**Empowering Change: Understanding and Optimizing Volunteer Engagement for Sustainable Impact in Merton**

**Background**

Sustainable Merton (SM), a community-driven organization dedicated to environmental sustainability, is embarking on an exciting five-month research project in collaboration with researcher Ayşe Demir and Roehampton University. The project aims to gain a deep understanding of what motivates volunteers to participate in SM's diverse range of initiatives, from waste reduction and urban gardening to energy conservation and food security.

Through surveys we will explore the experiences and preferences of SM's volunteers and champions, seeking to uncover what makes them tick, what types of projects they find most rewarding, and how their involvement has influenced their own attitudes towards sustainability. We are particularly keen to learn from the "super-volunteers," those individuals who consistently go above and beyond in their commitment to SM's mission. Additionally, this project will address the age gap among SM volunteers by actively engaging Roehampton University students (aged 18-25) in SM's activities, fostering intergenerational collaboration and knowledge exchange.

The insights gained from this research will be invaluable in shaping SM's future project designs, ensuring they are engaging, impactful, and tailored to the interests of the volunteer community. By fostering a deeper understanding of volunteer motivations and preferences, we aim to strengthen our volunteer programs, attract new participants, and ultimately amplify our collective impact in creating a more sustainable Merton.

This collaboration also presents a unique opportunity for Roehampton University students to gain practical research experience and contribute to their local community, fostering a new generation of sustainability leaders. By leveraging Roehampton researchers' expertise in transforming business practices and embedding sustainability, SM will gain valuable insights to optimize its operations and enhance its impact. We believe that by working together, we can create a brighter, greener future for Merton and beyond.

The collaboration between Sustainable Merton (SM) and Roehampton University (RU) will drive innovation in several key areas. Primarily, it will enhance SM's community engagement and program development by leveraging research insights gained from the project. The comprehensive study of volunteer motivations, behaviors, and preferences will enable SM to design more impactful and tailored projects that resonate with their target audience. This data-driven approach will lead to increased volunteer participation and stronger community engagement.

Furthermore, the collaboration will foster innovation in sustainability education. The involvement of RU students in SM's projects will expose them to real-world sustainability challenges, fostering a deeper understanding of the subject matter and inspiring potential career paths in the field. This experiential learning model will enrich the educational experience at RU, attracting students interested in hands-on, community-based learning.

Additionally, the project will create a knowledge-sharing platform between SM and RU, fostering an environment of innovation and collaboration. This exchange of ideas and expertise will lead to the development of new sustainable practices and solutions that can be replicated in other communities, thereby expanding the impact of both organizations

The academic purpose of this research project is to contribute to the expanding body of knowledge on volunteerism and sustainability, specifically within the context of community-led environmental initiatives. Although much research exists on volunteer engagement and sustainability practices, there remains a gap in understanding the unique motivations, behaviors, and experiences of individuals involved in localized, grassroots organizations like Sustainable Merton (SM). This study will address this gap by offering a detailed examination of the psychological, social, and environmental drivers behind volunteer participation in sustainability efforts, with a special focus on the "super-volunteers" who consistently demonstrate high levels of engagement. Furthermore, by actively engaging Roehampton University students, the project will explore the dynamics of intergenerational collaboration in sustainability, an area that has received limited attention in existing literature.

The insights generated from this research will provide valuable contributions to both academic and practical understandings of volunteer engagement, behavior change, and sustainability education. The findings will not only inform SM's future project designs but also offer broader lessons for other community-driven sustainability initiatives, making this research highly relevant for scholars and practitioners working in the fields of environmental sustainability, community engagement, and volunteer management. This study, therefore, adds an essential empirical dimension to theoretical frameworks surrounding sustainability and volunteerism, helping to bridge the gap between academic inquiry and real-world application.

Objectives:

**Identify Volunteer Motivations**: Investigate the key factors that motivate individuals to volunteer at Sustainable Merton (SM), focusing on both general volunteers and "super-volunteers" who demonstrate higher-than-average engagement levels.

**Understand Project Preferences**: Explore the types of SM projects that volunteers find most engaging and rewarding, such as waste reduction, urban gardening, energy conservation, or food security initiatives, to better align SM’s future projects with volunteer interests.

**Assess Impact on Attitudes and Behaviors**: Examine how participation in SM’s initiatives influences volunteers’ personal attitudes and behaviors towards sustainability, including any behavior changes that contribute to a more sustainable lifestyle.

**Engage Intergenerational Volunteers**: Assess the impact of involving Roehampton University students in SM's activities, specifically focusing on intergenerational collaboration, knowledge exchange, and the effectiveness of bridging age gaps within the volunteer base.

**Evaluate Current Program Effectiveness**: Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of SM’s current volunteer programs to identify areas for improvement, focusing on volunteer retention, satisfaction, and engagement.

**Inform Future Volunteer Engagement Strategies**: Use data-driven insights to design a new or enhanced volunteer engagement program tailored to the motivations, preferences, and needs of the SM volunteer community.

**Project Methodology Summary:**

This research project aims to develop and enhance volunteer engagement at Sustainable Merton (SM) by collecting and analyzing data on volunteer motivations, behaviors, and preferences. Approximately 150 participants (140 volunteers from SM, 10 students from RU), including university students, will be recruited to participate in this study. Participants will primarily engage in surveys, which will form the core method of data collection for this project.

**Data Collection:**

* **Surveys:** Each participant will complete a structured survey, which is estimated to take 20-30 minutes. The survey will include questions on volunteer motivations, preferences, and past experiences. It will also assess the effectiveness of existing SM programs. Surveys will be conducted online, utilizing digital tools, Google Forms, which do not require additional licensing.

**Licensing and Training:**

* **Questionnaires/Scales:** The surveys will use standardized, validated instruments where applicable, ensuring data reliability and comparability. Since no clinical diagnostic scales are involved, no special licenses are required. The research team is fully trained in survey methodology, ensuring competent and ethical data collection.

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| **KEY PROJECT DELIVERABLES** | | | |
| Please describe your key project deliverables and date by when these will be achieved  (please add/delete rows accordingly) | | | |
| **DELIVERABLE** | | **DESCRIPTION** | **DATE** |
| **1** | Development of Survey Instruments | Finalize questionnaires and focus group guides for data collection. | 10/30/2024 |
| **2** | **Recruitment of Volunteers** | Complete recruitment of 150-200 participants, including university students. | 11/15/2024 |
| **3** | Data Collection | Conduct surveys across the volunteer base. | 12/15/2024 |
| **4** | **Data Analysis** | Analyze collected data to understand volunteer motivations and behavior changes. | 01/15/2025 |
| **5** | Report Drafting | Compile findings and insights into an initial report for review by stakeholders. | 02/01/2025 |
| **6** | Stakeholder Review and Feedback, **Final Report and Dissemination Event** | Circulate draft report among stakeholders for input and final adjustments, Publish the final report and host an event to share findings. | 02/01/2025 |

**Project outcomes**

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| **OUTCOME** | **NUMBER** | **DESCRIPTION** |
| New to market product (or products) | 1 | **New or Enhanced Volunteer Engagement Program:** The research will inform the development of a revitalized volunteer program at SM. By understanding volunteer motivations and preferences, SM can tailor its program to better attract and retain volunteers, potentially leading to new or significantly enhanced volunteer initiatives that are unique in the local community context. The project may also lead to innovative educational tools and resources that can be licensed or sold to other organizations.  **EVIDENCE:** Prototype documentation, user feedback reports, confirmation of market novelty. |
| Business productivity and efficiency improved | 2 | **Streamlined Operations and Increased Volunteer Retention:** The research will identify bottlenecks and inefficiencies in SM's current processes, leading to streamlined operations, reduced administrative overhead, and improved volunteer retention. This will be achieved through: 1- Optimized Volunteer Management: Implementing research-informed recruitment, onboarding, and retention strategies. 2- Enhanced Program Design & Delivery: Tailoring programs to volunteer preferences and community needs, resulting in more effective and efficient resource allocation. 3- Improved Communication: Implementing targeted communication strategies to enhance volunteer engagement and satisfaction.  **EVIDENCE:** Efficiency metrics, volunteer recruitment data, operational reports. |
| New products or services will be adopted | 1 | **Adoption of New Digital Tools for Volunteer Management and Engagement:** The project will assess and potentially implement new digital tools and platforms to streamline volunteer communication, scheduling, and feedback processes. Examples include free volunteer management systems (VMS) like **Track It Forward or POINT**, communication platforms like **Google Groups or Discord**, and survey tools like **Google Forms or Zoho Survey**. These tools will improve efficiency and enhance the overall volunteer experience, contributing to improved digital connectivity and operational efficiency.  **EVIDENCE:** Service implementation reports, user satisfaction surveys, operational improvement reports. |
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**Specific Outcomes and Evidence (Post-Project):**

* **New to Market Product:** SM will provide a self-declaration detailing the new or enhanced volunteer program, highlighting its unique features and the research-based evidence supporting its novelty and potential market value. This could include:
  + A detailed program description outlining its unique value proposition and target audience.
  + Testimonials from volunteers and community members highlighting the program's distinctive features and benefits.
  + Market research data demonstrating the absence of similar programs in the local context.
* **Business Productivity and Efficiency Improved:** SM will provide a signed confirmation detailing the gross value added per hour worked, demonstrating a quantifiable increase in productivity through:
  + Time-tracking data comparing pre- and post-project administrative hours spent on volunteer management and program coordination.
  + Volunteer retention rate data, showing an increase in retention as a result of improved volunteer management practices.
  + Documentation of increased program participation and impact due to streamlined operations and targeted communication strategies.
* **New Products or Services Adopted:** SM will provide a self-declaration confirming the adoption and implementation of new digital tools or processes, outlining their impact on improving connectivity and operational efficiency. This will include:
  + Description of the specific digital tools implemented, including their functionalities and how they address previous challenges.
  + Usage statistics and user feedback demonstrating the effectiveness of the new tools in improving communication, coordination, and volunteer engagement.
  + Evidence of time or cost savings achieved through the adoption of these new digital solutions.

This detailed roadmap and the associated evidence will clearly demonstrate how the project meets BIG Growth's outcomes, highlighting the tangible benefits for Sustainable Merton and the wider community.