



Case Study - Volunteer Calgary

Volunteer Calgary has supported the development of volunteerism in the city for over 50 years. Its mission is “leading, promoting, connecting and strengthening volunteerism.” **Volunteer Calgary** does this by:

- promoting the value of volunteering,
- connecting people to volunteer opportunities,
- strengthening the ability of the non-profit sector, groups and individuals to support volunteers; and
- providing leadership on issues relating to volunteerism.

Through its services and programs, **Volunteer Calgary** has enhanced the ability of more than 450 non-profit member organizations to engage volunteers and linked thousands of Calgarians with unique volunteer opportunities through its searchable database. More than 300 individuals are registered with their “board match” program. Volunteer Calgary also facilitates employee volunteering.

Their long-term vision is “see all Calgarians taking responsibility for creating a healthy and caring community by getting involved in local issues . . . [resulting in a] community [that] will reflect a warm and caring place where diversity is accepted, the basic needs of all citizens are met, and citizens routinely look out for one another.”

Noting significant changes in the demographics of the city’s population, and the pace of economic growth, **Volunteer Calgary** began to explore innovative ways to respond to these changes in 2007. The *High Skills Research Project* explored strategic volunteer engagement as a way to enhance and grow the capacity of the voluntary sector.¹ As noted in our discussion paper, research together with their own experience strongly supports that individuals want to be involved in volunteering with charitable and non-profit organisations; however, they want to use and develop their skills and experience in high-skills, non-traditional volunteer roles. “Strategic Volunteer Engagement” as **Volunteer Calgary** defined it “strives to elevate the engagement of volunteers to the strategic level such that volunteer engagement is considered as critical an input as funding and paid employees.”

The pilot project explored what high-skills volunteer engagement would look like and what factors would be associated with the successful implementation of this strategy. It was premised

¹ Unless otherwise noted, this discussion is adapted from **Strategic Volunteer Engagement**, a four-page Volunteer Calgary document as well as from a personal interview with Laurel Benson, President and CEO of Volunteer Calgary, March 23rd, 2010.

on the notion that “this approach to organizational capacity-building could be promoted as a way of addressing human resourcing issues in the voluntary sector.”

It involved 7 organizations representing a wide range of interests and that were of various sizes and at different stages in their organisational development. Based on an initial assumption that significant organisational changes would be required to support the engagement of highly-skilled volunteers, the Research Project included either the ED or CEO of the organisations as well as the managers of volunteers.

In order to enhance organisational readiness and receptiveness to highly-skilled volunteers, nine workshops were developed addressing the following:

- The Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement
- Developing Effective Policies and Procedures
- Trends in Volunteerism (presented by Linda Graff)
- Documenting Learnings/Evaluation
- High Skills Volunteer Position Design
- Developing a Recruitment Strategy
- Developing High-Skills Volunteer Training and a Parallel Strategy for Staff
- A Conversation with Colleen Kelly – Volunteer Vancouver (now *Vantage Point*)

As noted in our discussion paper, their project, which ended in October 2007, identified five important lessons learned:

1. **Essential Strategic Leadership** – The Executive Director must champion a culture and structure that supports the full integration of highly-skilled volunteers.
2. **Role and Place of the Manager of Volunteers** – Organisations need a staff manager of volunteers who is a member of the management team.
3. **Professionally Managed Volunteer Programs** - require an alignment of systems, policies and processes for paid and unpaid staff.
4. **Valuing Volunteers** – Volunteers and staff need to understand the "value" that volunteers contribute to the organization to overcome the outdated perceptions of "I am/you are just a volunteer."
5. **Readiness for an integrated human resource strategy approach** – To succeed, this approach needs to be integrated with the organisation's strategic plan.²

Based on these preliminary learnings, **Volunteer Calgary** plans to take the following steps to support the successful engagement of volunteers in high impact roles that advance the missions of individuals organisations and enhances the capacity of the sector overall:

1. **Encourage potential volunteers to engage their skills and talents in the voluntary sector through social marketing activity**
2. **Support the Advancement of the Profession of Volunteer Management**

² Adapted from “*Integrated Human Resource Strategy Learnings & Implications from the High Skills Volunteer Research Pilot Project*” available online from http://www.volunteercalgary.ab.ca/news_resources/high_skills_research.html

- 3. Engage Executive Directors, Senior Management and Board of Directors in effective volunteer engagement and encourage adoption of Integrated Human Resources**
- 4. Empower and inform volunteers to participate in designing volunteer opportunities that engage their skills and passion and increase sector capacity**
- 5. Conduct practical research by working directly with nonprofit organizations and volunteers in their efforts to become engaged and integrating this knowledge into future programs and services**

These activities are part of their 2010 – 2012 Action Plan.³

Laurel Benson, President and CEO, will participate in this pilot project as a member of the Advisory Committee. As a leading organisation, they may be involved in a greater role.

More information about Volunteer Calgary from their website: <http://www.volunteercalgary.ab.ca/>

³ Volunteer Calgary, Strategic Volunteer Engagement Action Plan 2010 – 2012.