

Building the Bridge to Employer-Supported Volunteers

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

About the Research Study

The 2010 pan-Canadian research study was a joint project commissioned by Manulife Financial in partnership with Volunteer Canada, and conducted by the Carleton University Centre for Voluntary Sector Research & Development, in collaboration with Harris/Decima.

The study involved 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 -- including 61 participants representing employer-supported volunteers -- in both urban and rural settings, and an online survey of 208 non-profit and voluntary organizations.

The research yielded 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-supporter volunteers.

How can we bridge the gap between what employer-supported volunteers (ESVs) are looking for in volunteering today and how organizations are engaging their employees who also volunteer?

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 volunteers, including information specific to employer-supported volunteers.

Unlike earlier surveys that emphasized overall participation rates, this new research captured:

- ➔ What employer-supported volunteers want in their volunteer experiences;
- ➔ The issues employer-supported volunteers have in finding satisfying volunteer roles; and
- ➔ What non-profit organizations can do to enhance the volunteer experience for employer-supported volunteers who, in turn, can help them achieve their missions and ultimately build stronger communities.

"I would be more likely to volunteer if I were recruited in, and supported by, my place of work."

"I would like to see the results of my volunteering, which would ideally consist of clearly defined tasks that are different from what I do at my everyday job."

- Workplace Focus Group Participants

The Importance of Employer-Supported Volunteers to the Canadian Voluntary Sector

The relationship between the private sector and the voluntary sector is primarily based on the concept of corporate social responsibility. How companies engage with their community has evolved from 'chequebook philanthropy' to more direct corporate community investment. More and more, businesses are supporting their employees to engage in their community in a variety of ways, including volunteering.



Common Trends Among Today's Volunteers

The research revealed the following trends, which apply broadly across the majority of today's volunteers, including employer-supported volunteers:

- **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; and
- **Finding satisfying volunteering is not easy for everyone.**

To achieve this, many companies have established Employee Volunteer Programs (EVPs), which are rooted in the philosophy that community volunteer work is also a matter of corporate concern and should be another measure of a company's social responsibility.

Formal EVPs and other forms of support for employees who wish to volunteer have been shown to have a positive impact on workforce morale, skill development, productivity, job satisfaction and employee retention.

Employees' Thoughts on Volunteering

Workers often see volunteering as a way to balance work life, learn new skills and make a contribution to a cause they care about. Volunteering is also described as a personal duty, where employees can contribute their skills and talents for a common purpose.

Today's employers are interested in seeing volunteering as a professional development activity that can help their employees achieve performance improvement objectives (such as "to improve ability to work in a team", "to develop presentation skills" etc.). This fosters a win-win situation where employees can choose a volunteer experience that is very different from their work but that also has transferable skills that can help them in their paid position.

Notably, one-day volunteer events hosted by companies are great for team-building and staff morale, while ongoing programs and special projects satisfy employees' interests in developing skills. Beyond one-day volunteer events, employer-supported volunteers can also be engaged in providing loaned-executive talent or other such 'knowledge-based' volunteer activities.

Additionally, the research participants felt companies were more apt to provide sponsorship and paid employee time to support higher profile initiatives – sport programs like the Arctic Winter Games, for example – as opposed to lower profile social issues.

Workplaces that provide employees with paid volunteer days are to be commended. However, it is essential that the necessary support is provided to help employees find suitable volunteering opportunities as well as appropriate follow-up to measure both satisfaction and impact.

Ultimately, connecting to the values of the workplace culture and what employees really care about is the key to meaningful volunteer engagement. This connection is essential, as it forms the basis for creating a broader community investment strategy, which is generally the recommended best practice.

It was also suggested that companies perceive non-profit organizations as not needing the same skilled staff as corporations; a notion that the focus group participants believed was untrue, as there are many highly trained professionals who would love to volunteer.



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Understanding the Characteristics of Employer-Supported Volunteers

To be more effective at attracting and retaining volunteers in a particular demographic, it helps to first understand their general characteristics. The key employer-supported volunteers (ESVs) characteristics are highlighted below.

- *Results-oriented* – ESVs want short-term, high-skilled volunteering opportunities
- *Measuring progress* – ESVs like to measure their efforts and know that the impact is worth the time they're contributing
- *Volunteerism as a pastime* – ESVs see volunteering as an activity distinct from work, with a clear end product
- *Flexible volunteering* – ESVs want flexibility in terms of time and space; they would like the ability to work remotely and to know the minimum hours expected for their role
- *Structured volunteering* – ESVs do not want to contribute their time to an organization that isn't structured and organized efficiently

Matching Skills for Employer-Supported Volunteers: Barriers & Opportunities

Workplace focus group participants indicated organizations would be much more effective at matching volunteers in their programs if they treated the volunteer applications in a similar way as a job application. To this end, it was recommended that organizations have volunteer job descriptions, clearly defined expectations and time frames.

A more formal application process can also help organizations identify those who are genuinely committed to those who are not. Criticisms of organizations made by workplace volunteers included gender discrimination, and experiences in which organizations required excessive proof of an individual's capabilities before entrusting them with a task.

Federal government employees experienced significant 'arm twisting' by their departments to persuade employees to participate in the workplace charitable campaign, and a focus more on financial targets to be achieved rather than the impact of the donations. This happens at the expense of creating a positive volunteering environment and taking employees' preferences and skills into account when filling volunteer roles.

Conversely, employees also felt sometimes organizations match volunteers almost exclusively with tasks they already do as part of their paid work, which not every employee desires from their volunteer experience. Although it was recognized that often small organizations will take what they can get in terms of volunteers, 'pigeon-holing' employees with a defined skill set into a similar volunteer role may mean missing out on other people who are willing to step up and take on these roles.

Other barriers to employer-supported volunteering include:

- The perception that applying for an employer-supported volunteer opportunity is a time-consuming or complex process;
- Expectations that volunteers want to commit to an extended, open-ended period instead of tasks with definable timeframes;
- Lack of recognition of volunteers' restrictions (e.g., conflicting work schedules or personal/family commitments)
- Insensitivity to issues related to diversity; and
- Inflexibility in terms of time and space, or inability to volunteer remotely.

Participants felt that both corporations and organizations that use volunteers need to be supportive of employees' volunteer activities, and that they should be flexible to accommodate volunteer work in relation to paid work. Ideally, organizations should have a volunteer coordinator in place to oversee screening, training and retention.

"There is extensive value in getting to know who people are, besides what they can offer."

- Workplace Focus Group Participant

Providing Volunteer Opportunities That Interest Employees

The research found that today's employees are most interested in volunteer opportunities:

- Where they can learn new skills, which are perceived as valuable both to the employee as well as to their company;
- Where they do not perform the same job for a volunteer organization as they do for their employer;
- With the administrative and HR support to efficiently run programs and ensure adequate follow-up to offers to volunteer;
- Where the traditional rigid hierarchies of the workplace are avoided and all volunteers are treated equally; and
- Enjoy meaningful volunteer engagement, in addition to 'one-day' company volunteer events as team-building exercises.

Examples of Employee-Friendly Volunteer Tasks

- *Activities that allow workplace volunteers to donate their time in short shifts, e.g. 'Teams of two needed every Tuesday between 3-5 p.m. to deliver meals along the North Park route for the Meals on Wheels program'*
- *Activities using workers' skills or talents for unique community support projects, e.g. 'Computer Lab in Immigrant Reception Centre needs volunteers with computer skills speaking different languages for a 3-hour shift on week-day afternoons (commitment of one shift per month required)'*

- *Activities offering the chance to transfer skills and knowledge to those seeking it, e.g. 'Mentor needed for youth volunteer looking for database development experience in a Cancer Support Centre'*

Companies Can Improve the Volunteer Experience for Employees By:

- ✓ *Promoting volunteerism in the work environment* – increase efforts to advertise and raise awareness about volunteer opportunities
- ✓ *Establishing workplace volunteer representatives* – at least in larger workplaces to support volunteering initiatives
- ✓ *Building meaningful relationships* – getting to know the individual needs and talents of employees who want to volunteer better by encouraging and mentoring them
- ✓ *Capitalizing on technology options* – providing remote or online volunteering to increase accessibility for employees with families or who travel frequently
- ✓ *Being sensitive to differences* – respecting employees' gender, culture, language and age, being careful to avoid the perception of discrimination and recognizing any unique skills they have to offer
- ✓ *Being cognizant about the time commitment required for the volunteer role* – avoiding burning out volunteers
- ✓ *Being flexible and accommodating* – recognizing that many employees have to juggle other time commitments related to their paid work, their families or personal life
- ✓ *Opening up communication between the players* – establishing a relationship between organizations that use volunteers and the companies or corporations that employ them for paid work

For more details, please refer to the report, '*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