

Professionalization of Volunteering: Bridging Commitment, Competency, and Sustainability in the IRDO Model

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Abstract

This paper investigates the professionalization of volunteering as a strategic mechanism for enhancing volunteer retention, motivation, competency development, and long-term organizational sustainability (Wilson, 2000; Hustinx et al., 2010). The study is grounded in a qualitative case analysis of the IRDO Institute for the Development of Social Responsibility, a Slovenian non-governmental organization with over two decades of experience in volunteer-driven work and social responsibility development (IRDO Institute for the Development of Social Responsibility, n.d.). The research addresses the growing tension between traditional, informal volunteering structures and the increasing need for systematic volunteer management in contemporary civil society organizations (European Volunteer Centre [CEV], n.d.). The methodology combines institutional analysis, policy review, and comparative examination of Slovenian and European volunteer frameworks, including the Volunteering Act and the Volunteering Development Strategy in the Republic of Slovenia until 2030 (Republic of Slovenia, 2024), as well as European approaches developed through the Policy Agenda for Volunteering in Europe (P.A.V.E.) and the Blueprint for European Volunteering 2030 (BEV2030) framework (Centre for European Volunteering [CEV], 2011, 2021; CCIVS, n.d.). The findings indicate that professionalization, when appropriately implemented, strengthens volunteer engagement through structured onboarding, mentoring systems, competency-based training, and systematic evaluation (Clary et al., 1998). The paper proposes the IRDO model of volunteer professionalization as a conceptual framework integrating human resource support, education, evaluation mechanisms, and community networking.

Keywords: volunteering, professionalization, mentoring, IRDO, healthcare volunteering, competency development

1 Introduction

Volunteering is widely recognized as a foundational pillar of civic engagement and social cohesion (Wilson, 2000). It reflects the willingness of individuals to contribute time, knowledge, and effort to collective societal goals without direct financial compensation (Clary et al., 1998). Across Europe, volunteering is increasingly understood not only as a moral or ethical practice but also as a structural component of social welfare systems, community resilience, and democratic participation (European Volunteer Centre [CEV], n.d.).

To resolve these operational tensions, contemporary organizations must align local initiatives with broader macro-level directives. On the European stage, this structural transition is driven by two foundational policy frameworks: the Policy Agenda for Volunteering in Europe (P.A.V.E.) and the Blueprint for European Volunteering 2030 (BEV2030). Far from being detached bureaucratic structures, these frameworks offer a direct, strategic solution to organizational instability. P.A.V.E. (CEV, 2011) addresses the systemic vulnerabilities of relying solely on baseline, informal volunteer networks, establishing that long-term sustainability requires a transition toward institutionalized volunteer infrastructure and high-quality administrative management. Looking forward, the BEV2030 framework (CEV, 2021) outlines a vision where structured volunteer management is essential to foster inclusive environments, especially for vulnerable populations, while systematically validating the transferable competencies that volunteers acquire.

A particularly important dimension of volunteer professionalization emerges in the healthcare system, where volunteers operate in sensitive environments and interact with vulnerable populations. As Mikuš-Kos (2020) emphasizes, “the activity of healthcare volunteers presented in this book is organized, structured, and supervised (p.14),” requiring preparation, training, supervision, and continuous support. She further notes that “the effectiveness of volunteers depends on the quality of management of their work (p. 11),” highlighting the centrality of structured management, clear expectations, and professional oversight. Healthcare volunteering cannot rely on spontaneity; it demands clarity, boundaries, and mentoring to ensure safety for both patients and volunteers.

This perspective is reinforced by the primary qualitative interview conducted with dr. Ludvik Travnik, retired orthopedic surgeon and volunteer mentor within Spominčica – Alzheimer Slovenia. Spominčica is a voluntary, independent, non-profit, interdisciplinary professional association whose primary purpose is to provide assistance to people with dementia, their relatives, and caregivers. Within this framework, dr. Travnik (L. Travnik, personal communication, May 19, 2026) leads the Modra palica (Blue Cane) group, which supports people with dementia in natural environments such as Arboretum Volčji Potok. The Blue Cane project adapts walking paths and nature experiences for visitors with cognitive, sensory, or physical limitations, enabling access to nature for vulnerable groups (Spominčica – Alzheimer Slovenija, 2025).

Dr. Travnik’s (L. Travnik, personal communication, May 19, 2026) insights provide a vivid example of how structured leadership, education, and emotional support shape volunteer engagement. He stresses that “education is an extremely important part of our program,” and that volunteers join “on their own initiative, they are incredible enthusiasts, which is why we have absolutely no issues with volunteer turnover.” His leadership approach emphasizes gratitude, professional coordination, and continuous communication: “To ensure that volunteers stay with us, we always take great care to thank them properly and regularly highlight the invaluable importance of their participation.” Regular meetings every two weeks allow the group to “highlight things that could be improved” while also praising what was done well. Volunteers, he notes, “seek and find personal affirmation” through their work, feeling needed, respected, and valued.

These insights align with broader theoretical perspectives on volunteer motivation. Sociological theories of volunteering, as summarized by Mikuš-Kos (2020, p. 12), highlight the role of social integration, meaningful activity, and identity formation: people engage in volunteering to maintain an active social role, to ensure their inclusion in social networks, and to find meaning and control in their

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lives. These motivations are clearly reflected in the Modra palica group, where volunteers experience personal growth, belonging, and recognition.

The central research problem addressed in this paper is whether and how professionalization contributes to improved volunteer engagement and organizational sustainability without undermining intrinsic motivation (Clary et al., 1998). This question is particularly relevant in the context of increasing policy attention in Slovenia and Europe toward volunteer quality, competency frameworks, and structured engagement strategies (Republic of Slovenia, 2024). The integration of healthcare volunteering insights and primary interview data strengthens the analysis by illustrating how professionalization functions in practice.

This paper explicitly examines how structured professionalization practices influence volunteer retention, motivation, competency development, and organizational sustainability. The study seeks to determine whether professionalization strengthens volunteer engagement while preserving the intrinsic motivations that traditionally characterize voluntary action.

2 Method

This study applies a qualitative case-study methodology designed to explore the organizational practices of IRDO and situate them within broader policy and theoretical frameworks. The research design integrates three complementary analytical approaches: institutional analysis, policy document review, and comparative framework analysis (IRDO, 2026).

2.1 Data Selection and Document Criteria

Documents were selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to volunteer management, organizational sustainability, and public policy frameworks. Inclusion criteria required that sources either represent current Slovenian legislation, national strategic documents published after 2020, European volunteering policy frameworks, or official organizational documentation related to IRDO's volunteer management practices. The final document corpus included the Volunteering Act (ZProst), the Volunteering Development Strategy in the Republic of Slovenia until 2030, the Policy Agenda for Volunteering in Europe (P.A.V.E.), the Blueprint for European Volunteering 2030 (BEV2030), and internal IRDO documentation.

Institutional analysis focuses on IRDO's internal volunteer structures, historical development, and operational practices (IRDO, 2026). Policy analysis examines Slovenian legislative and strategic documents, particularly the Volunteering Act (ZProst) and the Volunteering Development Strategy in the Republic of Slovenia until 2030. Comparative analysis situates these findings within European volunteer management frameworks, tracking recommendations from the Blueprint for European Volunteering 2030 (BEV2030) and international guidelines established by CCIVS (CCIVS, n.d.).

A specific methodological emphasis is placed on the healthcare volunteering context, drawing on Mikuš-Kos's (2020) detailed account of volunteer work in Slovenian healthcare institutions. Her book chapter provides a rich empirical and normative foundation for understanding the requirements of structured onboarding, training, supervision, and mentoring in environments where volunteers interact with patients, medical staff, and sensitive information. The descriptions of volunteer preparation, ethical expectations, and organizational responsibilities inform the analytical framework used in this study.

The methodology also incorporates a primary qualitative interview conducted on 19 May 2026 in Lipica, Slovenia, with dr. Ludvik Travnik, volunteer mentor and leader of the Modra palica group within Spominčica (Spominčica – Alzheimer Slovenija, 2025). His statements provide firsthand insight into volunteer motivation, retention, leadership practices, and the emotional dynamics of volunteer groups supporting people with dementia. The interview is treated as a primary source and cited as personal communication.

2.2 Interview Protocol

The semi-structured interview was organized around three thematic areas: (1) volunteer motivation and recruitment, (2) volunteer retention and support mechanisms, and (3) professionalization practices including education, mentoring, and supervision. The interview provided qualitative insights into volunteer experiences and organizational practices within the Modra palica programme.

2.3 Data Analysis and Triangulation

Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Information derived from policy documents, institutional materials, literature sources, and interview data was coded and grouped into recurring themes. The analysis focused on five principal categories: structured onboarding, competency development, mentoring systems, organizational culture, and policy alignment. To strengthen validity, findings were triangulated by comparing policy objectives, organizational practices, and interview evidence.

2.4 Methodological Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study relies primarily on qualitative evidence derived from a single institutional case and one primary interview. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory rather than universally generalizable. While the qualitative approach allows for in-depth understanding of organizational processes, future research should incorporate survey-based data, longitudinal analysis, and comparative studies across multiple organizations and countries.

3 Results

The analysis of IRDO's organizational practices (IRDO, 2026), combined with insights from Slovenian healthcare volunteering (Čebašek-Travnik, 2020) and the primary interview with dr. Ludvik Travnik (L. Travnik, personal communication, May 19, 2026), reveals several key dimensions of volunteer professionalization. These dimensions include structured onboarding, competency-based training, mentoring systems, organizational culture, and mechanisms for volunteer retention. Together, they form a coherent model of sustainable volunteer engagement.

The findings can be grouped into five interconnected dimensions of volunteer professionalization: structured onboarding, competency-based training, mentoring systems, organizational culture, and policy alignment. Together these dimensions form the basis of the proposed IRDO model of volunteer professionalization.

These structural initiatives closely match European benchmarks outlined in the P.A.V.E. and BEV2030 frameworks, which emphasize that sustainable volunteer ecosystems require professionalized coordination infrastructure (CEV, 2011, 2021).

3.1 Structured Onboarding and Clear Role Definition

A central finding is the importance of structured onboarding. IRDO's (IRDO, 2026) approach aligns with the standards described by Mikuš-Kos (2020, pp. 14, 68), who emphasizes that "Volunteer work requires proper preparation and training for volunteers, continuous monitoring of their work, ongoing education, and supervision." This structured preparation ensures that volunteers understand their responsibilities, boundaries, and the ethical framework of their work.

In healthcare settings, onboarding includes detailed explanations of patient characteristics, hygiene protocols, confidentiality, and the limits of volunteer responsibilities. As Mikuš-Kos (2020, p.24) notes, "A highly clear and detailed overview of volunteer tasks, responsibilities, and potential complications should be prepared." This clarity reduces uncertainty and increases volunteer confidence.

IRDO's (IRDO, 2026) onboarding practices similarly emphasize clarity, expectations, and alignment with organizational values. Volunteers receive orientation materials, participate in introductory meetings,

and are gradually integrated into project teams. This structured approach reduces early dropout and supports long-term engagement.

3.2 Competency-Based Training and Continuous Education

Training emerged as a core pillar of professionalization. IRDO's (IRDO, 2026) educational programs focus on developing competencies in communication, teamwork, project management, and social responsibility. These competencies align with European volunteer development frameworks, which emphasize transferable skills and lifelong learning (CEV, 2011, 2021).

Healthcare volunteering provides a particularly strong example of the importance of training. Mikuš-Kos (2020, p.24) highlights that "Training enhances volunteer effectiveness by equipping them with the necessary skills, knowledge, and ideas, while also ensuring the safety of everyone involved." Training protects patients, volunteers, and institutions by reducing risks and ensuring quality.

The interview with dr. Travník (L. Travník, personal communication, May 19, 2026) reinforces this finding. He states that "education is an extremely important part of our program," and that volunteers undergo systematic preparation before working with people with dementia. This includes training in communication, safety, understanding cognitive decline, and adapting activities to individual needs. The Modra palica group's training model demonstrates how education enhances both volunteer confidence and service quality.

3.3 Mentoring and Support Systems

Mentoring is a critical component of volunteer professionalization. IRDO (IRDO, 2026) integrates mentoring into its project structures, pairing new volunteers with experienced members who provide guidance, feedback, and emotional support. This approach aligns with Mikuš-kos's (2020, p.14) emphasis on supervision and ongoing support, which she describes as essential for preventing burnout and ensuring quality.

In healthcare settings, mentoring is even more important. Mikuš-Kos (2020, p.24) notes that "During training, and particularly the practical onboarding of new volunteers, it is highly beneficial to involve mentors from among experienced volunteers." Experienced volunteers help newcomers navigate complex environments and develop confidence.

The Modra palica group provides a vivid example of effective mentoring. As dr. Travník (L. Travník, personal communication, May 19, 2026) explains, "we provide the teams with comprehensive professional leadership—meaning that we coordinate all activities, carry out regular training, and advise the volunteers as needed." His leadership style combines structure, empathy, and recognition, creating a supportive environment where volunteers feel valued and motivated.

3.4 Organizational Culture and Volunteer Retention

Organizational culture plays a decisive role in volunteer retention. IRDO (IRDO, 2026) fosters a culture of respect, collaboration, and recognition, which contributes to long-term engagement. This aligns with research showing that volunteers remain committed when they feel appreciated and when their contributions are acknowledged (Clary et al., 1998).

Healthcare volunteering again provides a strong example. Mikuš-Kos (2020, p. 20) emphasizes that "Studies show that, in addition to strong relationships, effective organization is a fundamental building block of work quality and volunteer retention." Good relationships and organizational structure are essential for sustaining volunteer involvement.

Dr. Travník's (L. Travník, personal communication, May 19, 2026) experience confirms this. He notes that volunteers in the Modra palica group "seek and find personal affirmation" and that the group maintains "a truly beautiful, human relationship." Regular meetings every 14 days provide space for reflection, feedback, and mutual support. This culture of gratitude and open communication

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contributes to the group's remarkable retention rate, with no volunteer turnover reported during the observed project period. However, this finding should be interpreted within the specific context of the Modra palica programme, which operates as a relatively small, highly supervised volunteer group supported by strong professional leadership. Consequently, the result demonstrates the potential benefits of intensive mentoring and support systems rather than a universally applicable benchmark for all volunteer organizations.

3.5 Alignment with Policy and European Frameworks

IRDO's (IRDO, 2026) practices align with national and European policy frameworks emphasizing volunteer quality, training, and structured engagement. The Volunteering Development Strategy until 2030 marks a decisive legislative shift toward professionalization by introducing concrete measures to build organizational capacity. Specifically, the strategy advocates for the co-financing of sustainable jobs for volunteer mentors and coordinators, alongside recognizing professional supervision for mentors as an eligible project cost (Republic of Slovenia, 2024). These structural initiatives closely match European benchmarks outlined in the P.A.V.E. and BEV2030 frameworks, which emphasize that sustainable volunteer ecosystems require professionalized coordination infrastructure (CEV, 2011, 2021).

Furthermore, the implementation of structured volunteer management within the healthcare and social care sub-sectors is directly validated by the strategy's emphasis on expanding volunteer programs that explicitly mitigate social isolation, mental health issues, and the challenges of an ageing population (Republic of Slovenia, 2024). Slovenia's strategic alignment highlights a clear policy bridge: national policies are actively translating broader European agendas into practical local realities. By using localized tools like the Slovenian translations of BEV2030, head organizations such as Slovenska filantropija successfully bridge the gap between high-level European mandates and national legislative funding. This ensures that infrastructure changes—such as the institutional co-financing of coordinators—are structurally grounded in European best practices.

4 Discussion

The findings suggest that professionalization is not a bureaucratic burden but a strategic tool for enhancing volunteer engagement and organizational sustainability. Structured onboarding, competency-based training, mentoring, and supportive organizational culture contribute to volunteer satisfaction, retention, and performance.

4.1 Professionalization as Empowerment

Professionalization empowers volunteers by providing clarity, skills, and support. It reduces uncertainty, increases confidence, and enables volunteers to contribute meaningfully. This is particularly important in sensitive environments such as healthcare, where volunteers must navigate ethical dilemmas, emotional challenges, and complex interpersonal interactions.

This transition from raw enthusiasm to professionalized infrastructure serves as a core mechanism for volunteer empowerment. When evaluating the core motives for professionalization, critics often question whether structural regulation diminishes intrinsic volunteer drive. However, the evidence collected in this study demonstrates that professionalization acts as a protective shield. By introducing structured support networks, organizations fulfill the directives of the Policy Agenda for Volunteering in Europe (P.A.V.E.), which argues that high-quality volunteer management prevents organizational fragmentation and reduces operational friction (CEV, 2011).

The Modra palica group (L. Travnik, personal communication, May 19, 2026) exemplifies how professionalization can coexist with intrinsic motivation. Volunteers join out of personal interest and enthusiasm, but their long-term engagement is sustained by structured leadership, education, and

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recognition. This demonstrates that professionalization enhances, rather than undermines, volunteer motivation.

4.2 The Role of Leadership

Leadership emerged as a critical factor in volunteer engagement. Effective leaders provide guidance, recognition, and emotional support. They create environments where volunteers feel valued, respected, and connected. Dr. Travnik's (L. Travnik, personal communication, May 19, 2026) leadership style-characterized by gratitude, open communication, and professional coordination-illustrates how leadership shapes volunteer experiences.

IRDO's (IRDO, 2026) leadership practices similarly emphasize collaboration, empowerment, and continuous learning. These practices align with European frameworks that highlight the importance of supportive leadership in volunteer management.

4.3 Implications for Healthcare Volunteering

Healthcare volunteering requires a high degree of professionalization due to the vulnerability of patients and the complexity of care environments. Structured onboarding, training, mentoring, and supervision are essential for ensuring safety and quality. Mikuš-Kos's (2020) detailed descriptions of healthcare volunteer management provide a valuable framework for understanding these requirements.

The practical implementation of these systems directly anticipates the strategic future of civic work. By examining how the Modra palica group prepares its volunteers to care for individuals experiencing cognitive decline, this model directly materializes the core objectives of the Blueprint for European Volunteering 2030 (CEV, 2021). BEV2030 positions structured education and the inclusion of vulnerable demographics as the primary pillars of modern civil society. As a result, the structured workflows seen within Spominčica and IRDO confirm that professionalization does not suppress spontaneity; rather, it cultivates a reliable workspace where enthusiasts can find personal affirmation and security.

The Modra palica group (L. Travnik, personal communication, May 19, 2026) demonstrates how these principles can be applied in practice. Volunteers receive training, mentoring, and continuous support, enabling them to work effectively with people with dementia. This model could inform the development of similar programs in other healthcare settings.

4.4 Synthesis of Findings

The findings indicate that professionalization contributes to volunteer sustainability through a combination of organizational and interpersonal mechanisms. Structured onboarding reduces uncertainty, competency-based education increases confidence and effectiveness, mentoring systems provide continuous support, and organizational culture fosters belonging and recognition. Together, these factors appear to strengthen volunteer retention and organizational resilience while maintaining intrinsic motivation. Although the study does not establish direct causal relationships, the evidence suggests a strong association between structured volunteer management and sustainable volunteer engagement.

4.5 The IRDO Model of Volunteer Professionalization

Based on the findings, the IRDO (IRDO, 2026) model of volunteer professionalization can be conceptualized as a framework integrating:

- Structured onboarding
- Competency-based training
- Mentoring and supervision

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- Supportive organizational culture
- Recognition and gratitude
- Continuous evaluation and improvement

This model aligns with national and European policy frameworks and provides a practical approach for organizations seeking to enhance volunteer engagement and sustainability.

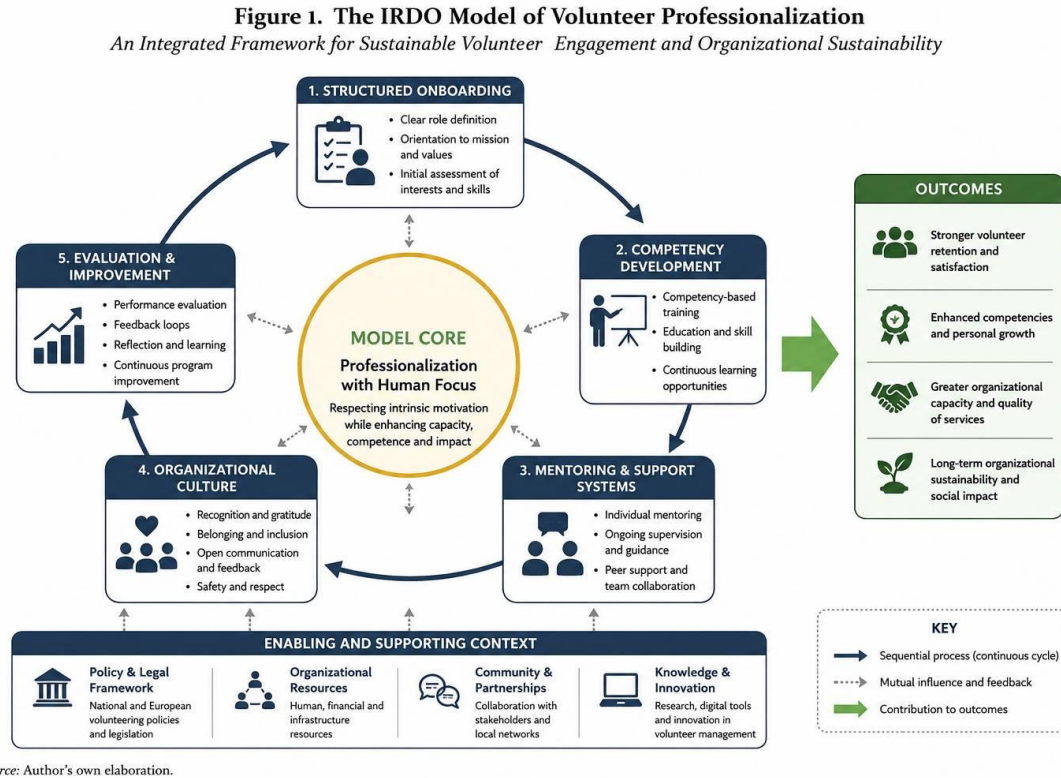


Figure 1 presents the IRDO model as an integrated framework in which structured onboarding serves as the entry mechanism, competency development and mentoring function as developmental processes, organizational culture provides the social environment for engagement, and evaluation mechanisms support continuous improvement. Together these elements contribute to long-term organizational sustainability.

The findings suggest that organizations seeking to improve volunteer retention should invest in structured onboarding, mentoring systems, and continuous competency development. However, the transferability of these practices depends on organizational resources, leadership capacity, and institutional support. Consequently, the IRDO model should be viewed as a flexible framework that requires adaptation to specific organizational contexts rather than as a universally applicable solution.

5 Conclusion

Professionalization is essential for sustainable volunteer engagement. It enhances volunteer satisfaction, retention, and performance by providing clarity, skills, support, and recognition. IRDO's practices, combined with insights from healthcare volunteering and the Modra palica group, demonstrate how professionalization can be implemented effectively.

The integration of structured onboarding, competency-based training, mentoring, and supportive organizational culture creates environments where volunteers feel valued, confident, and motivated. These practices align with national and European policy frameworks and provide a model for organizations seeking to strengthen their volunteer programs.

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Future studies should explore how professionalized volunteer management functions across different organizational environments, including healthcare institutions, educational organizations, social services, and digital volunteering platforms. Comparative international research could further identify contextual factors influencing successful implementation. In addition, quantitative measurement of volunteer satisfaction, retention rates, competency acquisition, and organizational sustainability outcomes would strengthen the evidence base regarding the long-term effects of volunteer professionalization.

Professionalization does not diminish intrinsic motivation; rather, it enhances it by enabling volunteers to contribute meaningfully and sustainably. As the examples from healthcare volunteering and the Modra palica group show, volunteers thrive when they receive education, support, and recognition. These findings underscore the importance of investing in volunteer professionalization as a strategic priority for organizations committed to social responsibility and community development.

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