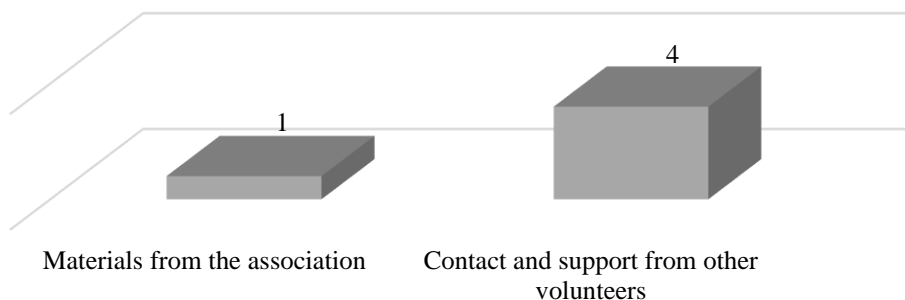


Figure 4. Results of the research regarding question number 4: What helps you the most in working efficiently as a volunteer?

Source: Own study based on research

Based on the results, it can be concluded that volunteers are much more helped by contact and support from other volunteers than by materials provided by the association.

The fifth question concerns the issue of what encourages volunteers the most to act and what they consider to be the best form of encouragement and support from the association. The results are presented in Figure 5.

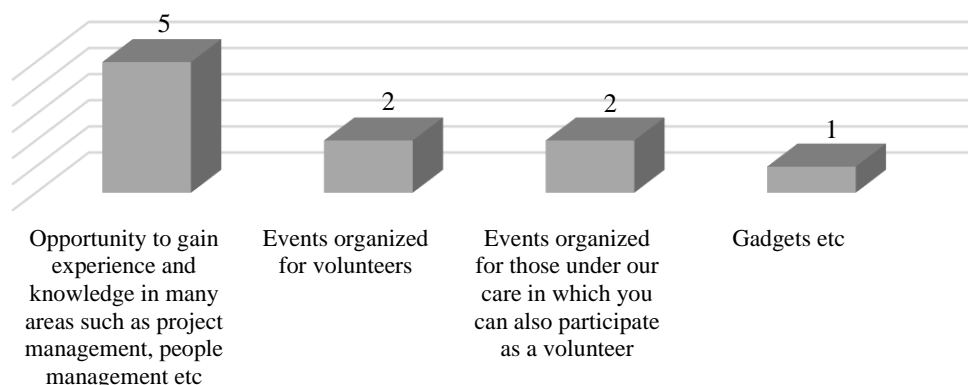


Figure 5. Results of the research regarding question number 5: What motivates you the most to perform, and what do you consider the best form of encouragement and support from the association?

Source: Own study based on research

Question 5 has a multiple-choice option. Based on the survey, it is clear that the greatest motivation for volunteers is the opportunity to gain experience and knowledge in many areas, such as project management, people management, etc. The least important are gadgets and similar tools.

Moreover, according to the reports of the association, definitely more people work in the association as volunteers (volunteering for more than six months) than as employees (employed under an employment relationship and civil law contracts). The picture of this structure is shown in Figure 6.

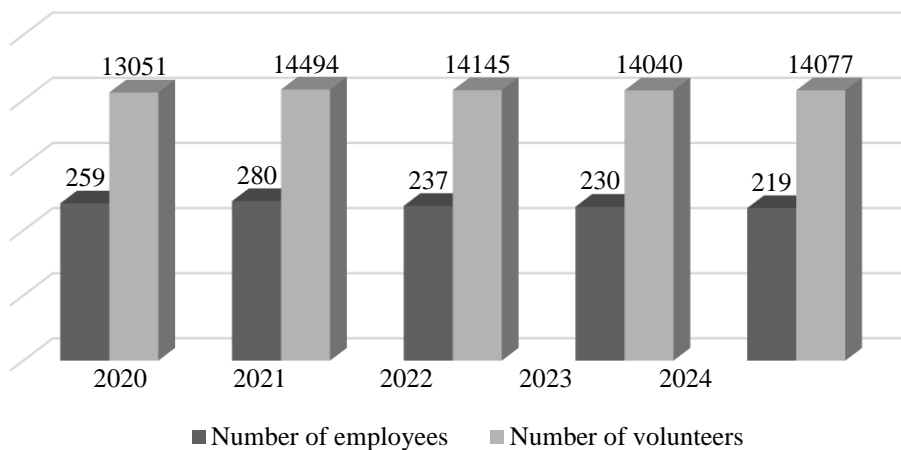


Figure 6. Number of employees and volunteers in the WIOSNA Association

Source: (The WIOSNA Association, n.d. c)

The results obtained by other researchers show interesting dependencies related to volunteering. First, one of the studies shows that volunteering plays an important role in the relationship between negative life situations and life satisfaction. However, this impact depends on time and context factors (Groß & Haffa, 2026).

Another study shows ways of behaving among people with long-term volunteering experience. The authors explored the potential participation of these people during social crises. The results of the study are crucial sources of information for volunteer leaders (Nowakowska & Pozzi, 2024).

A study published in 2024 presents the relationships between volunteering and changes in social needs (Tassi, 2024). Additionally, studies related to volunteering among older people and relations between paid jobs and volunteering are worth taking into account (Mao & Normand, 2022).

One of the studies also demonstrates the ability to volunteer in a situation of a natural disaster. There are some dependencies between the participation in these social activities and the personal experience of the disaster, contact with the media, understanding of the disaster, and religious factors (Benito et al., 2025).

Conclusions

As the world has changed, the role of people-focused activities has grown. The social economy has emerged as a response to evolving needs. As a result, many initiatives have been created that improve people's lives. One of the social economy entities is an association that pursues its goals thanks to the support of volunteers. Also, for the association, management is an important point that is not clearly accepted due to the fear of losing the main purpose of the organization. However, there is an increasing emphasis on the importance of management in NGOs. In fact, a suitable entity management system can determine the success. Many management concepts and conditions have been created for this type of organization. In addition, foreign research shows the importance of proper management of the organization, which significantly affects volunteers in this entity.

Volunteers undertake their activities for various reasons, thanks to which non-governmental organizations can achieve their goals. International research points to the positive aspects of volunteering. However, it also highlights certain risks.

The operations of the Academy of the Future are based on volunteering. The association has built an efficient system that informs, encourages, acquires, motivates, and guides volunteers throughout the entire program. Based on the survey conducted by the author among several of the association's volunteers, it can be indicated that they engage in activities primarily out of a desire to help others and meet new people. Furthermore, they are mainly helped by contact and support from other volunteers, which may indicate that this association brings together people with similar values who support each other and strive to achieve the organization's goals. Volunteers value the most the opportunity to gain knowledge and experience through volunteering. Therefore, the association is an attractive place for development. Additionally,

according to the reports, there are significantly more volunteers than employees in the WIOSNA Association. This shows the huge role of volunteers in achieving the success of the association.

The following limitations occurred in the study conducted. First, the research was limited to one geographic region and a small group of respondents. Therefore, the results may not fully reflect the behavior of the larger population. Second, knowing the group of people under study can have an unconscious influence on the interpretation of the results. However, despite the limitations of the study, it is a valuable tool in providing information about methodological issues before the main study begins, which will help to increase the effectiveness of future studies.

Future research directions include ways to increase the commitment and motivation among the association's volunteers, methods to improve volunteer work tools, and ways to strengthen volunteers' identification with the association in order to attract long-term volunteers.

To sum up, association management is a very important process that allows improving its operations without losing its value and goals. In addition, volunteers play an enormous role in the association's success.

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ZARZĄDZANIE STOWARZYSZENIEM – ROLA WOLONTARIUSZY W OSIĄGANIU SUKCESU PRZEZ PODMIOT EKONOMII SPOŁECZNEJ

Streszczenie: Obecnie rośnie liczba inicjatyw społecznych i znaczenie podmiotów ekonomii społecznej. Dlatego zostało podjęte badanie stowarzyszeń. Głównym celem badania jest przegląd oraz weryfikacja informacji i koncepcji dotyczących zarządzania stowarzyszeniami. Drugim celem jest zidentyfikowanie motywów podejmowania działalności wolontariackiej. Te cele mogą być osiągnięte z pomocą przeglądu literatury i badań pilotażowych. Można stwierdzić, że istnieją różne koncepcje zarządzania organizacjami pozarządowymi i ich wdrożenie jest ważne dla sprawnego funkcjonowania tych podmiotów. Badanie pilotażowe wskazuje, że motywacje wolontariuszy obejmują chęć pomagania innym, a ich skuteczność jest oparta na wsparciu innych wolontariuszy.

Słowa kluczowe: ekonomia społeczna, stowarzyszenie, wolontariat, zarządzanie

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