

# Breaking up volunteer schedules may make people more likely to donate their free time

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Charities that want to attract more people to commit to volunteering may want to focus on when and how much time they ask from volunteers, according to a new psychology study from The University of Texas at Austin.

Because time is viewed as a costly and finite resource, individuals must weigh the burden and benefits of committing [personal time](#) to volunteer. To understand how scheduling might influence their decision, psychology researchers examined people's likelihood to volunteer based on whether their volunteered time was segregated (spread out over multiple days) or aggregated (scheduled in a single day).

The multipart study is published in the *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*.

In the first experiment, researchers asked 95 participants how effortful a volunteer experience might be based on how the time was scheduled. Overall, people expected a four- or eight-hour experience to feel less effortful if it was spread across multiple days. But, if the experience was shorter—one or two hours—they expected it to feel just as or even more effortful if it spanned multiple days.

In a second experiment, 97 participants placed a moral value on different volunteer schedules. Overall, people placed more moral value on volunteering when it was scheduled all at once rather than spread across multiple days. Even when people imagined volunteering across multiple days, they put more moral value on the experience when it was less spread out across two rather than four days.

"While committing to small amounts of time across days rather than one big time commitment certainly makes people feel like it's more manageable, it seems to also bring in thoughts about other things unrelated to the volunteer activity," said the study's lead author, Marlene Henderson, an associate professor of psychology at UT Austin.

"Consequently, it appears to be easier for people to imagine how they will spend their time on an activity when it's aggregated in a single day, and they anticipate the activity to feel more valuable."

A similar thing occurs for money. Studies have shown that people have a "bias for the whole," Henderson explained. For example, individuals have been shown to be reluctant to spend the same amount of money when they thought about it as a single, large denomination (one \$20 bill) rather than smaller denominations (20 \$1 bills).

In a final experiment, 128 participants were asked to focus on either minimizing effort or maximize impact when considering volunteer opportunities. Results showed that participants who minimized their effort were more likely to volunteer when the hours were spread over several days. However, participants in both scenarios did not differ in their likelihood of committing to a schedule spread out over multiple days, suggesting that most people still cared about the amount of effort that would be required of them if they were to get involved.

Marketers for charities are constantly looking for ways to recruit volunteers, but the researchers note that the type of volunteer schedule that people are solicited with is unlikely to be the initial impetus that attracts them to a volunteer experience. Reports have shown that the No. 1 reason individuals get involved in volunteering is that they were asked by someone.

"Other factors such as the extent to which a volunteer experience allows people to express their values likely plays a larger initial role," said Henderson, who is also a faculty fellow with the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at UT Austin. "Nevertheless, our findings do suggest that once individuals are at least open to the possibility of volunteering, how their volunteered time is divided, or not divided, may play a pivotal role in their ultimate likelihood of committing to [volunteer](#). Thus, it is useful for charities to know how they should ask for time from whom."

**More information:** Marlone D. Henderson et al. Anticipated effort

and morality of segregated versus aggregated volunteering, *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* (2021). [DOI: 10.1002/bdm.2234](https://doi.org/10.1002/bdm.2234)

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