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Discussion Paper

Strategic Volunteer Management in Immigrant Support NPOs: Insights from the U.S. and Japan

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Abstract:

This study assessed the contemporary landscape of volunteer management practices within immigrant support nonprofit organizations (NPOs) in distinct cultural contexts by exploring the influence of leadership, organizational culture, and diversity management policies on volunteer recruitment, retention, training, and engagement within these organizations. This qualitative, multiple-case study is structured around in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with individuals in management or board member positions from organizations that serve to educate and/or integrate individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds into their local communities. Resource Dependence Theory and Stakeholder Theory guide the analysis of this research in order to examine how internal and external forces shape volunteer engagement strategies. The findings suggest that organizations in both countries adopt flexible practices to involve and retain volunteers. Furthermore, communication, training, and volunteer fit emerged as key components of effective volunteer management. One unexpected finding was the shared reluctance to adopt newer technologies or to use digital communication. Practical and managerial recommendations are presented based on the findings of this study, designed to help nonprofit managers bridge cultural gaps and recruit a more diverse and engaged volunteer base.

Keywords: Nonprofit, Volunteer management, Immigrant, Migrant, Foreign resident

Introduction

The integration of foreign residents into local communities is a complex and multifaceted endeavor influenced by various factors, including the cultural contexts within which nonprofit organizations (NPOs) operate. Understanding the ways nonprofit organizations in different cultural contexts recruit, retain, train, and engage their volunteer human resources is essential for developing long-term management strategies and achieving their respective missions. Using interview data collected from February 2024 to January 2025, this study examines the contemporary landscape of volunteer management practices within select immigrant support

organizations in distinct cultural contexts in the United States and Japan. More specifically, this study explores the influence of leadership, organizational culture, and diversity management policies on volunteer recruitment, retention, and training within these organizations. Furthermore, the study aims to uncover cross-cultural similarities and differences in volunteer management practices, which may assist nonprofit managers and policymakers in their attempts to bridge cultural gaps and build a more diverse human resource base.

Background & Literature Review

Role of Nonprofits:

Although the United States and Japan have distinct national cultures, nonprofit organizations in both countries play a crucial role in supporting foreign residents seeking to integrate into their local communities. In collaboration with the public sector, nonprofit organizations in the United States are trusted to address the comprehensive needs of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) residents, due to their efforts to preserve and respect immigrant culture (Wilson, C. E., 2012, p. 965). These needs include not only interpretation and translation services but also what they call "immigrant accompaniment." This phrase, frequently used by nonprofit leaders, encompasses various informal support services for immigrants, including client representation, safeguarding, and companionship (Wilson, C. E., 2012, p. 977).

In contrast to Western countries with a history of well-supported grassroots movements, many Japanese organizations operate on a volunteer basis and often face unstable funding and resources. These groups range from informal clubs to officially recognized nonprofits and social welfare entities. While some may receive local government or corporate subsidies, many are entirely volunteer-driven and operate with little to no external funding. Furthermore, the founders and staff of these organizations are diverse, including local and immigrant residents, educators, students, researchers, and immigrant families (Tokunaga, 2018, p.11).

Organization Diversity:

Nonprofit organizations are supposed to be accountable to the groups they serve. Accountability is increasingly important in the context of immigrant support organizations, as their target group is often particularly vulnerable or marginalized. As host country staff and foreign residents may not be aware of the best way to connect with each other, it is essential that the target group is represented within the organization, enabling them to become actively involved and participate in decision-making (Elloukmani et al., 2024, p. 527). However, in an effort to increase performance and achieve better outcomes for the target group, organizations may unintentionally marginalize or discriminate against the very groups of people they are trying to serve. In a study conducted by Elloukmani et al. (2024, p. 523), respondents cited both formal qualifications, such as education and language ability, and informal qualifications, such as "fitting into the organization," to explain the absence or underrepresentation of ethnic minorities in their organizations. Therefore, volunteer managers and organizations need to be mindful of their management practices to enhance the recruitment and retention of diverse volunteers that accurately reflect the communities they serve.

Organizational Culture

An organization's climate and culture have been shown to influence "learning, motivation, commitment, and creating", essential components of human resource management (Ronquillo et al., 2021). Ronquillo et al. (2021) suggest that strategic HRM is even more important in the nonprofit and public sectors, as "expenditures for employees…account for 60-80% of expenditures". Ross and Tries (2010, as cited in Studer & Von Schnurbein, 2012) state that "constructive collaboration between volunteers and paid staff is a key factor for successful volunteer coordination, rather than sophisticated recruitment strategies" (Studer & Von Schnurbein, 2012, p. 414). Organizational culture often plays a vital role in determining the success or failure of volunteer management outcomes.

The Role of Volunteers

It has also been debated whether "HR practices designed and implemented in a paid context can be readily transferred to volunteers" (Alfes et al., 2016, p. 4); however, research reveals key differences between the two. Volunteers tend to differ in motivation, roles, and the nature of their agreements within their organizations. In smaller nonprofits and grassroots movements, an absence of formal structure and procedures further complicates roles and expectations. Studies suggest that volunteers should complement, not replace, paid staff (Studer & Von Schnurbein, 2012). However, some organizations, including those in this study, rely heavily on volunteers to handle the majority of their workload. Due to the sometimes ambiguous nature of volunteering, questions about roles, responsibilities, and whether volunteers should be involved in decision-making processes are often raised. Furthermore, perceived power balance within the organization between volunteers and the organization influences volunteers' willingness to contribute meaningfully to the organization (Waters and Bortree, 2007, as cited in Studer & Von Schnurbein, 2012, p. 414).

Theoretical Frameworks

Resource Dependence Theory

Resource Dependence Theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003), traditionally used in studies of strategic HRM, explains that organizations are often reliant on external resources beyond their control. In the nonprofit setting, essential volunteers are one such resource. How these organizations manage and utilize resources plays a crucial role in their ability to achieve their organizational mission and become sustainable.

Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984; Hillman et al., 2009) suggests that organizations should consider not only their shareholders when making decisions and performing activities, but also consider groups that are affected by or could affect their operations. Stakeholders consist of

various groups, ranging from the board of directors to volunteers and community members. In this regard, the volunteers of an organization are also stakeholders of that organization.

This study integrates elements of these two frameworks to examine how cultural context, leadership, and organizational structure impact volunteer management practices in immigrant support nonprofits. These two frameworks, when applied to the context of volunteer management, are complementary in that they view volunteers as both a resource to be managed and a key stakeholder of the organization.

Research Gaps

While much of the existing literature focuses on paid staff or formal human resource management (HRM) structures (Alfes et al., 2016), volunteer management, particularly within social services organizations such as immigrant support organizations, remains underexplored. Studies that focus on volunteers typically concentrate on individual motivations (Studer & Von Schnurbein, 2012), such as "recruitability" or "volunteerability" (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2017), rather than organizational strategies used to engage and retain this valuable resource. Furthermore, research in this area tends to be heavily Western-focused, limiting the development of a more global understanding of volunteer management practices (Filatotchev et al., 2021).

Lee et al. (2023) recommend that future studies include qualitative methods, such as "in-depth interviews and qualitative analysis to obtain a rich understanding of nonprofit organizations' as well as individual volunteers' perspectives toward volunteering during challenging times". Furthermore, the authors propose that the use of volunteers by organizations can be examined by different competencies, such as "workplace diversity management competency" (Lee et al., 2023). Arnon et al. (2023, p. 1634) claim that volunteer management studies rarely examine "what the volunteer-employing organization does to accommodate volunteers". Taking these into consideration, we proposed the following question: How do immigrant support nonprofit organizations strategically manage their volunteers?

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative, multiple-case study is structured around in-depth semi-structured interviews. Interviews were originally conducted as part of the principal author's master's project from February 2024 to May 2024 with individuals in management or supervisory positions from nonprofits that serve to educate and/or integrate individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds into the local community. A fifth interview was conducted with a Japanese organization in late January 2025. The primary language used in the interviews was English; however, some interviewees are non-Native speakers of English and preferred to communicate in Japanese. The principal author translated the contents into English with the assistance of a bilingual translator on-site during the interviews and also used translation software to translate text from Japanese to English. A native Japanese speaker then confirmed the translations.

This study utilizes a qualitative, multiple-case study approach designed to explore the roles of leadership, organizational culture, and diversity in the volunteer management process. A qualitative design was chosen because it allows for a more comprehensive examination of rich, detailed data based on lived experiences and practitioners' firsthand perspectives, providing a deeper understanding of the challenges and successes in managing and engaging volunteer human resources within their respective nonprofits, as told by the management and leaders themselves.

Case Organizations and Selection Criteria

Case studies in the United States and Japan were adopted for this research. Nonprofits were identified using existing networks, personal connections, and recommendations from NPO practitioners. NPOs were selected via purposive sampling based on their missions and activities, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Case Background & Mission

Case Organization Background and Mission			
Organization	**Location**	**Established**	**Mission**
A	U.S.	1995	To assist recent arrivals to America in starting their new lives by offering language, culture, and "survival" classes, translation services, community support, and classes for children.
B	U.S.	2014	To ensure the continuity of high-quality bilingual education programs within Michigan and promote bilingualism and multiculturalism among K-12 students.
C	U.S.	1991	To introduce Japanese culture to the local community, develop a mutual understanding between Japan and the U.S., and provide support to Japanese residents living in Michigan.
D	Japan	1990	To promote international understanding and multiculturalism through various projects and initiatives, including international exchange programs, events, and support services.
E	Japan	2015	This organization supports the cultural, social, and economic development of its region, supporting regional connectivity, stimulating economic growth, promoting multicultural engagement, and serving as a hub for international exchange and mutual understanding.

Data Collection

Data was collected using case studies of five NPOs, with three located in the United States and two in Japan. The following methods and theories were employed:

Semi-Structured Interviews

The study is structured around in-depth semi-structured interviews, providing a detailed exploration of volunteer management within different cultural contexts. Four interviews were conducted as part of the first author's master's project from February 2024 to May 2024 with individuals in management or supervisory positions from nonprofits that serve to educate and/or integrate foreign individuals into the local community. A fifth interview with a Japanese organization was conducted in late January 2025 to increase representation among Japanese organizations.

Table 2: Interviewee Profiles

Organization	Interviewee Position / Title	Nationality	Location	Employment
A	Leader of International Ministry	American	U.S.	10+ Years
B	Educational Research Coordinator / Board Secretary	American	U.S.	10+ Years
C	Outreach Coordinator for Cultural Events	Japanese	U.S.	~ 1 Year
D	Coordinator for International Relations	Japanese	Japan	30+ Years
E	Senior Director of the International Department	Japanese	Japan	30+ Years

Analysis Method

Comparative Analysis

To better understand volunteer management across diverse cultural contexts, a comparative analysis was conducted. By examining the volunteer recruitment, retention, training, and engagement strategies of the case organizations, as well as how their respective leadership, organizational culture, and diversity policies affected these outcomes, it was possible to identify context-specific and potentially universal practices between nonprofit organizations working with communities from diverse cultural backgrounds in the U.S. and Japan.

Findings

The following subsections present findings from interviews conducted at five immigrant support nonprofit organizations in Japan and the United States. Guided by Resource Dependence Theory and Stakeholder Theory, the analysis explores how these organizations strategically manage their volunteers in multiple contexts. Findings are organized into the following themes: Leadership Influence on Volunteer Management, Organizational Culture and Diversity Management, and Digital Communication and Technology Use. These themes offer insights into how nonprofits navigate volunteer recruitment, training, engagement, and retention while balancing resource constraints and stakeholder expectations.

Leadership Influence on Volunteer Management

The ways in which organizational leadership interacts with volunteers can have a significant impact on volunteer engagement, retention, and motivations. Across the five organizations, leadership styles ranged from hands-on, servant leadership to more traditional, top-down approaches, each affecting volunteer engagement in its own respective ways. The following findings provide a quick glimpse into the various philosophies and involvement levels of nonprofit leadership within these organizations, arranged by theme.

Leadership Style

The leadership styles within these organizations typically follow a hands-on approach. Despite being located in very different host countries, the leadership tends to lean more towards a more egalitarian, low power distance leadership style. Interviewee A, stating that she follows the "servant model" of leadership, does her best to equip, support, and empower volunteers and staff, ensuring they have the necessary tools and training to succeed. She is constantly asking herself, *"How do we train these team members? How do we help them? How do we give them the tools they need? So we kind of started creating this, I call it the 'tool belt'."*. Similarly, in organization B, leadership demonstrates a hands-on approach, with members directly contributing their skills to organizational development. For example, one board member created a Japanese-language website to complement the existing English-language website, thereby enhancing accessibility and outreach. Furthermore, effective communication is highly valued across all organizations. In Organizations B and D, all translations and communications are entrusted to native speakers, including Interviewees B and D, to ensure accuracy and clarity.

> *"The foreign language pages are all done in-house by me and the part-time workers, so it's native speakers who are doing the translations… Every day I'm managing the foreign language pages and making sure the links are correct." - Interviewee D*

International Experience

Another key feature across the organizations is that all of the interviewees were either foreign residents of the country or had international or overseas experience. Interviewee A, having lived and worked in Japan for over 6 years before returning to the U.S., contributes her cultural sensitivity and competency to the organization. Having firsthand experience living and working in a foreign culture, she reflects on these experiences as she leads her organization.

> *"One of the main reasons they brought me on was to help teach the team members about Japanese culture and to increase their awareness. We started a training program for*

Japanese culture, and [our volunteers] loved it. They ate that up. I created different charts and stuff to help them understand the language.”

Similarly, Interviewees B and C also shared similar experiences, with Interviewee B studying in Japan on a scholarship in high school and Interviewee C being the wife of a diplomat, living in seven different countries over the course of 25 years. Both of these individuals find personal satisfaction in "paying it forward" and sharing their experiences and culture within and outside their respective organizations.

“I got to go to Japan on a scholarship when I was in high school. You know, we're kind of paying it forward, I guess, and a whole bunch of people feel that way.” - Interviewee B

“Every person helps me, you know, whenever I go to a new place. That's my impression. So I don't feel any worries when I move to another country. So I try to help when somebody comes here, you know, that's what I do.” - Interviewee C

This international experience allows the leadership to better understand and connect with the volunteers and stakeholders of the organization by building trust and creating a more empathetic and culturally aware environment.

The Value of Volunteers

Another recurring theme among the leadership of these organizations was the way they interacted with and viewed their volunteers. Leadership recognizes that each individual brings distinct skills and knowledge, and this inclusive mindset shapes how responsibilities are distributed and how new ideas are received. Interviewee A stated:

“I am a team player. I value very highly my coworkers and those I supervise. I value their input. They know things I don't know, and I know things they don't know. So we've got to work together as a team”.

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Similarly, Interviewee B firmly acknowledges the contributions of their volunteers, noting, "We have all these volunteers who make it possible, or we couldn't do it at all. But it's awesome. We really appreciate it". Additionally, organization B emphasizes generational continuity in its leadership and volunteer base, actively encouraging younger individuals to take on leadership or supervisory roles within the organization and teach the younger generation.

"It's generational. And we think it's very healthy for the organization because I am gonna retire one of these days. I might do this till I die. Who knows? I love this stuff. But if I don't, we need younger people to take it over, right? So we're very happy that these people have shown up." - Interviewee B

"[These] are excellent volunteers, right, because they went through it themselves and now they wanna help others. And so we've seen this kind of progression. And so it's nice. We have this one... here's an example. One high school junior attended a Catholic private school in Florida. She, of course, didn't have a Japanese class at her school, no surprise. And so she took [one of our] classes starting in 2021, I think. And then she loved it. So, then she was like only a freshman, right, or something like that. And so then she's very good at Japanese 'cause she was actually born in Japan and a whole bunch of stuff. But anyway, so she is now one of our tutors. Because she's reached the point where she's not gonna learn much more, and she can actually teach the younger kids. And of course, kids love that, right? They don't wanna be taught by this woman with the gray hair as much as this cute little 16-17-year-old." - Interviewee B

Organizational Culture and Diversity Management

Organizational culture, which refers to the internal norms, values, and ways of doing things, can strongly influence the way volunteers are recruited, trained, and retained. These values, which can be explicitly stated or implicitly understood, often guide the expectations and behaviors

within the organization. These cultural elements may affect volunteers' sense of belonging and commitment.

Table 3: Organizational Culture and Communication

Organization	Organizational Culture	Communication
A	Relatively egalitarian, collective decision-making	High levels of communication, weekly team meetings, feedback often solicited.
B	Relatively egalitarian, "safe place to land" for new members and volunteers	High levels of communication, culturally sensitive, bilingual, native speaker communications.
C	Relatively hierarchical, Japanese style with less formality and more flexibility	Communication is often implicit, with information shared in-person at events and via well-established relationships.
D	Hybrid model, combining traditional Japanese hierarchy with more egalitarian principles	Generally top-down, one directional communication. Information is shared via announcements, bulletins and on their website. Feedback is taken, but needs to be phrased in specific ways.
E	Hybrid model, combining traditional Japanese hierarchy with more egalitarian principles	Japanese language as the "common language", Information is shared via announcements and bulletins and social media posts, but relies on outside individuals to initiate contact via phone or email.

Organizational Culture

The organizations in this study display various forms of organizational culture, as shown in Table 3, which show various effects on volunteer management and engagement. Generally speaking, the organizations within the United States (A, B, and C) adopted a more flexible, egalitarian organizational culture, with member and volunteer feedback often solicited. Leadership at organization C recognizes the uniqueness of Japanese culture, placing special emphasis on

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adopting a culturally sensitive way of supporting members and volunteers without breaking the social harmony that is highly valued in Japanese culture. When asked how organization C manages their volunteers, Interviewee C states,

"[It] depends on the person, sometimes you know, as you know, the Japanese are kind of unique. So, it depends on the person. One person is so happy with the community and then joins our group, but some are not, so we don't try to push them. We are next to them. That's our philosophy." - Interviewee C

Interestingly, the Japanese organizations, despite high levels of hierarchy and government constraints, also seemed to adopt relatively flexible organizational cultures, allowing volunteers to have more adaptive roles based on their skills and motivations. Organizations E and E operate under a hybrid governance structure that adheres to traditional Japanese values while also trying to accommodate and value the cultures of the diverse volunteers and communities they serve. This is partly due to the fact that the organizations' primary source of funding is from the local and national governments of Japan. Because of this, there are external constraints, whether explicit or implicit, that are placed on the organizations which limit the scope of some of their activities. Despite these challenges, these organizations and their leadership remain relatively flexible and have worked to build strong relationships with members from the local community and other local institutions.

Communication

In order to effectively manage diverse volunteers and activities, effective, culturally sensitive communication is required. In order to maintain cohesion, transparency and shared ownership, Organization A holds weekly meetings to stay informed on the organization's operations.

"We do put a lot of importance on our weekly team meetings. Because here we are, so scattered throughout the week, we have to have that time to touch base because inevitably, you know, [Redacted]'s out doing something and somebody asks her a question, and if it's

my piece and she doesn't have an answer. It doesn't look good, right? So we have to have
an answer at all times. So that's why we kind of collectively have that understanding that
the team meeting is important." - Interviewee A

These weekly meetings help organization A maintain accountability and creates an opportunity for all members, including volunteers, to provide feedback and recommendations.

Other organizations, such as organizations B and E, adopt multi-language communication practices in order to ensure a high level of cultural sensitivity in its communication practices. This flexible communication style helps facilitate inclusion and engagement across diverse volunteer and participant populations, reflecting that effective volunteer integration depends not only on content, but also on culturally appropriate delivery. This sentiment is highlighted by Interviewee B;

> *"So, how do we ensure effective communication with the various groups? We kind of have*
> *to do it in both languages, right? And so it's sort of who's available." - Interviewee B*

Training

Within these organizations, volunteer training is an instrumental aspect of integrating diverse individuals into the organization. Volunteers are socialized into the organizations' culture and, in many cases, staff and volunteers are provided cultural sensitivity and competence training. One way new recruits are trained is through the use of an in-house, instructional DVD. This information not only introduces them to organization A's culture, but provides them with tools for their "tool belt".

> *"So we gave them tools for their tool belt, how they see the world, like what's their*
> *worldview, all that kind of stuff. We just started training, and we still offer, actually, those*
> *tools for their tool belt. You know, new team members they get that right away, and we did*
> *create a DVD. It's a very low-quality DVD, but it gets the job done." - Interviewee A*

Other training programs within the organizations exist. For example, organization D encourages members to pursue short-term placements overseas, in places like American "sister cities" and Europe, to enhance their intercultural competence. Organization E runs special training programs, such as their disaster training program. Organization E encourages its volunteers to become community leaders, empowering them to become ambassadors for the organization and spread influence into their respective local communities.

> *"After completing the two training sessions, volunteers receive a plaque certifying them as disaster volunteer leaders. In the event of another disaster, they'll know what to do and can assist those around them who speak the same language. This ties into the community leader aspect of the program. These are some of the other ways we involve volunteers." - Interviewee E*

Organizations A, D and E also provide opportunities for members and volunteers to learn from experts and community members by inviting guest lecturers, such as university professors, to come into the organization and provide new perspectives and training. These types of events and training are aimed to provide new training opportunities for members and volunteers, reduce redundancy and engage within the local community.

Volunteer Fit

Related to volunteer training is the concept of volunteer "fit". Volunteer motivations are often diverse, ranging from curiosity and academic credit to a deeper desire to contribute to community change. It is vital for organizations to match these individuals with appropriate roles, thereby promoting engagement and satisfaction. These organizations work to find ways to incorporate motivated individuals into their programs and activities to achieve their respective missions. Interviewee A recalled one example;

> *"Sorry, funny story. We had a girl who joined our [organization] because she wanted to volunteer and liked Japan, so why not? And she's still a team member. She's been a team*

member for like 5 years." - Interviewee A

Due to the inherent nature of immigrant support organizations, the volunteers and members are often a transitory population, relocating due to work and other factors. Such is especially true for organization C, where the members and volunteers are typically the spouses of Japanese nationals working in overseas job assignments. Rather than viewing volunteers as external helpers, they are treated as fellow community members whose contributions arise organically from shared needs and relationships. Organizations D and E also face similar challenges, which has led to the development of a variety of programs and activities offered where volunteers can choose to sign up and participate based on their skills, experience and interests. This allows volunteers to engage with causes that align with their motivations and put their expertise to use. This is particularly true at organization E, which provides language support in 10 languages plus local dialects and matches language support volunteers to roles that fit their expertise while maximizing organizational effectiveness. Furthermore, this organization works with motivated individuals to try to place them in appropriate roles based on their experiences and interests;

> *"But sometimes, you do have folks [who come] in, and they were like, 'I want to do something that's English-related'. And I was like, 'Cool! What do you want to do?' And they were like, 'I have no idea.' So, in that case, you kind of have to sit down and talk to them. Like, 'We have this, what about this?' And if they seem disinterested, then you move on to the next item, and so on. But yeah, you figure it out during the interview, most of the time, I'd say." - Interviewee E*

Diversity

Uniquely, Organization A's leadership structure is predominantly female, with five women in key positions. This has helped cultivate an environment where women's opinions and contributions are not only welcomed but actively valued. This reflects an organizational culture that aligns with

stakeholder engagement principles, ensuring that all voices, especially those historically marginalized, are heard in both formal and informal decision-making spaces.

> *"I have never felt that my opinion didn't matter, or that I couldn't say my opinion, I guess is the best way to put it." - Interviewee A*

Organization B, meanwhile, is composed of members and volunteers from diverse backgrounds. Roughly one-third of the organization is American families, followed by another one-third being families of either two Japanese, or one Japanese and one American, parents. The last third of the organization is made up of international families from other parts of the world. In order to accommodate the needs of such a diverse group of stakeholders, the organization utilizes members' backgrounds and insights to directly inform organizational practices and priorities.

Interestingly, organizations D and E have independently introduced programs to invite local foreign resident volunteers to hold seminars and workshops to promote their respective cultures and create a more diverse learning environment. These efforts reflect an innovative and culturally tailored strategy to engage volunteers and clients from diverse backgrounds while lowering barriers to participation by not requiring volunteers and guests to be fluent in Japanese.

Conversely, organization C emphasizes close personal relationships and community bonds over formal diversity policies. The organization comprises 85 members, all of whom are Japanese, who share Japanese culture with local communities through ceremonies, hobbies, and traditional crafts. This focus on cultural sharing strengthens community ties and fosters a sense of belonging grounded in shared heritage. However, because the membership is culturally homogeneous and volunteer engagement is informal, inclusivity efforts remain ad hoc rather than structured.

However, despite the aims to increase diversity within their organizations, the pursuit of diversity is often passive, relying on individuals to come forward, rather than actively pursued. For example, despite organization A's desire to amplify women's voices, it remains largely dependent

on individual women's willingness to volunteer. Similarly, organization D expressed a clear desire to improve diversity within its volunteer base; however, this, too, remains dependent on diverse individuals choosing to volunteer rather than on proactive recruitment efforts. These distinctions highlight a subtle gap in diversity management, where inclusivity is aspirational but not always structurally embedded.

Conflict Management

Another key observation was the way that leadership and volunteers navigated conflict within the organization. Cultural competence and cultural sensitivity are necessary when managing diverse organizations, such as the immigrant support organizations found within this study. In some cultures, such as Japan or Korea, there exist strong social hierarchies not typically found within other countries, such as the United States. When confronted with conflict borne from such cultural norms, culturally sensitive leadership is required to manage and diffuse tensions, demonstrating the need for nuanced, adaptive strategies in diversity management. Organization E combines the use of Japanese as the common language with the Japanese philosophy of "仕方がない," or "It can't be helped," to maintain social harmony and ease tensions between individuals. This strategy reflects one culturally grounded method to navigate these tensions and resolve conflict.

Digital Communication and Technology Use

The findings show a reluctance among organizations in both countries to adopt new digital technologies for volunteer management. Case organizations tended to rely heavily on traditional methods, such as email and face-to-face communication, with limited use of dedicated volunteer management platforms or advanced digital tools. This hesitance seems to be mainly shaped by two primary factors: resource constraints and cultural values. Limited financial and human resources can restrict organizations' capacity to invest in and implement new technologies. Additionally, these organizations and their members preferred to rely on informal practices and personal relationships that have been built slowly over time, rather than relying on active recruitment.

Offline Communication

Interviewee A views recruitment as a "marathon, not a sprint," emphasizing trust and long-term relationship building over speed or efficiency. Due to this philosophy, organization A relies almost entirely on face-to-face communication and personal networks for outreach and recruitment. Despite steady growth, it has never advertised through digital platforms. Volunteers are typically introduced through existing relationships and spread awareness organically through the local community. For example, one volunteer's husband included a flyer for organization A in his company's employee welcome packet, quietly promoting the organization through offline channels rather than explicit digital promotion. This word-of-mouth model has created a strong, loyal base, but it also limits the organization's reach to those outside of immediate social circles.

Thanks to the presence of native Japanese speakers on staff, organization B now manages bilingual social media content, enabling it to expand its outreach and better reflect its diverse community. Despite this, Interviewee B firmly believes in the importance of person-to-person, word-of-mouth communication over digital platforms.

> *"We do have a place on our website that says 'volunteer here', 'contact us'. That rarely brings us anyone, right? I'm a firm believer in it's person-to-person, word of mouth, even if that's done through Facebook, texting, messaging, email, whatever, Line." - Interviewee B*

Organization C continues to rely almost entirely on face-to-face interactions for both volunteer recruitment and retention. Its social media presence is minimal, and there is little indication of active digital outreach or communication systems. When asked about the organization's operations, Interviewee C stated:

"We mainly just talk with people...that's our main strategy, right? Sometimes we post on Instagram or Facebook, but other than that, we don't really have a specific strategy. Maybe we should." (Organization C)

The organization's long-standing history in the local community appears to reinforce its preference for traditional, in-person methods, which are viewed by leadership as sufficient for maintaining relationships and operations. This reluctance to integrate new technologies appears to be due to organizational habits and time constraints. Interviewee C cited being "too busy" as a reason for not adopting digital tools, which suggests that technology is perceived as an added burden rather than a strategic asset. This hesitancy reflects an internal culture shaped by continuity, where established practices are favored over innovation.

Despite Organization E maintaining a robust digital online presence, services are arranged via email or phone, with rigid service hours (9:00–17:00) and a dependence on volunteers initiating contact.

"We [have SNS], but it's one-way communication. We post notifications. Hey, there's an event. Hey, we have this like radio program in different languages. You might want to listen to it when it airs. Hey, there's like a weather warning. There might be a snowstorm tomorrow. Watch out. But people don't talk to us, right? There's no two-way interaction. It's just like a broadcast into the void, basically. Oh, hi, we're doing this thing. OK. And they can't really reach out to us that way. And then we do want more people to kind of get involved or utilize our service. I think that has to change. Especially younger people, they much prefer the direct SNS type rather than picking up the phone to call." - Interviewee E

Language and Time Lags

Organization B maintained an English-language website for eight years before creating a Japanese version, highlighting a language-based digital lag that limited accessibility for local

stakeholders. This delay reflects a bottleneck, where expanding bilingual infrastructure took time to implement.

"One of our board members, he had that skill set, and he's like, 'I would happily make a Japanese website'. So we're like, 'Yay, go for it!' you know" - Interviewee B

While organization D maintains an English-language website counterpart to their native Japanese website, this platform appears to be limited in functionality. Communications remain primarily informational rather than interactive. Furthermore, there appears to be a language lag, with the most recent English newsletters dating back to 2020. While their online presence supports awareness, it provides few interactive opportunities for volunteers.

Findings Summary

Based on the above findings, the following observations can be made. Firstly, within these organizations, there is a strong importance placed on the cultural competency training of staff and volunteers. Nonprofits serving culturally diverse communities appear to adopt more adaptive and flexible volunteer management strategies than those serving homogeneous populations. Secondly, the leadership styles of team leaders, board members, and management personnel influence volunteer engagement. Leaders who actively integrate volunteer feedback and recognize contributions improve volunteer engagement. Increased volunteer engagement is a potential driver of long-term volunteer retention. More specifically, giving volunteers increased autonomy and meaningful tasks tended to lead to greater engagement, according to the interviewees. Volunteer management strategies varied across organizational contexts; however, these organizations tended to rely on informal practices, with one organization stating, "We talk with the people and that's the main strategy." These organizations primarily rely on organic, word-of-mouth recruitment rather than active recruitment practices. These organizations also appeared to have low levels of digital engagement, instead relying on culturally specific values such as face-to-face communication and indirect knowledge sharing, for example, quietly sharing information pamphlets in the welcome folder at a volunteer's husband's workplace.

Discussion

This study examined how immigrant support nonprofits in the United States and Japan strategically manage their volunteers, with a focus on leadership, organizational culture, diversity management, and technology use. Drawing from Resource Dependence Theory and Stakeholder Theory, the findings highlight how nonprofits adapt to environmental constraints and diverse stakeholder needs through flexible, relational, and culturally responsive practices.

Organizational Leadership

Findings indicate that leadership plays a central role in shaping volunteer engagement and retention. Across the organizations studied, leaders who actively engage with volunteers, seek their input, and communicate their appreciation contribute to stronger volunteer commitment and organizational loyalty. These leaders promote a relational dynamic that goes beyond task delegation, emphasizing mutual respect and recognition.

Notably, many of the leaders interviewed had significant international or cross-cultural experience, including time spent living abroad, learning a second language, or navigating a foreign environment. This background translates into higher levels of empathy and cultural competence when working with diverse volunteer populations. Leaders with firsthand experience of being an outsider, whether as immigrants themselves or through overseas immersion, were better equipped to support volunteers who face similar challenges of adjustment and integration.

Even within Japanese organizations where bureaucratic structures are traditionally more hierarchical, several leaders promoted more egalitarian values in practice. This suggests that individual leadership values can challenge and soften institutional rigidity, creating a more welcoming environment for volunteers. Across all cases, every organizational leader interviewed was either a foreigner or had extensive overseas experience, reinforcing the link between cross-cultural sensitivity and inclusive volunteer management practices.

Organizational Culture

The development of an egalitarian and inclusive organizational culture emerged as a key theme across the case studies. These organizations encourage feedback from volunteers and create opportunities for them to contribute beyond routine tasks. In some cases, volunteers were empowered to propose or lead their own initiatives, indicating a shift toward shared ownership and collaborative program development.

A less hierarchical and more horizontal organizational structure was associated with increased volunteer motivation and involvement. When volunteers felt their voices were heard and their contributions valued, they were more likely to remain engaged and take on leadership roles within the community. In some organizations, this was operationalized through structured training programs or community outreach activities designed to promote volunteer development and collective resilience, such as disaster preparedness initiatives or leadership programs.

The emphasis on participatory culture reflects a strategic orientation toward long-term volunteer integration and capacity building. Rather than viewing volunteers as transient or peripheral, these organizations frame them as integral members of a collaborative ecosystem. This cultural orientation not only builds stronger volunteer commitment but also aligns with the broader goals of community empowerment and cross-cultural solidarity.

Diversity Management

While formal diversity policies were rare, many organizations showed implicit commitments to inclusion through everyday practices, such as bilingual communication, intercultural events, and giving volunteers flexibility in their roles and experiences based on their skills and "fit". This supports the notion that inclusion does not always require codified policies; it can emerge organically through intentional community engagement and staff behavior.

Digital Communication and Tools

A more unexpected but revealing theme was the limited adoption of digital tools. Despite the potential of volunteer management platforms, few organizations utilized them. Most continued to rely on email, physical sign-up sheets, or face-to-face outreach. Resource constraints were one explanation, but resistance also stemmed from cultural norms and staff preferences.

Cross-Cultural Insights

Despite shared reliance on mission alignment and relational trust, Japanese and American organizations differed in how they operationalized volunteer strategies. Japanese organizations emphasized long-term relational continuity, hierarchical leadership, and in-person engagement. U.S. organizations showed more flexibility in role definitions and embraced bilingual outreach more proactively. However, both sets of organizations displayed reluctance to adopt new digital tools. These differences underscore the importance of cultural sensitivity in designing and implementing volunteer management strategies. What works in one context may not easily transfer to another without modification to fit local values, communication styles, and stakeholder expectations.

Contributions to Theory

This study contributes to nonprofit management theory by extending key ideas from both Resource Dependence Theory and Stakeholder Theory through a cross-cultural lens. First, the findings expand Resource Dependence Theory by showing how immigrant support nonprofits in Japan and the United States respond to external constraints, such as limited staffing, funding, or access to technology, through informal, flexible volunteer management strategies. Rather than relying on formal HR systems, these organizations draw on mission-driven messaging, personal networks, and relational trust to attract and retain volunteers. These practices reflect how nonprofits actively shape their environments by leveraging culturally responsive strategies to secure essential resources.

Second, the study enriches Stakeholder Theory by highlighting how responsiveness to stakeholder needs, especially those of volunteers and immigrant communities, is embedded in day-to-day organizational practices. Volunteers are treated as key stakeholders, and their needs are met through informal mechanisms like language accommodations, cultural events, and trust-building interactions. These efforts not only support volunteer engagement but also strengthen organizational legitimacy in multicultural contexts.

Third, by comparing cases from Japan and the United States, this study offers insight into how context shapes volunteer management practices. While there are shared themes across both countries, such as the importance of mission alignment and personal relationships, cultural and institutional differences influence how strategies are carried out. This cross-cultural perspective broadens the application of both theories beyond Western-centric frameworks and shows how nonprofits adapt within their specific social environments.

Finally, the study reframes the role of volunteers in nonprofit organizations. Rather than viewing them solely as resources to be managed, the findings position volunteers as active contributors to the organization's mission and public image. When supported effectively, they act as informal ambassadors, helping the organization build trust and visibility within local communities. This perspective adds to existing literature by emphasizing the reciprocal nature of volunteer engagement and its strategic value in nonprofit governance and sustainability.

Practical and Managerial Recommendations

This study highlights several actionable strategies nonprofit organizations can adopt to improve volunteer management. Drawing on insights from case organizations, the following recommendations address recruitment, retention, engagement, and training, along with broader operational practices.

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Adopt a Strategic Approach to Volunteer Recruitment

Despite the importance and heavy reliance on volunteers to carry out their missions, oftentimes these organizations lack a strategic approach to managing their volunteer resources.

"Just recently, within the last year, we hired someone specifically to help with volunteers. Before that, we had a leadership position for this role, but it had been vacant for about 10 years, which is very sad because it affected our volunteers. We had a really dynamic guy in that role 10 years ago" (Organization A)

Recommendation: Create dedicated staff or leadership positions for volunteer coordination and develop clear, proactive recruitment strategies that reflect the organization's mission and volunteer needs.

Focus on Human Connection to Support Retention

Volunteer retention is a crucial issue for these organizations; however, it is more than just a metric. In most cases, these organizations did not want to pressure volunteers, so they did not explicitly focus on retention. Instead, they focused on engaging with their volunteers and making them feel valued as individuals and for their contributions.

"People volunteer for a reason. It's not just because they need something to do; they genuinely want to be involved, especially for a weekly class for a whole year. These are people who really mean business, so you can't drop the ball and fail to follow up with them. You HAVE to follow up. You HAVE to make sure you touch base with them face-to-face, not just by phone, to make sure they know that you still want and value them and what they bring to the table. I feel that's just basic human interaction." (Organization A)

Recommendation: Maintain regular, personalized contact with volunteers. Show appreciation and reinforce their sense of purpose and belonging within the organization.

Empower Volunteers through Shared Ownership

By giving volunteers varying degrees of autonomy, organizations can improve their engagement not only with their volunteer resources but also with the local communities they represent.

> *"The volunteers are very active, often coming up with ideas for events and activities they want to organize. We try to involve them as much as possible because when they go about their daily lives, they share their experiences with others. This helps spread cultural awareness and promotes a sense of harmony in the community." (Organization D)*

Recommendation: Encourage volunteer-driven initiatives and include volunteers in planning and decision-making processes to enhance motivation and community impact.

Provide Culturally Relevant Training

Providing adequate and context-relevant training and certifications for volunteer members can lead to improved engagement and retention. Moreover, by cultivating a sense of competency and trust, these volunteers can effectively assist the organization in achieving its mission through community outreach.

> *"After completing the two training sessions, volunteers receive a plaque certifying them as disaster volunteer leaders. In the event of another disaster, they'll know what to do and can assist those around them who speak the same language. This ties into the community leader aspect of the program. These are some of the other ways we involve volunteers." (Organization E)*

Recommendation: Develop training programs that are relevant, practical, and culturally sensitive. Provide certifications or recognition to reinforce competence and commitment.

Broader Organizational Recommendations

In addition to improving volunteer management practices, organizations should also consider taking the following actions:

- Implement structured systems to recognize, support, and engage volunteers.
- Create clear communication channels and regularly collaborate with community stakeholders.
- Offer language support, cultural orientation, and sensitivity training for both staff and volunteers.
- Build inclusive practices that promote both integration and cultural preservation.
- Provide access to technology and digital tools for staff and volunteers.
- Collect and use data to refine service delivery and volunteer programming.
- Continuously adapt educational and program strategies to meet diverse community needs.

These recommendations are grounded in the lived experiences of nonprofit leaders and volunteers working in multicultural contexts. By adopting these strategies, organizations can build more resilient, inclusive, and mission-aligned volunteer ecosystems.

Challenges & Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it utilizes a small sample of only five organizations from a single industry, which limits generalizability. Cultural differences in language, norms, and context made it difficult to make direct comparisons between organizations. Furthermore, access to nonprofit leadership varied by country and organization, proving more difficult in the Japanese context than the American context, most likely due to language and trust gaps between the first author and the Japanese organizations. Inherent to qualitative studies, the findings from this study offer some depth but not breadth. Future research should consider larger, more diverse samples, include the perspectives and experiences of volunteers themselves via surveys or other methods, and potentially adopt quantitative or mixed-methods designs for data triangulation. Comparative studies involving other national or regional contexts, or including other industries, could further clarify how cultural factors shape strategic volunteer management across the nonprofit sector.

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