

# THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF ASSOCIATIONS IN FRANCE

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## ABSTRACT

*Recent studies highlight the managerial and professional evolution of associations, with the largest adopting an entrepreneurial mode of operation. Against a background of professionalization in the non-profit sector, which is faced with increasingly managerial regulation of its modes of operation and its forms of governance, volunteer experiences are more frequently perceived as activities that generate skills of a social nature, as may be expected, but also of a managerial nature. A more competitive regulation is now imposed on the state and tutelary regulation, which has prevailed up to this point, enabling commercial companies to enter a sector that had been reserved for associations until now. This competition in social assistance forces volunteers to react by strengthening their skill levels.*

**Keywords:** Association, Professionalization, Rationalization, Skilled volunteering

## Volunteering Under Pressure

Recent studies (Barthélémy 2000, Bernardeau Moreau 2004, Hoarau and Laville 2008, Simonet 2010, Ospital and Templier 2018, Lebon et al. 2022)) highlight the managerial evolution of associations, with the largest adopting an entrepreneurial mode of operation (Marchal 1984, Hély 2009). Professionalization translates into a rationalizing process that leads associations to harmonize their objectives and tools in a space that has become more demanding and competitive. Of all the forms that this transformation process can take, there is one that is less visible than the others: This concerns the development of skilled volunteering. Researchers now talk about paid volunteering, skilled or professional volunteering (Ferrand-Bechman 2000, Demoustiers 2002, Bernardeau Moreau and Hély, 2007, Tardif Bourgoïn 2014) or even voluntary careers (Lebon and al. 2022). With regard to the current developments that have resulted in significant restructuring of the non-profit sector, the question that can now be asked is whether this more professional and competitive form of volunteering aims to replace the traditional and amateur form. Therefore, against a background of professionalization in the non-profit sector, which is faced with increasingly managerial regulation of its modes of operation and its forms of governance, volunteer experiences are more frequently perceived as activities that generate skills of a social nature, as may be expected, but also of a managerial nature. A more competitive regulation is now imposed on the state and tutelary regulation, which has prevailed up to this point, enabling commercial companies to enter a sector that had been reserved for associations until now. This competition in social assistance forces volunteers (especially managers) to react by strengthening their skill levels.

In order to address the subject at hand, we have structured our article in three parts. In the first part, we endeavor to better define the professionalization process in charitable organizations and to clarify the features of non-profit organizations. In the second part, we try to show how these non-profit organizations are subject to stresses created by a general context of managerial rationalization, reduction of public aid and competition between non-profit and commercial structures. In the third part, we aim to outline the skills that volunteers

acquire or should acquire. To do this, we distinguish between the cognitive skills, technical skills and social skills developed by volunteers to respond to societal challenges.

### **1. The Professionalization of Associations is a Process of Rationalizing Various Aspects of the Organization**

Although the momentum of associations has been regularly proven by surveys, more attention is being paid to the professionalization of their way of working. Defining the professionalization process in charitable organizations is hardly a simple task, as the common and generic senses tend to obscure the range of phenomena that it covers (Boussard, 2014, p. 73). There are many authors who have tried to conceptualize this term and there are multiple definitions, according to how it is approached by professions (Chapoulie 1973, Bourdoncle 2000, Dubar and al., 2011), professional groups (Offerlé 1998, Paradeise and Lichtenberger 2001, Ospital and Templier 2018) and structuring and salary processes (Guillaume 1996, Ughetto and Combes 2010). When applied to the non-profit sphere, this professionalization is characterized by a marked blending of unpaid activity and salaried work, which can be perceived as a form of obstacle preventing volunteers from starting work (Simonet, 2010, Vachée and Danzac 2019). This link between work and volunteering has been analyzed by authors such as Hély (2009) and Simonet (Op. Cit.), for whom the process of professionalization refers to both rationalization and qualification of practical and managerial activities and to a growth in the financial means of associations (Lochard, Trenta and Vézinat, 2011). For Ughetto and Combes (2010), although it mentions companies and salaried employees, this phenomenon subjects volunteers to productivity-related obligations in a market that is increasingly in competition with companies. It indicates “either the import of methods intended to be professional as opposed to the amateur nature associated with volunteers, or the recruitment of specialists and professionals duly trained in techniques that are useful in corporate “functions”, such as marketing, communication and human resources” (Ibid., p. 3). Ion (2001, p. 241) explains that the professionalization of associations leads to the formalization of structures and the rationalization of their operation. If we maintain Weber’s meaning of instrumental rationality, in which the development of organizations is interpreted as adapting means to achieve ends, we can qualify the professionalization of associations as a process of “rationalizing different aspects of the organization” (Le Roux, 2006, p. 129), leading to stronger skills and training, in particular (Bertrand et al., 1993, Stroobants 2007, Wittorski, 2009).

Through “implementing results-based management built on achieving goals and measuring and evaluating performance as part of the program of contractualization” (Bezes, 2007, p. 19), all relationships between public (national and regional) and private (non-profit and commercial) stakeholders have been disrupted in the long term. The professionalization of associations and volunteers is a direct consequence of these far-reaching changes.

### **2. Competition Among Associations Accelerates Professionalization**

To summarize the professionalization process in non-profit organizations, we can draw from Wittorski’s works (2007) and, in particular, on his reference framework that distinguishes different levels of professionalization. On a structural level, it can be seen that associations tend to strengthen their financial independence to cope with lower subsidies and reduce their reliance on public authorities. According to Ruchaud and Bardout (2011), the distribution of revenue between the public and private sectors also increased by 63% and 37%, respectively, in 2002 to 51% and 49% in 2007. The distribution of revenue between the

public and private sectors in aid organizations was 41% and 59% in 2007, 48% and 52% in education and training, and 47% and 53% in culture. In the sports sector, the ratio is similar at 33% and 67%. For Tchernonog and Prouteau (2019), the balance between public and private sectors has now been reversed. Private sector revenue accounted for 56% in 2017. According to the CNRS/Matisse survey (2005/2006), this share of non-profit revenue from the private sector increased 2.5 times faster than the public share between 1999 and 2005. According to Tchernonog (2013, p. 10) and Prouteau and Tchernonog (2017), revenue linked to the sale of services increased by 6.3% between 2005 and 2011. According to Tchernonog (2019), the share of revenue from internal activities increased from 49% in 2005 to 66% in 2017. This increase in revenue from the private sector correlates with a steady decline in state and regional public subsidies. Although Tchernonog (2001) states that the share of public funding increased from 44% in 1990 to almost 54% in 1999, it appears that, on the other hand, between 1999 and 2005, state subsidies fell by 5%, according to the CNRS/Matisse survey cited above. Between 2005 and 2017, the fall in public subsidies continued, dropping from 34% to 20% (Tchernonog 2017). From 2005 to 2011, the share of municipal subsidies in association budgets also fell from 14% to 11.5% (Tchernonog, 2013). It is worth noting that this decrease in public subsidies tends to be compensated by a very significant increase in orders from the public sector (partnership contracts, service contracts, public contracts). According to the above author, tender procedures for public purchase orders thus increased between 2005 and 2011 by 73%. In 2005, only 7% of associations responded to calls for tenders; in 2011, the figure was 23% (Ibid.).

In reality, this very significant rise in tendering procedures reflects the competition between associations and companies that “monetize” this competition by investing in the social sector (Ferrand-Bechmann, 2014, p. 116). This promotes the emergence of a particular type of association: The “non-profit company” that is characterized by a growing share of employees and volunteers who have been entrusted with the task of negotiating contracts and increasing revenue from the sale of provisions, services and related products. In this context of instrumental rationality and managerial competitive standard, Laville and Sainsaulieu (2013) identify the assertion of a competitive regulation that forces associations to now keep pace with companies on the market in terms of offer and demand. This shift in the commercial age has taken on a very symbolic aspect that is concerning for its members who are aware that they are experiencing changing times. Sousi writes that “the position on the market now means that associations are faced with competition, from other non-profit organizations also on the market and from companies in the traditional or “commercial” sector” (2005, p. 79). In this “culture of contract” (Laville and Sainsaulieu, 2013, p. 165) that balances the rules of the game between the public and private sectors, companies invest in the sphere of social skills and thereby require associations to restructure their way of operating. These authors write that the opposition of clearly different logics up to this point “creates new, necessary relationships on both sides” (Ibid., p. 163).

### **3. Increased Skills Among Volunteers: The Hidden Aspect of the Professionalization Process**

While Marchal was already considering the professionalization of volunteers in the 1980s, other authors, such as Ferrand-Bechmann (2000), Demoustier (2002), Bernardeau Moreau (2004), Havard-Duclos and Nicourd (2007) and Chanut-Guieu (2009) have only been analyzing this phenomenon for about 15 years. For Ferrand-Bechmann, the professionalization of volunteers “refers to an increase in and specialization of skills” (2004, p. 153). De Montmolin (1986) explains that these skills are a balanced combination of

knowledge and expertise, types of management, standard procedures and types of reasoning that can be implemented without new training. They result in social attitudes that mobilize “practical intelligence” (Zarifian, 1999) in the sense that they are acquired definitively and can immediately be put to use (Montrache, 2007). To summarize the nature of skills developed by volunteers, we can refer to the types put forward in social sciences. Of the various types of competencies developed by authors (Iribane 1989, Stroobants 1998, Stasz and Brewer 1998), Morlaix (2015) explains that most identify three types of skills: cognitive skills (knowledge that enables the understanding of situations and the means to solve the problems they pose), technical skills (know-how) considered as “competencies necessary to perform a task” (Sellenet, 2009) and behavioral skills (social skills), which are also social competencies (English-speaking authors such as Heckman and Kautz (2012) talk about soft skills) because they refer to attitudes that are expected in the organization (Morlaix, *Ibid.*, p. 184).

National surveys confirm the growing importance of skills in the voluntary sector. 72% of managers state that they need skills and managerial skills in particular, for their association (Havard-Duclos and Nicourd, 2007). This search for skills is widespread and concerns associations across all of the sectors included. According to Bazin et al. (2011), nearly 80% of them wish to renew or strengthen their management teams through the provision of skills, with initial or in-house training being seen by the majority as an indispensable means of gaining access to responsibilities. A study by Malet (2007) shows that the skill areas where associations face the most difficulties in recruiting volunteers are project development with relevant fundraising, management and accounting. The ability to implement a communication plan has also been mentioned frequently. The survey by Bazin et al. cited above highlights the same trend. Project development with funding comes first in the list (35%) of skills that volunteer managers want to obtain. Following on from that is the need to better understand laws and regulations (32%), ability to manage, organize and delegate (27%), organizing and publicizing events (26%), financial management and accounting (22%). All of the studies cited above show that the most sought-after skills are cognitive when they focus on the general management of an organization, the objectives and strategies of the organization, project management and the ability to adapt these to the environment. Technical skills are more frequently associated with issues in human resource management (working in a team, motivating people and bringing them together, steering projects and meetings). Lastly, social skills refer to conflict management, facilitating a consensus and aptitude in innovation and creativity.

<b>Types of skills</b>	<b>General skills</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Cognitive skills	Managing Defining	– Knowing how to manage the organization – Defining long-term objectives and strategies – Managing projects and adapting to the environment
Technical skills	Organizing Deciding	– Working in a team – Motivating people and bringing them together – Leading projects and meetings
Social skills	Negotiating Innovating	– Managing and anticipating difficult situations – Demonstrating diplomacy – Facilitating a consensus and fair solutions – Being innovative and creative

## CONCLUSION

The policies of non-profits have been affected by the withdrawal of public authorities leading to major budgetary restrictions, more demanding user requests going to the highest bidder and the very significant increase in contractual procedures through tenders from regional authorities. This evolution in the distribution of public and private revenue is, from our point of view, very indicative of the commitment of non-profit organizations, to varying degrees according to the nature of their project and their sector positioning, to a process of professionalization, the full impact of which they are not all able to assess. As Chanut-Guieu specifies, the need for results is now a requirement, which contributes in particular to the professionalization of association, but also for those who are in management (2009, p. 15). Tardif Bourgoïn explains that among volunteers, this “involves a logic of skills and qualifications” (2014, p. 43), which contributes to adding nuance to an image too often wrongly judged as amateurish (Ferrand-Bechmann, *Ibid.*, p. 76).

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