

Executive Summary: Bridging the Gap

Enriching the volunteer experience to build a better future for our communities

How can we bridge the gap between what Canadians are looking for in volunteering today and how organizations are engaging volunteers? Conducted in the summer of 2010, a new pan-Canadian research study provides the most current national data about the changing culture of Canada's voluntary sector.

Unlike earlier surveys that emphasized overall participation rates, this new research captured what Canadians want in their volunteer experiences, their issues in finding satisfying volunteer roles, and what organizations can do to enhance their volunteer base, achieve their missions and ultimately build stronger communities.

The study conducted on behalf of Volunteer Canada by the Carleton University Centre for Voluntary Sector Research & Development in collaboration with Harris/Decima and with generous funding from Manulife Financial.

The new 2010 research gathered practical information for use by volunteer organizations to attract and retain skilled, dedicated volunteers among four specific demographic groups: youth, family, baby boomers, and employer-supported volunteers.

Identifying the Gaps

The research found there are gaps between the opportunities organizations are providing and the meaningful volunteer experience Canadians are seeking, such as:

- Many people are looking for group activities BUT few organizations have the capacity to offer them;
- Many people come with professional skills BUT many professionals are looking for volunteer tasks that involve something different from their work life;
- Organizations are expected to clearly define the roles and boundaries of volunteers BUT many volunteers want the flexibility to initiate what they have to offer (i.e., create their own volunteer opportunity);
- Many organizations want long-term commitment BUT more volunteers want shorter-term opportunities; and
- Many organizations focus on what they need BUT many volunteers come with personal goals to be met.

Common Trends Among Today's Volunteers

Some findings were unique to youth, baby boomers, families, and employer-supported volunteers, other trends apply more broadly to volunteers today, including:

- Volunteering changes throughout our lifecycle, along with evolving priorities, circumstances and interests;
- Today's volunteers are more goal-oriented, autonomous, tech-savvy and mobile;
- Volunteering is a two-way relationship that needs to meet the goals of the volunteer and the organization;
- Volunteering is personal and stems from individual preferences and motivations;
- Volunteering is a way to transfer and develop skills by gaining or sharing experiences;
- Volunteering in groups appeals to all ages for social and business networking;
- Finding satisfying volunteering is not easy for everyone.

The results also suggest the most promising opportunity to expand the volunteer base is among 'past' volunteers -- those who have volunteered before, but don't at the moment.

Trends in Volunteer-Involving Organizations

Advances in technology, shifting demographics and increased resource pressures mean today's organizations must re-evaluate all facets of their volunteer policies and practices, and ultimately embrace different approaches.



Organizations reported six common characteristics of their volunteer programs:

1. Their volunteer base tends to be younger;
2. Many of their leadership volunteers are older;
3. More new Canadians are seeking volunteer opportunities;
4. More volunteers do not necessarily want to volunteer doing what they already do all day at work;
5. Most organizations do not have the tools, training, and strategies in place to engage youth, families, baby boomers, and employer-supported volunteers, particularly using a skills-based approach; and
6. Many organizations do not have the capacity to involve groups.

Organizations Can Improve the Volunteer Experience By:

- Building meaningful relationships – get to know volunteers' unique needs & talents
- Developing integrated HR strategies – use similar approach for paid employees and volunteers
- Being flexible and accommodating – recognize volunteers' other time commitments
- Being sensitive to differences – respect volunteers' gender, culture, language and age
- Capitalize on technology options -- provide more online volunteer opportunities
- Clearly outlining the purpose of the proposed volunteer activity and how it will help people, as well as follow up by letting volunteers know the impact of the time they contributed
- Telling volunteers what they need and when they need it, but not how to do it and what time to do it

The 2010 research findings are based on a literature review of over 200 documents, a general population phone survey of 1,016 Canadian households, a survey of 551 volunteers, 18 focus groups with 236 participants in both urban and rural settings, and an online survey of 208 non-profit and voluntary organizations. All primary research was conducted in Canada.

Conclusions

The volunteer experiences individuals are looking for change significantly as Canadians move through the different stages of their lives. Organizations need to facilitate these shifts to optimize their volunteer recruitment and retention programs. This is critical for sustaining and growing an effective and vibrant voluntary sector in Canada.

Fostering meaningful volunteer engagement in Canada today is not just a capacity issue, but also a strategic one that must evolve with the trends to meet the needs of both organizations and volunteers themselves. The optimal formula to engage volunteers strikes a balance between:

- Designing specific, set roles and being open to volunteers determining the scope of what they can offer;
- Being well organized but not too bureaucratic; and
- Matching skills to the needs of the organization but not assuming that everyone wants to use the skills related to their profession, trade, or education.

In conjunction with the public and private sectors, Canada's voluntary sector is an important third pillar of Canadian society and a major contributor to our nation's world-renowned ability to build quality communities. As such, finding this balance as we aim to build a better future for our communities is essential. Ultimately, volunteering is an enriching experience both for the volunteers, as well as those who are beneficiaries of the contribution of volunteers.

As we mark 10 years since the United Nations International Year of Volunteers in 2001, applying the lessons learned from this research can help bridge the gap to more meaningful volunteer engagement, and solidify volunteerism not just as a fundamental value of a civil society but as a true act of Canadian citizenship.

For more details, please refer to the full document

'Bridging the Gap: Enriching the volunteer experience to build a better future for our communities – Highlights of a pan-Canadian research study' at www.volunteer.ca