

VOLUNTEERS  
CAST A  
BEAUTIFUL  
SHADOW



# 2013 Volunteer Recognition Study

How do Canadians want to be recognized for their volunteer contributions?

## Contents

2

Research Objectives & Methodology

3

Key Findings

4

Volunteer Engagement

6

Volunteer Recognition

7

Perceived Barriers to Volunteer Recognition

8

How organizations are currently recognizing volunteers

10

Best Practices

Volunteers want to be thanked and shown how they have made a difference – they want to know the **impact** of their contributions.

## Acknowledgements

October 2013

Research Team: Andrea Dixon and Melanie Hientz

Reviewers: Paula Speevak Sladowski and Trevor Krahn

Special thanks to all interviewees and contributors to this research

Funding for this resource was provided by Investors Group

ISBN [978-1-926530-17-8](https://doi.org/10.1371/978-1-926530-17-8)

## VOLUNTEERS CAST A BEAUTIFUL SHADOW



# Research Objectives

- To learn about best practices in volunteer recognition and determine the key drivers that lead to volunteer retention.
- To raise awareness around the importance of recognizing volunteers' efforts.
- To explore the changing volunteer landscape in Canada and its implications for volunteer engagement.

**“I volunteer to  
contribute to my  
community”**

## Methodology

- Two online surveys were launched in May 2013, designed for volunteers and non-profit organizations in Canada. In total, there were 379 responses to the surveys.
- The survey designed for volunteers sought to explore preferences around volunteer recognition, and identify links between the volunteers' motivation and their preferred recognition practices.
- The organizational survey was targeted to non-profit organizations and it sought to determine how organizations were thanking volunteers, barriers to volunteer recognition and best practices.
- 14 key informant interviews were conducted by Volunteer Canada, providing in-depth feedback on volunteer recognition practices, challenges and experiences.

VOLUNTEERS  
CAST A  
BEAUTIFUL  
SHADOW



## Key Findings

The ways people want to be recognized most are **also** the most cost-effective methods out there. This is promising news for organizations seeking effective methods of recognizing and retaining volunteers. Notably, hosting a formal banquet or dinner is one of the least preferred ways volunteers wish to be recognized. Few volunteers want to be thanked in public ways – but they do want know the impact of their contribution.

**“For me, an authentic personal thanks means more than anything else.”**

### Top two ways volunteers want to be recognized

- 80% stated that they would like to be recognized or thanked by the organization they volunteer for by hearing about how their work has made a difference.
- Close to 70% stated they would like to be recognized by being thanked in person on an ongoing, informal basis.

### Least preferred ways volunteers want to be recognized

- Volunteers indicated that their least preferred forms of recognition include banquets, formal gatherings, and public acknowledgment in newspapers, radio or television. Interestingly, these methods are common methods for many organizations, with 60% citing banquets and formal gatherings, and 50% using public acknowledgement as their recognition strategies.

### Perceived barriers to volunteer recognition

- Over 80% of organizations indicated that the most common barrier they encounter around volunteer recognition is that they do not have enough money in the budget to do what they want to do. Yet 80% of volunteers would like to be recognized by hearing the impact of their contributions.

### Expanding the concept of volunteer recognition

- Volunteers and organizations alike have identified a need to redefine perceptions of volunteer recognition – away from a once a year banquet and towards a holistic, year round practice that acknowledges volunteers for their individual contributions of supporting the communities around them.
- Organizations can expand the concept of volunteer recognition by taking time to learn about volunteers' motivations and preferences. This can be achieved by building in questionnaires to accompany the documentation organizations are already requesting for screening and administration. This information can be referenced for ongoing recognition throughout the year.
- Recognition practices can be expanded by learning about the kind of skills volunteers' would like to apply or develop and by ensuring that this is being fulfilled in their volunteer roles. Organizations can create an event that embeds training or networking opportunities with celebrations around volunteer recognition.



# Volunteer Engagement

## Motivation

The number one motivation for volunteering is to “contribute to my community,” while the second most common motivation is having the opportunity to gain or apply skills and knowledge to a volunteer task.

Organizations can recognize volunteers' efforts by communicating and highlighting the impact that they are having on their communities. They can take time to learn about their volunteers' skills, knowledge and motivations and find ways to foster or develop them. Creating more [skills-based volunteering](#) opportunities can be one way to achieve this.

## Recruitment

Almost 60% of respondents indicated that they were recruited by directly contacting an organization they were interested in about opportunities. They were proactive in their search to volunteer, and specific in their selection of an organization.

Research highlighted that for organizations seeking to reach older adults, they may find more success promoting their organization through newspaper/radio ads.

Consistent with previous research (Vézina, M., et. al. (2012) Volunteering in Canada. Canadian Social Trends. Statistics Canada.), parent involvement was cited as being influential to youth engagement, whether in setting an example through their own volunteering, or with helping to seek out opportunities.

“I wanted to understand a certain segment of society and by volunteering in that sector I learned a number of lessons and expanded by knowledge and acceptance of a different lifestyle.”

“My parents instilled the value of contributing to ones community as a responsibility for everyone by the time I was 5 years old.”





# Volunteer Engagement

## Volunteer Activities

- Volunteers indicated a preference to work directly with people who benefit from their volunteering. Additionally, many cited a desire to apply professional or technological skills, or serve on boards and committees.
- Volunteers indicated that they are less interested in manual labour, crafts, cooking or fundraising. Interestingly, data from the 2010 Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating highlighted fundraising as the most common activity volunteers are engaged in (45%).
- Volunteers indicated that more breaks, reimbursement of expenses and access to organizations' events are not important factors in how organizations could more effectively engage them.
- Volunteers prefer greater flexibility in scheduling, more feedback on the impact of their work and more opportunities to use their skills, abilities or talents in their volunteer roles.



***“I volunteer to improve life in my community for all. Seniors and children alike. Personal thanks from those I help is all the recognition I require.”***

# Volunteer Recognition

## Everyone is different...

*"I think it's critical that an organization talks with each volunteer to find out what they need in order to feel satisfied by the work they do and feel valued and appreciated for their time and efforts."*

Volunteers want recognition that is **sincere and authentic**. This was something echoed repeatedly in the research. A passing hustled thanks in the hallway versus an acknowledgement of a volunteer's contribution and impact can make a significant difference.

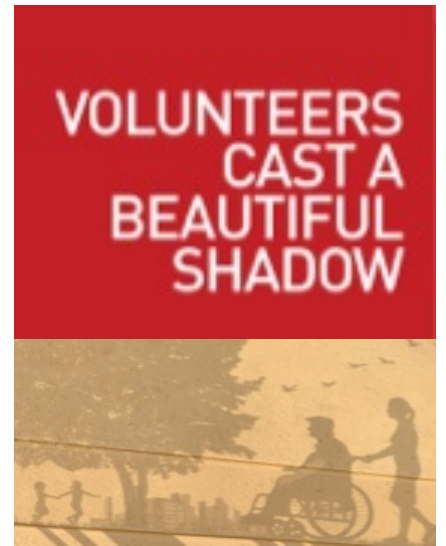
People appreciate a **personalized** thank you. Whether it is with words highlighting the impact of a volunteer's contribution to the organization or client, or a small personalized token or gift – it being sincere and customized makes a difference.



VOLUNTEERS  
CAST A  
BEAUTIFUL  
SHADOW

*"I was working at a volunteer booth...and a staff member brought me an extra large cup of Timmies coffee. She knew I loved my coffee, and it tasted even better after being there for a few hours! It helped make the rest of my shift go by quicker it seemed. All it took was a cup of coffee, a smile and a verbal-Thanks for helping out!"*

- The desire to be thanked personally on an informal basis, versus formal recognition through banquets or events, is something that also tends to increase with age. Younger people expressed a higher preference for more concrete expressions of recognition – certificates, letters of reference, small gifts and nomination for awards.
- All age groups highlighted a desire to partake in an informal group outing as a way to be recognized, highlighting the social appeal to volunteering, especially for young people. Picnics, potlucks and small get-togethers were highlighted as being a very meaningful way to recognize volunteers- something that is not costly, but that brings people together in an informal way.
- The types of recognition volunteers are NOT interested in include public forms of recognition, newspaper columns or radio ads and costly forms of recognition such as banquets, formal gatherings and small gifts. People highlighted issues they have with money being spent on thank you gifts, when they'd prefer to see it contributed directly to the organization's mission. Some people voiced a preference for recognition events to be integrated into the volunteer's time commitment to the organization, as opposed to during their weekend or evening.



## Perceived barriers to volunteer recognition

Organizations shared their perspectives around barriers to volunteer recognition through the online survey and qualitative interviews.

- Over 80% of organizations indicated that the most common barrier they encounter around volunteer recognition is that they do not have enough money in the budget to do what they want to do. This significant percentage highlights the prevalence of this concern amongst organizations across Canada. The good news is that the two types of recognition that volunteers appreciate most are not dependent on organizations' budget. Volunteers want to be thanked informally and hear about the impact of their work. Shedding light on these findings will be an important step in breaking down these perceived barriers.
- Over 50% of organizations indicated that they do not have enough time to design and run a recognition program. Understanding how volunteers wish to be recognized may enable organizations to rethink the way a recognition program could operate, and highlight the fact that it does not need to be a burden on budget or time.
- Interestingly, over 40% of organizations indicated that a lack of interest from volunteers is a barrier to their implementation of a volunteer recognition program. It is worth considering whether the perceived lack is a result of volunteers not wanting to be recognized at all, or that they simply do not wish to be recognized in the ways the organization sees fit.

*"For a small organization- a particular activity I performed had a significant impact on the staff's ability to do their own work. They each wrote on a different piece of cad stock what the activity meant to them and sent the cards to me. Cost: \$3. Value: Priceless*

*Another organization knew there was someone I would love to meet and they were thoughtful enough to invite me to an event where I would have the opportunity to meet her and provide an introduction. Cost: \$0. Value: Priceless."*

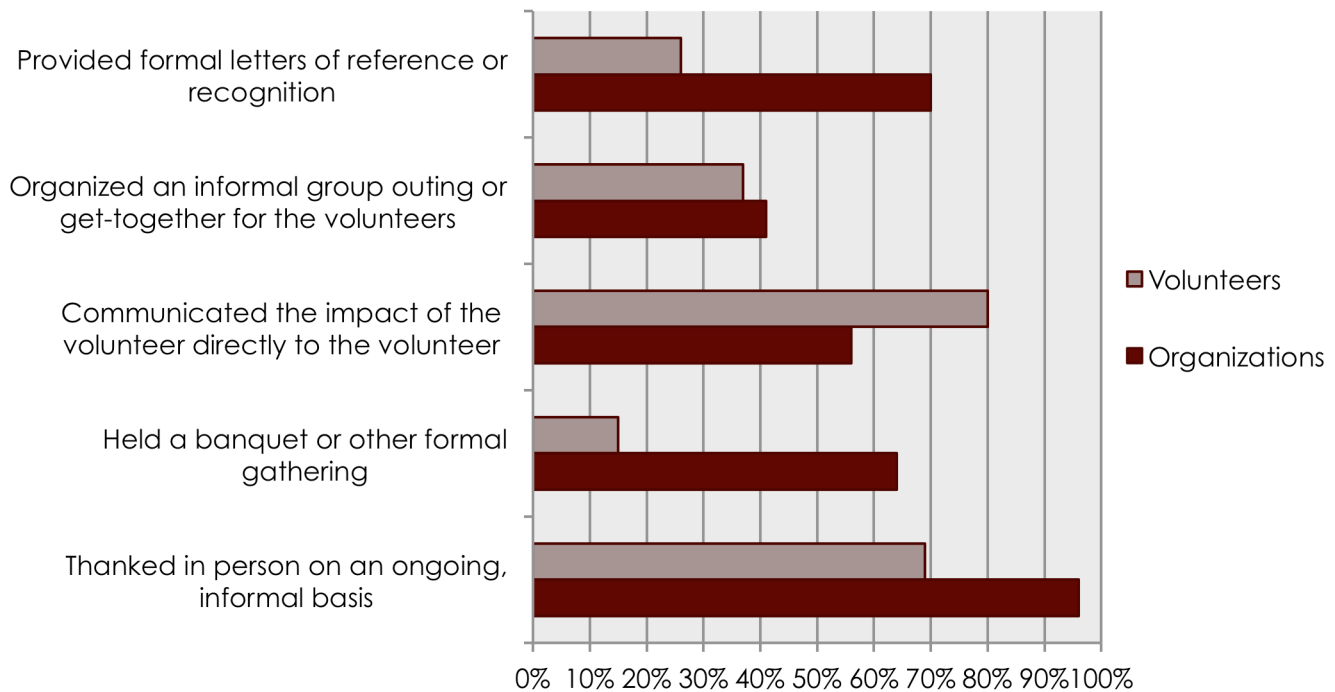




# How organizations are currently recognizing volunteers

The research highlighted gaps between how organizations are recognizing volunteers and how volunteers want to be recognized.

## Recognition practices/preferences



The most common way organizations are recognizing volunteers is by thanking them in person on an ongoing, informal basis. Great news! This is also the most popular way volunteers would like to be recognized. Over 60% are holding banquets and formal gatherings, while less than 20% of volunteers like to be recognized in this way.

## Barriers to recognition – organizational perspectives

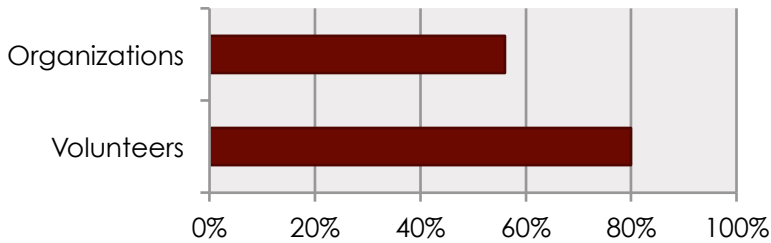
*“Money and time are always the big ones...there isn’t a lot of money for gifts, banquets, monthly recognition, swag etc...If I had more time I could find freebies, donations and organize more informal and formal events.”*





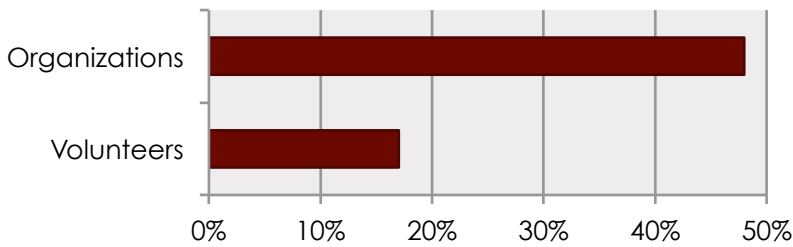
# How organizations are currently recognizing volunteers

## Communicating impact – hearing how my work has made a difference



80% of volunteers would like to be recognized by hearing the impact of their contributions, and less than 60% of organizations are currently doing this. This highlights an opportunity for organizations to focus heavily on communicating impact to volunteers.

## Public recognition of volunteers



Close to 50% of organizations are recognizing volunteers using public methods – placing thank you ads, speaking or writing about their volunteers in the media, nominating volunteers for awards- but less than 20% of volunteers want to be recognized in this manner.

Part of the reason described by organizations for publically recognizing volunteers is that it also serves to market the work they are doing regionally or nationally. Recognizing volunteers this way creates an opportunity to share stories with the public about the organization itself and the role volunteers play in achieving its mission.

40% of organizations stated that they believe they are not doing enough to recognize volunteers. 20% of volunteers believe the organization they volunteer for is not doing enough. This highlights an opportunity for organizations to reflect upon their current recognition strategy and determine if any changes could be made.

# Best Practices

VOLUNTEERS  
CAST A  
BEAUTIFUL  
SHADOW



Organizations shared their stories on best practices in recognizing volunteers:

- Recognition is not just a once a year event, it should be year round. Organizations need to move beyond the perception that volunteer recognition equates to volunteer events.
- Organizations can learn about volunteers' motivations and preferences by building in questionnaires to accompany the documentation organizations are already requesting for screening and administration. This information can be very useful for ongoing recognition throughout the year.
- Organizations can recognize volunteers by learning about their motivations and by ensuring that volunteers are meeting their desires to use or develop skills.
- Volunteer recognition is a continuum that requires a variety of initiatives. It's important to try to offer different forms of recognition (formal and informal), customized for different individuals.
- Organizations can find meaningful ways to recognize volunteers. They can create an event that embeds training or networking opportunities with celebrations around volunteer recognition.
- It is important to build strong relationships between staff and volunteers. The staff and board members should be aware of volunteers' contributions to the organization.
- Making volunteers feel welcome is an important form of recognition. Whether it is putting a volunteers' role on their name tag as opposed to simply "volunteer," soliciting feedback on how their role could be improved or offering training, there are many opportunities for organizations to create a warm and welcoming space.

***“Make volunteers an equal part of the organization... Allow volunteers to get involved with organizational changes and programs...There is a tendency, however unintentional to treat volunteers differently, and to undermine their capabilities. If they're here, respect their skills and knowledge.”***