The Paradox of Employee–Volunteer Interchangeability in a Supported Social Enterprise

Kunle Akingbola – Lakehead University
Suwimon Phaetthayanan – University of Toronto

This research examines the paradox of employee–volunteer interchangeability as a core resource in a nonprofit social enterprise organization. Specifically, the research investigates a) how the human and social capital derived from employee–volunteer interchangeability drives strategic intent, and b) how challenges associated with employee–volunteer interchangeability hinder strategic intent. The research provides insight into how employees and volunteers value outcomes that are dependent on the inherent paradox of interchangeability. The findings reveal that while employee–volunteer interchangeability can be a core resource, a social value, and a driver of competitive advantage, it can also hinder organizational strategies and growth—especially for nonprofit social enterprise organizations.

Keywords: Employee–Volunteer, Interchangeability, Paradox, Social Enterprise

Employees and volunteers are a core resource for nonprofit organizations (NPOs) (Akingbola, 2006; Barbeito, Bowman, & Applied Research and Development Institute International Inc., 1998; Light, 2003; Wright & McMahan, 2011). They collectively drive the mission, foster the values central to the vision, and help coproduce the organization's outputs. The competencies of employees and volunteers underlie the core capabilities that NPOs depend on to deliver services and advocate for social justice.

Not only do employees and volunteers collaborate to make service delivery possible, they also act as key players in the social and emotional transactions that characterize NPO services (Akingbola, Phaetthayanan, & Brown, 2015; Resnick & Menefee, 1993). Thus, many jobs in NPOs are inherently labor intensive. They involve significant interchanging between employees and volunteers. This suggests that the knowledge, skills, and behaviors of employees and volunteers cannot be substituted by investments in physical capital (Akingbola, 2013; Kim, 2005). As a result, employee–volunteer interchangeability is a core resource in the nonprofit sector.

NPOs must be uniquely positioned to deploy management practices that support employee–volunteer interchangeability in order to enhance organizational, employee, and volunteer outcomes. However, similar to other core organizational resources, the concept of employee–volunteer interchangeability is not without challenges and tensions. Indeed, although research is rich on interchangeability in general (e.g., Chum, Mook, Handy, Schugurensky, & Quarter,

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2013; Handy, Mook, & Quarter, 2008; Russell, Mook, & Handy, 2017), we know little about the interchangeability within specific nonprofit settings.

Thus, this research examines the paradox of employee–volunteer interchangeability as a primary resource for a supported social enterprise organization. Specifically, in the study, we investigate how employee–volunteer interchangeability, as a core source of human and social capital for a social enterprise, impacts the strategic intent of the organization. The focus of the research is on the benefits as well as the challenges of employee–volunteer interchangeability. The goal is to explain how the organizational outcomes of a social enterprise can be dependent on the inherent benefits and challenges of interchangeability. In other words, the goal is to examine how interchangeability serves as a determinant as well as an obstacle for an organization to add value and adapt to change.

Employee–volunteer interchangeability is characterized by the degree to which the roles and responsibilities of paid and unpaid labor are interchanged with one another (Handy et al., 2008). Within social enterprises (especially those created and supported by an NPO), this involves employees who are also volunteers of the organization. This dual role highlights the challenges of interchangeability at the organizational and individual levels. In the study, we use a human resources management (HRM) lens to illustrate how this paradox is critical to the outcomes valued by, both, employees and volunteers.

Theoretical Background

Paradox underlies the reality of organizations. It is characterized by the need for an organization to make a decision or address a tension on a continuum between two or more competing, contradictory, interdependent or countervailing demands or positions at the same time (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016). Smith and Lewis (2011) define paradox as "contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time; such elements seem logical when considered in isolation, but irrational, inconsistent and absurd when juxtaposed" (p. 387).

Tensions, or opposites, are fundamental features of paradox in that they often represent the extremes on a continuum that management must base their decisions on (Clegg, da Cunha, & e Cunha, 2002, p. 485). Although tensions can be considered problems that organizations must resolve, scholars have suggested that tensions are embedded and inherent in organizations (Putnam et al., 2016; Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016). Thus, understanding and adopting a paradox framework can enhance organizational outcomes and effectiveness (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2010; Gebert, Boerner, & Kearney, 2010; Schmitt & Raisch, 2013). How organizations manage competing or contradictory demands, especially those that combine advantages and disadvantages, could be the difference between survival, sustainability, and growth (Lewis, Andriopoulos, & Smith, 2014; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

To explain paradox, Bowers (2017) emphasized the role of time and difference between logical and social paradoxes. Logical paradoxes can be found in timeless abstract thought, while social paradoxes are the product of real world interactions that are subject to constraints and often vague (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Ford and Backoff (1988) defined social paradox as "some 'thing' constructed by individuals when oppositional tendencies are brought into recognizable proximity through reflection or interaction" (p. 89). Paradox is embedded in the tensions that evolve through processes of interaction between individual actors and organizational systems. In other words, the structures, processes, and relationships in the internal and external environment (including values and contradictions) are sources of tension that characterize paradox (Bowers, 2017; Putnam et al., 2016; Schad et al., 2016).

Organizations must, therefore, be able to understand and implement strategies to manage the tensions that constitute a paradox. Tensions can be, both, salient and latent in organizational environments. Salient tensions are the products of basic interactions between organizational actors (e.g., employees, volunteers and community partners). This type of tension is fundamental and obvious because of the divergent interests of actors (Bowers, 2017; Lewis et al., 2014; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Latent tensions are characterized by the "contradictory yet interrelated elements embedded in organizing processes that persist because of organizational complexity and adaptation" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 389). These types of tensions are built into the systems and processes that help organizations deliver value, adapt to change, and survive (Bowers, 2017). Importantly, latent tensions are not easily perceived until organizational actors experience and highlight them, especially as a result of the challenges in the environment (Lewis et al., 2014; Smith & Lewis, 2011). This is how latent tensions become salient.

The complex, competitive, and fast-paced environment of organizations underscores why scholars find nonlinear frameworks, such as paradox, to be particularly relevant for explaining the contradictory and interdependent interactions of tensions that abound in organizational life. Paradox has been used to explain tensions in HRM (e.g., Aust, Brandl, & Keegan, 2015), social responsibility and sustainability (e.g., Hahn, Preuss, Pinkse, & Figge, 2014), hybrid organizing (e.g., Jay, 2013), change management (e.g., Raisch, Birkinshaw, Probst, & Tushman, 2009), innovation (e.g., Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2010; Smith, 2014), and flexible work arrangements (e.g., Putnam, Myers, & Gailliard, 2014). Although the varied and increasing application of paradox in management research points to a new perspective, paradox theory has rarely been applied in nonprofit management research.

Nonprofit Paradox

The characteristics of NPOs imply that paradox is inherent in the environment. The mission of NPOs and their values as well as their relationships with the community, funders, and government are all distinctly and inherently embedded in paradox (Chau & Huysentruyt, 2006; Chetkovich & Frumkin, 2003; DiMaggio & Anheier, 1990). The contradictory but interrelated tensions that characterize paradox are, therefore, fundamental elements of nonprofit management and governance. NPO managers constantly seek to balance paradox in order to drive organizational goals and strategy.

For example, NPOs continuously play a balancing act to manage the paradox in their relationship with government (Akingbola, 2004; Blau & Scott, 2003; Guo & Acar, 2005; Lipsky & Smith, 1993; Salamon, 1987; Salamon, 1995). On one end of the paradox continuum, government is simply a partner to NPOs in the delivery of public goods and services (Besel, Williams, & Klak, 2011; Lipsky & Smith, 1993). This partnership is characterized by cooperation between the two sectors based on mutuality and shared values. On the other end of the paradox continuum, however, NPOs operate in a resource dependent relationship with government. At this end, NPO managers adopt innovative adaptive strategies to drive organizational effectiveness through their relationship with government (Cunningham, 2010). Thus, they must balance the tension between contradictory and interdependent elements (Battilana et al., 2015).

Perhaps the most inherent paradox in NPOs is employee–volunteer interchangeability. Russell, Mook, and Handy (2017) define "interchangeability of labor" in NPOs as "the extent to which NPOs exchange paid and unpaid labor in their workforce" (p. 273). The contradiction, interdependence, and tension embedded in interchangeability falls on the continuum of NPO paradox.

At one end of the paradox continuum, interchangeability means a rich pool of human capital that NPOs can draw on to achieve their organizational goals. The knowledge and skills of employees and volunteers enhances the pool of competencies that the organization is able to deploy in order to facilitate coproduction of organizational output (Handy et al., 2008; Hartenian, 2007; Liao-Troth, 2001). The diverse human capital that these organizations have enhances their ability to adapt to change.

Primarily, interchangeability is twofold, substitution and complement. Volunteers are often deployed as a substitute for employees when there are financial constraints and/or when there is a shortage of paid staff (Handy et al., 2008). There are several factors that underlie a NPOs decision to hire paid employees in the place of volunteers. If an NPO has a new source of funding or revenue to professionalize its operations, for example, it may hire personnel. Additionally, if there are certain funder requirements (Akingbola, 2004; Handy et al., 2008; Smith & Lipsky, 2009) or if there are administrative needs that only paid employees can fulfill (Salamon, 1995; Smith & Lipsky, 2009), NPOs may hire paid staff.

Paid employees often help facilitate an NPOs mission and organizational strategies in many instances (Chum et al., 2013). The complement form of interchangeability is likely to be a value-add, where volunteers are deployed to provide additional support for employees (Brudney, 1990; Brudney & Gazley, 2002). Handy et al. (2008) found evidence of task interchangeability between volunteers and employees, but mainly this interchangeability was for generic tasks (e.g., customer service) rather than specialized tasks (e.g., technical or clinical roles). Likewise, Chum et al. (2013) surveyed 836 NPOs with mixed workforces in Canada and found that the interchange of tasks was widespread, but to varying degrees.

On the other hand, interchangeability can also be a challenge for strategy and employee morale in NPOs (Akingbola, 2006; Handy & Brudney, 2007). Indeed, it can contribute to conflict in the organization. The challenges of interchangeability can be attributed to different factors. For one, although the human capital that NPOs derive from volunteer labor is critical to the organization, the competencies available to NPOs through volunteer human capital are not always predictable nor consistent over time. Thus, it can be a challenge for an NPO to develop and implement a strategy based on the competencies of volunteers only.

Additionally, many NPOs use participatory decision-making models. This type of decision-making includes volunteers, clients, and the community (Akingbola, 2015). Thus, volunteers have a role in the development of organizational strategies, policies, and practices. This can be challenging because volunteers may not understand the operational issues, opportunities, and external factors in the NPOs environment.

Interchangeability can also threaten employee motivation and morale (Akingbola, 2006; Handy & Brudney, 2007). Due to increased professionalization in response to changes in funding (Akingbola, 2004; Leete, 2006), employees who have jobs that are not specialized are more likely to be interchanged with volunteers, while those with more specialized jobs are less likely to experience interchange. Non-specialized employees may, therefore, feel threatened in their job security. Thus, these employees may develop a tense working relationship with volunteers. They may also experience low morale due to potential replacement by volunteers.

Different employee groups may also have different management practices that develop in order to align employee behavior with organizational strategies. As a result, human resource (HR) practices may emerge that ensure employees act in the organization's best interest—especially for those employees whose skills are not interchangeable with volunteers. In other words, HR practices may target employees who are deemed to be more critical to the competitiveness of the NPO based on interchangeability. Ultimately, this may contribute to job dissatisfaction and low employee morale (Howe & McDonald, 2001).

Research has also shown that volunteers can experience tensions (e.g., competition and antagonism) as a result of interchangeability. Mook et al. (2014), for instance, found that volunteers felt it was unfair when they were replaced by paid staff. However, they also felt it was unfair when *they* replaced paid staff. Other research has also suggested that volunteers can feel disempowered by a NPOs professionalization and bureaucratization, especially when resulting fromd interchangeability with paid staff (Milligan & Fyfe, 2005).

Interchangeability is, thus, the nexus of the partnership between employees and volunteers in NPOs. It is an important factor that shapes the HR practices NPOs use to attract, engage, and retain volunteers and employees. However, interchangeability is an inherent paradox that NPO managers must continuously address in order to balance its benefits and challenges.

Understanding and managing paradox is critical to the formulation and implementation of NPO strategy, especially when that strategy is developed to adapt to change in the external environment (e.g., funding, government policy, and competition). It is also important to develop the competencies to manage paradox by enhancing the motivation and engagement of employees and volunteers. Therefore, in the present study, we examine how a social enterprise established and supported by an NPO, Betrust (a pseudonym organization), pursues its strategic intent in the face of employee–volunteer interchangeability. Specifically, we examine how employee–volunteer interchangeability acts as, both, a key driver of as well as a challenge facing the organization's strategy. Finally, we provide insight into the paradox of nonprofit HRM practices in terms of employee–volunteer interchangeability.

About Betrust

Betrust is a Canadian supported social enterprise that was founded in the 1980s by consumers and survivors of the mental health system. This is a label commonly used in Canada to refer to people with psychiatric disabilities who have been treated in mental health institutions (O'Hagan, McKee, & Priest 2009). A supported social enterprise is a market-based entity that is established by an NPO for the purpose of providing economic and social benefits for persons along social margins who are employed in or trained through the enterprise (Quarter, Ryan & Chan, 2015). These are essentially hybrid organizations with market operations driven by a social mission.

Betrust was established as an NPO to provide a supportive workplace where employees with mental health challenges would be empowered (Shragge, Church, Fontan, & Lachance, 1999). This supportive workplace is characterized by an emphasis on health and flexible HR practices. Betrust's mission is to create work opportunities where consumers and survivors, as employees, can be held accountable and function independently.

Betrust emphasizes and promotes social and environmental values. As a business, Betrust provides environmentally friendly local courier services. They deliver documents and small packages on foot and using public transit. Deliveries outside of Betrust's service area are offered by a larger courier company.

Betrust emerged as a result of grassroots advocacy efforts by consumers and survivors in the 1970s. These grassroots initiatives marked the unofficial starting point of the government supported consumer- and survivor-led social enterprise. The organization's start-up funding was primarily provided by government through a program designed to provide training and employment for consumers and survivors of the mental health system.

Since Betrust generates additional revenue from fees for courier services, they have hired 57 employees. Of these 57 employees, seven (12%) are female. The average age of employees is 53. Sixty-three percent of Betrust's employees have some form of higher education. Eight of

the employees are categorized as management (inclusive of the executive director). In addition, there are 35 couriers who work part-time and 14 non-management office staff.

At the time of this study, the greatest challenge facing Betrust was a decision about the organization's strategic intent and how to adapt to change in its external environment. There were three options that the organization was considering. First, Betrust could remain focused on its current strategy and continue providing benefits for current staff. Second, the organization could develop and implement a diversification strategy that leveraged its resources to reach new markets and attain improved business goals. The diversification strategy could help more staff (i.e., consumers and survivors) in the mental health system transition to mainstream employment options. Lastly, the organization could implement a blended strategy that incorporated elements of both of these strategic options.

A member of Betrust's board of directors summarized the organization's need for renewed strategic intent as follows, *"We are looking at new activities, so we look at what is being suggested and raise questions and issues, which is our responsibility as board members."* Ultimately, the question about the organization's strategic intent was a major issue that had been brewing for several years.

Data and Method

This study adopts a longitudinal community-based research approach (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998). This approach brings together a number of research partners (e.g., management staff, volunteers, employees, university faculty, and graduate students). Using this community-based research approach, the researcher and community partners shared decision-making power and ownership to co-create research, knowledge, and learning (Castleden, Morgan, & Lamb, 2012). This type of approach is mutually beneficial to the researchers and community partners.

After brainstorming issues of concern in the organization's external environment, critical issues relating to supported social enterprises and the organization's interactions with government were identified. The research partners then outlined the research process. This included identifying employees and volunteers as the primary stakeholders. This process informed the decision to focus the study mainly on employees and volunteers. It also provided the basis for the data collection and study design. The brainstorming also informed the need to adopt a qualitative research approach to provide in-depth and valuable insight on interchangeability in the organization (Creswell, 1998).

Data collection included semi-structured in-depth interviews with 30 employees (53% of the total number of employees), two board members, and one community partner (Borg & Gall, 1989). The average length of service at the organization was 10.24 years (SD=7.92 years). Tables 1 and 2 show demographic information and descriptive statistics of participants.

To ensure reliability, two waves of interview data were collected between 2012–2015. Purposive sampling was used to select respondents among employees and other stakeholder groups (e.g., members of the board of directors, customers, and community partners). Key informant interviews (Gilchrest & Williams, 1992) were utilized to ensure that the context and experience of employees was captured. The interviews were conducted using a narrative approach (Polkinghorne, 1988) drawing on the backgrounds and experiences of the employees.

The interview questions were intended to uncover the human and social capital benefits and challenges that employees experienced. This meant asking about demographic information and work experiences. Also included in the interviews were questions on mental health,

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (*n*=30)

Characteristics	*n*	%
Gender		
Male	24	80.0
Female	6	20.0
Education		
High School and Under	9	30.0
Two-year College	9	30.0
Bachelors	6	20.0
Three-year College	3	10.0
Some College	1	3.3
Masters and Higher	1	3.3
Other	1	3.3
Mental Health Survivor	30	100.0
Position at Betrust		
Courier Only	14	46.7
Both Courier and Office	8	26.7
Office Staff Only	6	20.0
Management Only	2	6.7

employment, and standard of living. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Interviews were conducted by members of the research team. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

During data collection, the research team reviewed data on an ongoing basis to identify emerging themes. As necessary, the interview protocol was revised to incorporate data on emergent themes. The analysis of the interview data involved an extensive review of transcripts as well as secondary data (e.g., annual reports, internal communication, policies, and strategic plans).

Specifically, the analysis process proceeded as follows: first, the entire interview text was combed for descriptive categories. These categories were then reviewed to highlight themes consistent with the theoretical foundation of the research (Orton, 1997). Next, the interviews and secondary data were entered into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software. Using this software, these data were coded and analyzed to further uncover relevant themes.

Coding was based on insights related to organizational themes emphasized in the interviews. The emergent organizational themes were coded and key insights that connected them to the research themes were coded as sub-themes. The results focus on organizational themes from the data that are relevant to understanding the paradox of employee–volunteer interchangeability. This includes the implications for the organization's strategic intent as well as for employees. The relevant organizational themes identified were mission, strategy, HRM, motivation and retention, work outcomes, social outcomes, business outcomes, role of employees, and external stakeholder perspectives.

Results

The core objective of this research was to examine the paradox of employee–volunteer interchangeability through the HR practices of a social enterprise created and supported by an NPO. The interviews and the secondary data analyzed in this study provide insight into how managers and employees deal with this paradox. The findings are presented in terms of the sub-themes that are central to the organizational themes presented above, especially their

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Participants (*n*=30)

Characteristics	*n*	Mean	Min.	Max.	Standard Deviation
Age	28	53.93	36	72	9.13
Length of Service	30	10.24	0.58	27	7.92

Note: Two individuals did not provide their age.

impacts on the strategic intent of Betrust. These sub-themes are context, root of paradox, benefits of interchangeability, and challenges of interchangeability.

Context of Paradox: Mission

Interdependence, contradiction, and tensions are firmly rooted in Betrust's mission. Specifically, respondents explained that Betrust's mission, which is to create long-term employment opportunities for consumers and survivors of the mental health system, is paramount to shaping the organization's business strategy. Underlying the mission-related tensions is the role of government. Since ninety percent of Betrust's business revenue is used to pay for employees' commission and benefits, the ability to generate revenue and the stability of government grants creates tensions regarding the sustainability of Betrust's mission. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that respondents highlighted that the mission made the organization important to its stakeholders. As one respondent noted,

> *Back then people wanted to prove that 'these people' were not unemployable, that they could work, and you know many of them were told…that they'd never work again, and I think they wanted to say, 'You know, that's wrong. We'll start our own business and we'll provide a good service, reliable to customers,' and it's been going for 24 years. (Respondent P)*

Respondents also noted that HR practices were established based on the mission. The importance of mission in establishing HR practices was evident in the engagement of employees as the core stakeholders of the organization. Specifically, respondents linked Betrust's mission to its organizational culture—that is, a work environment characterized by empowerment and independence of employees. Importantly, respondents identified mission as the primary source of the interchangeability paradox. One respondent noted that the needs of the employees, who are also the majority of volunteers, should drive the strategic intent of the organization.

Root of Paradox: Strategic Intent

In addition to mission, respondents noted that paradox is evidenced by Betrust's strategic intent. They explained that this paradox is embedded in employee–volunteer interchangeability. Betrust's business strategy emphasizes differentiation based on a social enterprise model and the ability to combine quality service with operational flexibility. Respondents indicated that they wanted the organization to deliver more value to employees and be more efficient in their efforts for growth. However, they reiterated the critical nature of Betrust's primary objective, which is to provide employment for consumers and survivors of the mental health system. Indeed, they noted that the organization's supportive environment and its peer support model helps those who have mental illness. Without the existence of Betrust, and similar organizations, many of these individuals would otherwise have no job. One respondent specifically indicated that,

Figure 1. Major Paradoxes and Themes of Employee–Volunteer (E-V) Interchangeability
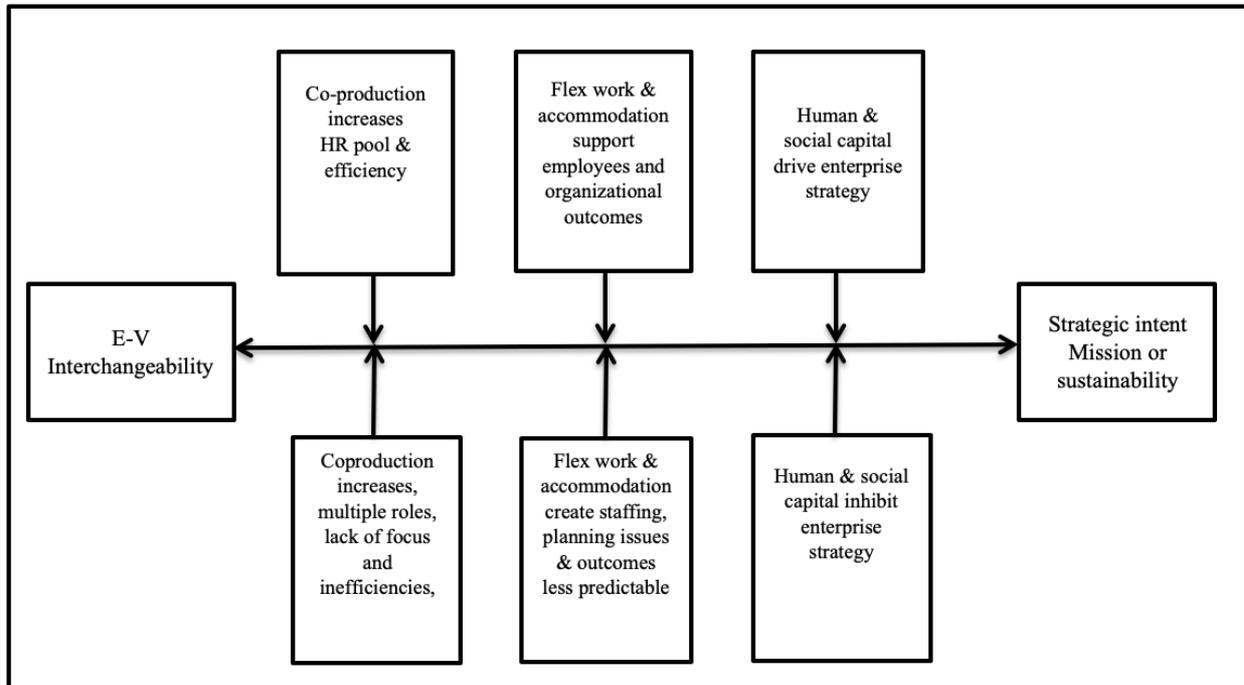
> *Places like Betrust are the biggest thing for everybody in that you come into it cold and all of a sudden you're a part of a group of 50 to 70 people who are totally open and out about their mental health challenges and what's happened to them and that alone is so…freeing! There's nowhere else you can do that…so you need to build on [that]. That already gives people a sense of, 'Wow, like I belong! It's okay. I don't care what your label is. What do you need to do your job?'…I think that's the huge difference. (Respondent L)*

Still, respondents explained that the business environment (particularly competition, the organization's courier operations, and low compensation) had limitations. Specifically, respondents noted that the organization's method of courier delivery had limited volume, lower speed, and fewer locations where it could make deliveries. The prices that they charged for services were also limited to low-cost service fees. These fees helped the organization remain competitive in the courier market. Some respondents, however, wanted Betrust to increase employee compensation rates despite the need to keep fees low. Other respondents noted that the organization could not afford to increase fees without losing customers.

> *We're still in a position where we're doing a lot of the jobs that other people don't do, and we're doing a lot of the entry-level things and we're having to charge a lot lower rates for our services than other companies that would do the same thing in order to compete with other companies who don't have this stigma attached to them. (Respondent H)*

The issue of strategic intent was discussed by, both, managers and board members. They wanted Betrust to chart a new strategic course. However, there were divergent opinions about

which strategic goals or what strategic direction the organization should pursue. Should the organization diversify its goals in order to support more consumers and survivors? Or, should the organization implement a strategy that would benefit only current employees and stakeholders. Some respondents suggested that Betrust could combine the two. This would allow the organization to diversify and help more consumers and survivors, while also increasing opportunities and compensation available to current employees.

Regardless of which strategy the organization pursued, however, respondents agreed that Betrust would need to rely on core organizational resources in order to achieve any goal. These resources are summarized in Figure 1 and further highlighted in our findings regarding the major paradoxes of interchangeability, which include context and root of paradox (discussed above) and benefits of interchangeability and challenges of interchangeability (discussed below).

Paradox: Benefits of Interchangeability

Employee–volunteer interchangeability was also central to Betrust's operations, cost effectiveness, and outcomes. Specifically, respondents highlighted relevant interrelated aspects of the values that underlie HR practices and the human and social capital that derived from employee–volunteer interchangeability. These aspects were critical drivers of Betrust's strategic intent.

Coproduction. Employees coproduced support, management, and governance functions with volunteers at Betrust. There were substitutions of roles between volunteers and employees, which often involved the same people. Sometimes coproduction also occurred with other social enterprises.

Betrust did not have a formal recruitment plan for volunteers to coproduce except to serve as members on the board of directors. Coproduction, in this instance, was seamless and integrated between employee and volunteer roles. For example, an employee who had completed their task as a courier or in the office could continue to work in other roles as a volunteer. Labor productivity did not influence interchangeability as employees and volunteers worked in different roles. Thus, respondents indicated that the substitution of volunteers with employees did not have a particularly adverse effect on employee relations or job satisfaction because they had job security.

Respondents also indicated that task interchangeability typically involved the same employees informally volunteering their time outside of their paid hours. Many of the respondents contended that interchangeability meant more opportunity for coproduction because the employees helped out as volunteers after their work shift. For example, one accounting software partner spent extra time outside his paid work to teach employees computer skills. He also assisted with information technology issues, as needed.

Flexible Work. A key component of Betrust's HR practice is flexible work. Respondents indicated that flexible work means employees can come and go as their health, and other conditions, permit. Employees who worked as couriers could work one of three shifts in a day. Those with medical conditions could choose to start later in the day, if needed. On average, couriers worked two to three shifts each week. Because of these flexible hours, Betrust's same-day delivery cutoff time was sometimes late into the evening.

There were drawbacks to this flexible work design. Respondents explained that since courier order volume was unpredictable, it was difficult to plan for staffing. And, while an oversupply of labor may not be harmful to business operations, the couriers found it to be frustrating.

Employee Accommodations. HRM at Betrust was employee focused. Respondents felt that Betrust's work environment was supportive because the organization provided work accommodations for their mental health. With flexible work, unpaid sick leave, informal counselling, understanding of mental health, equipment, and mobility assistance, employees felt that Betrust provided accommodating and supportive work conditions. Ultimately, respondents indicated that they felt good about themselves. They explained that they had gained self-esteem and self-confidence from having a job. They also pointed to the role of the job in reducing stigmatization of mental illness and their ability to self-regulate.

> *You are recognized as a community member. You're not just, like, a patient. Or you're not just going...into a counselling agency. You feel like an actual valued member of the community. You are more integrated...that's not the first thing when we say, we, um, we're a courier for Betrust. We have a mental illness...We are an employee. (Respondent W)*

Human Capital. Respondents emphasized that Betrust had enhanced their knowledge and skills. The majority of respondents indicated that by working at Betrust they had gained new skills, both, as employees and volunteers. These skills related to governance, funding administration, and literacy. Respondents also indicated that they had acquired practical skills such as management, health and safety, peer support, and those relating to being social. Most of this learning was acquired in training programs and through informal learning opportunities such as coaching and mentoring. Discussions held in meetings also provided opportunities for informal learning.

Employees were given opportunities to work in technical roles in the organization, mostly as a replacement for colleagues who were on leave. Some employees noted that although they had gained specific skills prior to joining Betrust they only had the chance to use those skills while working at Betrust.

> *Getting the new position worked out perfectly because I took advertising in college. So, yeah, it fits like a glove....it's one thing, one of the reasons why I had anxiety and depression...because I wasn't really following what I did in college, and thanks to Betrust now, I can say...it made my education worth it. (Employee M)*

The data also show that interchangeability is important at the governance level. There were 13 board members of Betrust, and half of them were employees. The employees were encouraged to participate in order to learn new skills and offer relevant feedback at the monthly board meetings. The board discussed the direction of the social enterprise, its policies, and bylaws.

Employee–volunteer interchangeability provided greater opportunities for employees to learn about management of the organization. Indeed, interchangeability allowed them to gain and contribute their knowledge and skills in ways that helped shape the policies and strategies that the organization pursued. Thus, respondents noted that the organization's processes and activities enabled them to develop specific skills and knowledge.

Social Capital. Respondents also highlighted the value and importance of the relationships and connections that employees were able to access. For many employees, Betrust provided peer support and a community not only for their work roles but also for building networks that allowed them to collaborate in handling mental health crises. Specifically, respondents

indicated that many of the organization's partners had helped them establish connections. The employees, therefore, viewed Betrust as a supportive community.

As one employee stated, "*They talk about the Betrust family, and there is a very strong sense of that being part of something bigger than themselves*" (Respondent L). Similarly, another employee indicated that, "*It's a real community here. I mean, people have said…when you've taken a leave of absence…people say, 'Well, we miss you! Come back and join the Betrust family!'* (Respondent M).

In this regard, then, Betrust is a primary source of social capital for employees. Through Betrust, employees are able to build and extend their social networks. Many of the them even indicated that opportunities to build social capital occurred outside of their paid work. This included during their shifts when they had no delivery orders or other formal social gatherings organized by Betrust to attend.

Paradox: Challenges of Interchangeability

Although most of the respondents highlighted the benefits of employee–volunteer interchangeability, they also emphasized the centrality of employees to the strategic intent, and ultimately the mission, of Betrust. This centrality served as the basis for one of the most salient paradoxes. Respondents indicated that employee–volunteer interchangeability meant by-law mandated roles in governance, advocacy, and on committees.

Coproduction. Many respondents noted that Betrust offered relatively stable job security and had a high rate of employee retention. They explained, however, that since there was rarely employee turnover there were no immediate needs to recruit new employees. This directly impacted the opportunities they had available to take on additional employee and volunteer roles.

Respondents also indicated that the multiple roles that were currently interchangeable meant that employees were often juggling several jobs at once. This made the organization susceptible to workload imbalance issues. These issues could eventually lead to the inability of employees to focus on their main job task. It could also create challenges in the implementation of new projects. Some of the respondents, thus, explained that they were stressed and anxious by any changes that required new learning and/or adaptation. The quote below highlights how managing the mental health of employees and volunteers, some felt, was a significant enough challenge without adding workload issues and the stress of organizational change,

> *If you have a short-term memory problem, you can't take a large number of instructions. You have to go over them and over them, which drives most employers crazy. [This] sometimes makes my job quite stressful…because I have dyslexia. Some of the instructions, some of the addresses get reversed. So, whenever I take an order, I have to read it back to dispatch, and they find it frustrating sometimes because, for some couriers, they can just rhyme it off and do it. I can't. (Respondent H)*

Some respondents, therefore, considered aspects of coproduction that characterized interchangeability (such as an increase in the HR pool, efficiency, flex work and related accommodations, and human and social capital) to be challenges. Consequently, they indicated that more coproduction would likely inhibit the organization's strategies.

Flexible Work. Although most employees acknowledged that flexible work practices allowed them to keep their job, these practices also posed challenges for staffing and planning. Some respondents noted that flexible work added to the organization's already low predictability in terms of operations. They explained that since there was a flexible work policy, absenteeism was high. Employees would call-in sick without explanation or penalty. An employee could decide, for instance, not to come to work due to the weather or an employee could decide to go on leave for a long time. Respondents noted, however, that they understood the challenges for an organization like Betrust that wanted to create a supportive work environment.

Human Capital. Respondents noted that human capital was the utmost benefit as well as the utmost challenge for employees and for the organization. For most employees, although they experienced significant opportunities to upgrade their skills, the paradox of interchangeability meant deskilling and skill mismatch were also a typical experience. There was variation in employees' level of education and experience. Their skill level ranged from low to high. However, the majority of the jobs at Betrust were in low skilled areas. One manager noted that she, at times, felt uncomfortable in her role because of the mismatch between employees' education and skill level.

> *Interviewing people to...work as a courier—that's the entry position. And to sit there and have to show them an example of what they will make...it's really quite embarrassing. We interviewed two people recently...a lot of people here have skills and university degrees and work experience in very high-powered jobs. [But] their mental health didn't fit in in that environment. (Respondent M)*

Some respondents, therefore, indicated that regardless of their skills, they had limited opportunity to progress in their current role with the organization. One employee stated,

> *Another disadvantage would be that in terms of...long-term career growth...I have to say, personally, I would like to work in the office, but...it's...maybe a two or three-tier system, where there's the couriers, there's the receptionists, and the dispatchers; and, then there are the people behind the scenes. And so, it seems like...there's only so much room for advancement (Respondent B).*

This challenge was present for employees in different ways. Some employees felt that they lacked the self-confidence to use skills that they had acquired (e.g., decision-making and supervisory skills). Other employees expressed concerns that human capital aspects of the organization indirectly contributed to their stress. For example, some managers felt overwhelmed by their responsibility to mentor employees. As one manager noted, overseeing several people with mental health challenges is itself a challenge. In this sense, Betrust struggles to provide employees with adequate support to acquire and use the human capital underlying their mission.

Social Capital. Although not a major issue, some respondents highlighted issues relating to social capital outcomes. They explained that the most unique aspect of the organization's culture was an emphasis on peer support and openness about mental health. However, employees pointed out that Betrust also emphasized a system of performance that required them to continuously balance their social capital needs with their need to maintain their own independence. Specifically, employees noted that the supportive work environment, at times, created dependency. Although the collaborative peer support culture enabled employees to

build their confidence and self-esteem, too much handholding negatively impacted their performance.

More importantly, some respondents pointed out that the role and influence of employees on the board of directors could be an indirect challenge to the strategic intent of the organization. The board provides governance and oversight on major organizational decisions, programs, and initiatives. According to one member of the board, *"We ensure that the policies and practices established for the functioning, the personnel, the finances, and so on are properly done; and, then we trust the administration to carry it out."*

Some employees, however, were thought to be advocating to the board for protection of their collective interests. As indicated by one board member, some employees emphasized the need to provide support to current employees rather than invest in strategies that diversified the organization's services.

Ultimately, respondents explained that while many challenges may not be obvious, they are embedded in the same system and processes that work to benefit employees. They contended that their roles and the opportunities available as a result of employee–volunteer interchangeability were not only organizational benefits, but also core sources of organizational tensions. Specifically, respondents noted that while employee–volunteer interchangeability enhanced coproduction outcomes, flexible work arrangements, human capital, and social capital (thus, allowing the organization to achieve its mission), it also created challenges for the organization in achieving its mission. Thus, resulting in an interchangeability paradox.

Discussion

This research adopted a paradox perspective to examine employee–volunteer interchangeability in an NPO supported social enterprise organization. The key objective of the research was to examine how values that underlie the human and social capital benefits derived from employee–volunteer interchangeability can act as, both, critical drivers of and barriers to an organization's strategic intent. Although previous research has emphasized different dimensions of employee–volunteer interchangeability (e.g., Chum et al., 2013; Handy et al., 2008), questions remain about the paradox embedded within it. In this study, we identified five factors, each described below, that underlie the paradox of employee–volunteer interchangeability in an NPO supported social enterprise.

First, our findings suggest that the context of a social enterprise, particularly its mission, is one explanation for the inherent nature of paradox resulting from employee–volunteer interchangeability. The organization in this study, Betrust, was established to achieve a social mission (Drucker, 1992; Quarter, 1992). However, this mission was nuanced and different stakeholders had different ideas about how to achieve and sustain the mission. Questions about the focus of a social enterprise's mission (especially in the face of challenges), can create a context ripe for paradox. Divergent ideas can lead to contradiction, competing demands, and tensions (Smith and Lewis, 2011). This will inevitably be reflected in the organization's operations and processes.

Second, our findings suggest that the nature of paradox can change. Initially, Betrust had to balance the contradictions and tensions in interactions with organizational actors such as employees, volunteers, and community partners. This led to one paradox. As Betrust grew, it had to contend with paradoxes stemming from partnerships with government (Akingbola, 2004; Besel et al., 2011; Guo & Acar, 2005). Managers, therefore, should recognize the need to manage multiple and competing paradoxes. For some NPOs, paradox will emerge due to tensions between value congruence and mission creep (Blau & Scott, 2003; Kim, 2005;

Weisbrod, 1998) as well as tensions between strategies that focus on growth and those that focus on social impact and community development (Akingbola, 2013; Jäger & Beyes, 2010).

Third, our findings suggest that employee–volunteer interchangeability can result in latent paradox. (Smith & Lewis, 2011). That is, it is inherent in the complexity of organizational processes. Latent tensions are characterized by the "contradictory yet interrelated elements embedded in organizing processes that persist because of organizational complexity and adaptation" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 389). These tensions are embedded in the same systems and processes that help organizations to deliver value, adapt to change, and survive (Bowers, 2017). In this study, managers at Betrust understood the practical challenges associated with scheduling employees who held, both, employee and volunteer roles. However, the fact these roles even exist created tensions.

Fourth, our findings suggest that employee–volunteer interchangeability is an important paradox to understand as organizations attempt to define their strategic intent. In this study, the challenges that led Betrust to examine its strategic intent highlighted the paradox of employee–volunteer interchangeability (Lewis et al., 2014; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Specifically, issues central to Betrust's strategic intent (e.g., the imminent threat of competition, the possibility of mission drift, and low compensation of employees who also worked as volunteers), contributed to elevated tensions of interchangeability from a latent paradox to a salient paradox.

Moreover, Betrust's values, human capital, and social capital were major factors contributing to the organization's HR paradoxes. Indeed, employees and managers, as individual actors, benefited from interchangeability in the form of flexible work, development of human capital, and social capital (Akingbola et al., 2015; Handy & Brudney, 2007; Haski-Leventhal, Hustinx, & Handy, 2011). At the organizational level, Betrust benefited from the outcomes of human and social capital obtained from interchangeability. Despite these benefits, employees and managers experienced tensions that were a direct result of the structures, processes, and relationships produced from interchangeability. These tensions, in turn, influenced (and acted as barriers to) Betrust's strategic intent.

Finally, our findings highlight an important, yet complicating, aspect of employee–volunteer interchangeability. That is, in this interchange employees and volunteers experience salient and latent paradoxes at the same time. This can create a unique challenge for the organization because management strategies used to manage latent tensions may not necessarily be able to manage salient tensions.

Conclusion

In this longitudinal case study, we sought to examine the paradox of employee–volunteer interchangeability in an NPO supported social enterprise. In the study we explored how contradictions, competing demands, and tensions associated with interchangeability impacted opportunities for employees, volunteers, and the organization.

Our findings suggest that although there can be benefits to interchangeability, organizations can also be susceptible to interchangeability-related challenges. On the one hand, there are human and social capital benefits that are derived from employee–volunteer interchangeability. These benefits can be critical drivers of an organization's strategic intent. On the other hand, however, employee–volunteer interchangeability can mean that an organization becomes susceptible to several challenges. For the organization in this study, employee–volunteer interchangeability was a major barrier that inhibited its ability to pursue its strategic intent and adapt to change in its environment.

Ultimately, though, paradox can be a source of innovation and a major driver of organizational effectiveness. NPO managers should, therefore, seek to understand and manage the paradoxes associated with interchangeability in order to effectively fulfill their mission and balance potential tensions that could derail organizational operations.

This research is not without limitations. Although the longitudinal case study design allowed us to examine the employees experience with employee–volunteer interchangeability over time, we cannot claim generalizability of our findings. However, this limitation should certainly provide a useful starting off point for future studies to do so.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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Author Biographies

Kunle Akingbola is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Business Administration at Lakehead University. His research focuses on the complex interactions that shape employee behaviour, human resources management, and change in nonprofit and healthcare organizations.

Suwimon Phaetthayanan is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Toronto.