



FROM VOLUNTEERING TO PR AND NETWORKING SKILLS

A view into Finnish NGOs' training and skills needs

The OK Study Centre is a nationwide liberal adult education provider that specialises in training NGOs and associations. It is maintained by an umbrella organisation of 67 Finnish NGOs. In spring 2012, as part of its development programme sponsored by the Finnish National Board of Education, the study centre conducted a survey of training and skills needs in its member NGOs and their regional organisations. Many Finnish NGOs have a three-tier structure so that individuals are members of an association that is a member of a regional organisation that in turn belongs to a nationwide NGO, even though local and regional associations are registered independently. Respondents were asked to analyse their own organisation's needs during the next three years. Responses reflect current thinking and most urgent needs emerging in Finnish NGOs.

The survey was conducted with the web-based Webropol tool and analysed with SPSS software. Respondents were selected from the study centre's database, and they mainly included managers and employees from NGOs and their regional organisations who are responsible for training, volunteering and organisational issues. The questionnaire was sent to 783 persons out of whom 231 (31 %) responded. The response rate was not high, but as the type and geographical location of respondents' organisations were relatively evenly distributed as regards the study centre's membership, this sample was relatively representative, and respondents' views probably reflect the everyday life of Finnish NGOs at large. This article presents the most important results.

Age and organisation type important background factors

The OK Study Centre has divided its membership into four groups: 1) public health and disabilities (e.g. the Finnish Heart Association & the Finnish Association of the Deaf) (37 % of the membership, 43% of respondents); 2) education and culture (e.g. the Finnish Folklore Association & The Finnish Federation of Foster Care Associations) (30 % of membership, 22 % of respondents); 3) citizens' advice, nature and environment (e.g. The Finnish Association for Nature Conservation) (15 % of membership, 18 % of respondents); and 4) others (e.g. The Finnish Red Cross & The Finnish Lifeboat Institution) (18 % of membership, 17 % of respondents). The education and culture group was slightly underrepresented, whereas public health and disability organisations

seemed active, partly due to their larger size and greater number of employees. Organisation type showed up in the responses as an important background factor.

132 respondents represented a nationwide NGO or their regional office, and 99 came from a regional organisation. Some differences could be noted between the two groups.

Organisations were divided into four groups by their size: 1) small (0-2,000 members, n=38); 2) relatively small (2,000-10,000; n=74); 3) mid-sized (10,000-50,000, n=57) and 4) large (over 50,000, n=48). By and large, organisation size did not have a great effect on responses.

Generational questions have become important in NGOs, which also showed in the responses. Respondents' organisations were divided into three groups according to the age groups that primarily participate in training: 1) young (0-34-year-olds) (22 %) 2) middle-aged (35-54-year-olds; 36 %) and 3) older participants (55+; 42 %). Young people are underrepresented in NGO training, but respondents were mainly happy with the situation. Still more than one in four would like to target training at younger participants. Regional associations meet younger people than nationwide ones, probably since they operate closer to the grassroots level. The oldest participants are active in public health organisations, whereas education and culture organisations cater for the youngest participants – many of them actually work in the field of family welfare.

A clear need for training and skills development

In the next few years there is a clear need for training and skills development: 76 % of the respondents felt that the need was at least relatively great. Only two respondents thought that there was very little need for development. This view was shared between the respondent groups.

Respondents were asked to comment on their responses. Most comments dealt with educational or change management questions. The educational themes mainly concerned a specific training topic, developing new training systems or personnel training. On the other hand, comments about change management concerned the overall change of the voluntary sector, organisational changes like mergers, and changes in society, all of which are considered challenging.

"Associational activity is transforming and the ranks of activists are becoming smaller. We need new ways to recruit members and activists, along with new forms of associational activity. It is hard to transform our current active members' ideas even through training, but if we got them to come up with new forms and means of acting for the newcomers, to make way for a new way of volunteering and peer support." (Respondent from a nationwide public health/disability organisation)

Financial issues came up with regard to both themes. Finnish NGOs are facing harder times, which affects both their skills needs and training resources:

"Our environment is changing all the time and we have to train our personnel to face current challenges. Also the organization itself is undergoing changes due to public funding pressures. We have

to inevitably focus more on developing and increasing our fundraising activities so that we won't have to cut our services." (Respondent from a regional citizens' advice, nature or environmental organization)

Respondents were presented with a list of training and skills needs areas and asked to tick all the relevant ones. Here the topics are grouped according to their importance so that the important needs included those ticked by at least 50 % of the respondents and noteworthy needs were ticked by 25-50 %.

Important needs

Social media, PR and communication, managing and supervising volunteers, networking, volunteer training & initiation, associational skills, board work, the organisation's own specific field.

Noteworthy needs

Advocacy, leadership and management, training methods, training skills, evaluation, interaction skills, campaigning, strategic skills, multiculturalism, ICT skills, health promotion.

The needs chosen by respondents varied somewhat across the groups. Surprisingly, the greatest difference between nationwide and regional organisations concerned the management and supervision of volunteers: 75 % of respondents from nationwide NGOs ticked it, whereas only 57 % of regional organisations' representatives did so, even though the common belief is that the regions are closer to volunteers than their nationwide 'mother' organisations.

Advocacy and evaluation skills are important for public health and disability organisations. They also have a need to develop health promotion skills. This is natural as they operate more closely than others with insitutional funders like Finland's Slot Machine Association, which require close monitoring and evaluation. On the other hand, the citizens' advice, nature and environmental group stood out, as all volunteering-related skills were only considered noteworthy by their respondents – some of these organisations focus more on expert advice than volunteering, even though this group is very diverse and volunteering is at the core of many of its organisations.

The age of participants had some effect on perceived needs: for instance, organisations with older members discussed ICT skills, whereas in organisations with young members multicultural skills are more important than in others. This reflects changes in Finnish society: migration has increased as has diversity in general, and associations with young members seem to attract members from more diverse backgrounds.

Respondents were asked to describe the most important needs in detail. Six themes were mentioned over 20 times. The most common was volunteer management and supervision. The topical issue of social media came second, and it was strongly linked with the third most important skills need, PR and communication. The fourth place was taken by networking skills, which in the Finnish NGO world has perhaps not been such an urgent need before, and the fifth by general associational skills. Leadership and management came sixth.

The supervision and management of volunteers is viewed as a challenge affecting all NGOs and associations. The greatest challenges comes from the rise of short-term volunteering, along which recruitment and motivation skills needs have emerged. The topical nature of social media related skills was visible in many comments. They are needed in particular for communication and attracting younger members. Older activists generally need ICT skills. Communication skills are also needed for advocacy and campaigning. A stonger strategic connection is also necessary, which is often poorly understood.

Several respondents stated that the growing importance of networking is caused by competition, joint projects and advocacy needs. This is a strategic need: one should find the right partners and to be able to divide the tasks optimally. It also concerns volunteers.

"Networking and cooperation will become vital because fewer and fewer people commit to volunteering, not everybody needs to do 'everything' but to join their forces." (Respondent form a nationwide citizens' advice, nature/environmental organisation)

Associational skills needs were linked most closely with local associations and their volunteers, and training on this subject has increased. On the other hand, leadership and management skills needs are required everywhere and on all organisational levels.

Training and learning remain important

Training and learning are vital strategic resources for NGOs. From this perspective respondents were asked for their views of the near future by positioning themselves on a continuum between certain statements. Results are presented by their means; values below 3 point to the statement on the left, and above 3 to the right. 3 is the neutral value.

During the next three years in my organisation training or skills needs...

value 1	mean	value 5
are uniform throughout the organisation	2,4	are locally diversified
mainly concern volunteers	2,3	mainly concern staff
mainly concern my organisation's field	2,9	mainly concern generic skills (e.g. PR)
is increasingly organised on line	3,1	is based on face-to-face interaction
training methods are strongly developed	2,5	we will rely on traditional methods
are organised differently than now	2,7	are organised in the same way as now
the importance of training increases	2,1	the importance of training decreases

Respondents felt most clearly that the importance of training is growing. Also training needs concern volunteers to a greater extent than staff. On other issues trends were not as clear.

There were few differences between respondent groups. For instance, size or the nationwide/regional division had little effect on responses. Nevertheless, representatives of organisations with young members are, for example, less likely to think that the importance of training is growing (mean 2.4), and representatives from citizens' advice, nature and environmental organisations were less likely to see training as a volunteer-related issue (mean 2.7).

How will learning in NGOs take place in the near future? This table shows respondents' views on the importance of different methods. N.B. The peer learning group or study circle is a Nordic tradition of adult learning that is supported financially by the state via the 11 Finnish study centres, so it is widely recognised in the third sector.

Method	importance increasing	importance remaining	importance decreasing	N
peer groups or study circles	41%	52%	7%	202
long courses	15%	58%	27%	197
short courses or seminars	47%	51%	2%	213
eLearning	77%	21%	2%	196
informal initiation	46%	49%	5%	185
training offered by OK Study Centre	42%	57%	1%	212
training offered by another partner	24%	71%	5%	170

Out of these means of study, eLearning is most clearly increasing its importance in NGOs. Even though none of these means is clearly decreasing, the importance of longer courses is slowly declining. As volunteering becomes more short term, the same happens to training. The importance of other means remains more or less the same in the next years. On the other hand, almost half of the respondents think that the importance of short courses and informal initiation (e.g. mentoring) is increasing. This view is particularly clear in young participants' organisations.

Respondents were also asked to identify new ways of learning in associational life. Along with eLearning, peer learning and benchmarking were commonly named. Respondents also discussed the most important educational issues in NGOs in the near future: the challenges of volunteering, eLearning, quality issues, networking and accessibility were identified. Shorter training is needed, complemented with eLearning, more people need to access it, and it has to respond to real need.

“New innovative, motivational ways of training that provide personal gratification. Courses over which participants will ‘fight for’. Motivation, entertainment and joy in the midst of the rigid associational laws.” (Respondent from a nationwide public health/disability organisation)

The development of training requires partnership. Respondents felt that the OK Study Centre was their preferred training partner (84 % of respondents wished it as a partner). In addition, 79 % wished to develop training with another NGO, 69 % with another educational institution, 64 %

with other bodies that organize volunteering (like local authorities), and 59 % with health or other authorities. Even though NGOs have in recent years developed their contacts with companies, less than half (48 %) of the respondents would like to have a company as a training partner.

Notes on the results

The survey yielded plenty of interesting information, which has here been presented in a very compact form. The responses reflect the views of NGO personnel who are active in the field of training.

Social media and PR/communication skills needs are obviously pressing among many Finnish NGOs, and often connected to marketing. Support is also needed to strengthen the strategic dimension of communications – it is understood that means do not equal the objectives. On the other hand, it became evident that respondents cannot specify their social media related skills needs. On-line presence is desired because ‘everyone is there’.

ICT skills are also required for training. Respondents felt that eLearning and face-to-face training should be fitted together because all volunteers or other participants do not acquire ICT skills at a similar pace and because face-to-face interaction is needed for community building. Another clear trend is the rise of short-term training, which will impact the way people learn in associational life and requires new ways of planning to ensure that volunteers acquire the necessary skills.

The rise of networking skills needs reflects the environment in which NGOs currently operate. Funders often demand inter-organisational cooperation, and advocacy requires it as well. There has also been a rise of local and regional volunteering-related umbrella organisations in Finland, which has given rise to a new way of viewing activity.

Training is more important to NGOs than before. This is partly due to fast-moving drastic changes in volunteering and the entire third sector. Training can increase the capacity for change management. Also the expert role of the sector is growing in Finland. These are likely reasons why the study centre remains an important partner for many NGOs.

The views of respondents from young people’s organisations should be examined from a future angle: as young volunteers grow older, skills that now relate to their world, such as multiculturalism, will become mainstream in Finnish NGOs. The significance of training is seen in this group as slightly smaller, so eLearning and informal initiation and the transfer of tacit knowledge should be examined as important future study methods.

Another issue to follow is the balance between volunteer and paid staff skills needs. Expertise is valued highly in society, so also volunteers may need knowledge and skills previously thought to be meant for staff only. This will lead to questions about balancing the division of labour.