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## **Editorial**

When the editorial team sat down last summer to brainstorm themes for the 2016 issues we did not think of how apt the theme "Going Against the Trends" would be for our own volunteer team.

The editorial team is comprised of a small group of volunteers based in Ottawa who work with volunteer representatives from across the country to decide on themes, find authors, edit submissions and publish the Journal. We work both virtually and face-to-face. We struggle to engage new volunteers in what is a responsible, long-term but fulfilling commitment.

And then there is the Journal itself. It has moved from a traditional printed publication that was mailed to subscribers, to an electronic pdf document emailed to subscribers, to its current incarnation as an online journal accessed through a user name and password. We have tried to keep current with the times, though truth be told we are always struggling to keep up as technology and common practice change so quickly.

Last summer we started musing on the three issues a year format. Is this the best approach? Should we be moving, as so many others are doing, to a one article or blog posting a month approach? We talked with some key organizations in the field and they were firmly in the do-not-change camp. It was felt that we should go against the trend and keep to our publication schedule as this is what makes us unique. What do you think?

Our authors on this theme have also given us much food for thought. Paula Speevak starts us off with a look at the big picture and asks whether managers of volunteer resources should be trendy or true.

Annmarie Nicholson suggests ways a manager of volunteer resources can navigate through the trends and Leslie Scott discusses the adaptations needed to recruit volunteers from differing demographics. Later, Janet Canavan, addressing a topic on which many other authors chose to focus, makes an impassioned plea for decision makers to look at qualitative data before making decisions to close programs that involve volunteers making a long-term investment. Elva Keip shares tips for enticing people to become board members and Jena Davarajah gives us some practical, proven pointers to engaging and keeping long-term volunteers. These pointers are echoed by long-term volunteer, Shelley Ann Morris, in her article about her volunteering experiences over 31 years and how her organization has supported her throughout that time. We end the issue with two articles (from Perpetua Quigley and Mike Brown) that embrace some current trends: virtual and micro volunteering.

Happy reading and let us know how we inspired you to be trendy or true. We are on LinkedIn too.

Maria Redpath, Editorial Team

## **Trendy or true?**

by Paula Speevak

When it comes to volunteer engagement, would you rather be trendy or true? This decision often proves tricky as volunteer engagement really is not one or the other. Albert Einstein defined intelligence as “the ability to adapt to change.” As leaders, we aspire to be nimble, flexible and responsive. At the same time, we speak of leadership as being proactive and not reactive, admiring the social innovators and trend-setters. Does staying trendy mean we turn our volunteer programs inside out just in time for the next trend to emerge? Does staying true mean falling behind on important advances in the sector? Let us explore the key trends in volunteer engagement uncovered by recent research.

Based on input from organizations, as well as from baby-boomers, youth, families and employee volunteers, a 2010 national study<sup>1</sup> identified the following gaps between what Canadians were looking for in volunteering and how organizations were engaging volunteers:

- 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 tailor what they have to offer (i.e., create their own volunteer opportunity);
- many organizations still want long-term commitment BUT many more volunteers are looking for shorter-term opportunities; and
- many organizations focus on what they need BUT besides helping others, many volunteers come with their own goals to be met.

While these findings validated what we had been seeing in the field, they raised an important question: can we accommodate these trends without compromising our organizational values and the effectiveness of our programs?

We have seen many creative answers to this question, and in 2013 Volunteer Canada conducted a follow-up study to get a sense of how organizations were adapting to these and other trends.<sup>2</sup> Many organizations reported difficulty engaging employer-supported volunteers and implementing skills-based volunteering strategies. They also indicated that their volunteer base was getting younger, yet their leadership and top volunteers – who volunteer more than 171 hours per year – were getting older.

In 2013, Volunteer Canada also examined trends in volunteer recognition<sup>3</sup> and found that many organizations did not have the funds to host recognition activities such as galas and banquets. At the same time, the majority of volunteers reported that formal recognition events were less important to them and appreciated a simple thank you and hearing about the impact of their volunteering. While formal recognition events are often the tradition with organizations, this demonstrates that getting to know your volunteers, thanking them for their efforts and communicating impact is cost-effective, meaningful and a best practice for volunteer recognition programs.<sup>4</sup>

Statistics Canada has been tracking Canadian volunteer activities since 1997 and there were some notable shifts in the results released in 2015.<sup>5</sup> With 12.7 million Canadians volunteering (44% of Canadians aged 15 and older), there was a slight decrease from the 13.3 million (47%) reported just three years earlier. Yet the two billion hours contributed each year has remained unchanged. This may simply be a result of our aging population: as people age, their volunteer rate decreases, while the number of hours they volunteer each year increases. Still, we cannot ignore the drop completely. Is this a blip or a trend? What other social trends have emerged?

Today, people have found alternatives to volunteering through organizations.<sup>6</sup> They are mobilizing in less formal ways to raise funds, raise awareness about issues, organize events, change their purchasing practices, increase democratic participation and decrease their harm on the environment. Is this trend of finding alternatives a result of the public's perception of an inflexible and overly bureaucratic volunteer engagement system?

With cutbacks in home care, community support and educational resources, have people become more involved with their family, neighbours and social networks to support one another? Is this a trend that may be influencing peoples' availability to volunteer? More than a third of all volunteers indicate they receive some support from their employer.<sup>7</sup> Given the many demands on peoples' time, will the trend to volunteer through the workplace be increasingly important in sustaining volunteer participation in Canada?

Family volunteering has been introduced in the sector a number of times over the years with minimal success.<sup>8</sup> Few organizations are set up to engage families. Is this non-trend something we want to consider?

Looking to 2017, we have the opportunity to answer these questions to strike the balance between trendy and true. This will require broadening our concept of volunteering to include informal helping and organic movements and increasing the participation, quality and diversity of volunteer experiences. In some cases, that will mean responding to trends and in others, it will mean holding fast against the trends. Above all, though, effective volunteer engagement will mean setting the trends.

## References

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- <sup>2</sup> Volunteer Canada, (2013). [Building the Bridge for Volunteer Engagement.](#)
- <sup>3</sup> Volunteer Canada, (2013). [2013 Volunteer Recognition Study.](#)
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Statistics Canada (2015), [General Social Survey - Giving, Volunteering and Participating.](#)
- <sup>6</sup> Statistics Canada (2012), [Volunteering in Canada.](#)
- <sup>7</sup> Statistics Canada (2015), [General Social Survey - Giving, Volunteering and Participating.](#)
- <sup>8</sup> Volunteer Canada, (2013). [Building the Bridge for Volunteer Engagement.](#)

Paula Speevak serves as President and CEO of Volunteer Canada and is an Adjunct Professor with Carleton University's School of Public Policy and Administration. Her applied research in volunteer engagement has produced several tools, guides, and resources in the area of screening, employer-supported volunteering, volunteering and older adults, and trends in citizen engagement.

## Take the helm: steering through shifting currents

by Annmarie Nicholson, Ottawa, ON

Based on the history of Canadian volunteerism, we know ours is a resilient sector. It has seen trends continually change and has consistently adjusted with chiropractic dexterity to meet the challenges. As any leader of volunteers can attest, this has remained a constant over time.

Currently, volunteerism is facing the challenge of a seismic generational shift, one that is challenging its leaders to find new and creative adaptations to the way they manage both their volunteers and the programs they support. The expected boon of boomer retirees-turned-volunteers has not materialized

in the way the sector predicted. While younger Canadians are giving their time in larger numbers, the millennial trend toward episodic, “big-bang” volunteerism has presented a real challenge for those managing the work of volunteers. Younger adults want more bang for their volunteer bucks so while they may be volunteering in larger numbers, they want to do more, get more and give more in less time. This is a smart, goal-oriented approach to volunteerism and older adults are also catching-on. They have less time to give due to ever-increasing and competing priorities, so the time they give must have maximum impact.

It would be a mistake to interpret this change as a lack of investment, interest or care on the part of volunteers. Those qualities are still fundamental aspects of what motivates volunteerism today, just as they have traditionally been the main drivers. What has changed however, are the expectations of volunteers in a new and transformative reality. As leaders of volunteers, if we do not find our flex in this current context, we will find ourselves watching from the wake as the ship we once knew continues to sail past us. The sting of stagnation is long lasting and entirely self-defeating, so adapt we must and once again, we are! If a volunteer is looking for big bang for their volunteer buck, organizations need to find creative ways to ensure an environment that is mutually supportive and win-win.

Condensing volunteer commitment is one way that organizations have met this challenge. Volunteers get that intensified experience they are looking for and the organizations that have embraced this change have seen that they, too, often will get a higher-quality return. The end product is a satisfying volunteer experience which still meets or even surpasses the needs of the organization. There is a price tag for this success, of course, as volunteer turnover increases. There is an added pressure on recruitment as retention becomes less of an organizational strength and recruitment efforts take a larger portion of the front seat.

With this shift, do we just hang up the retention skates and accept that long-term volunteerism is a thing of the past? Certainly not! In fact, long-term volunteers will continue to remain as committed to the organizations they serve as they did before, just in smaller numbers than in the past. As such, these volunteers become the true leaders of their peers and smart managers are finding creative ways to develop their talents and skills. For example, mentorship and advisory roles that may not have existed before or that were once performed by staff are now being seen and developed as leadership opportunities for volunteers. A by-product of creating sexier volunteer opportunities may also be increased retention overall. Volunteers who would otherwise move onto new organizations to find that next challenge may now be able to find it within the one they currently serve. Rather than leave for the next big bang, they can now simply move to another position. Again, it is a win-win.

Another way that organizations are adapting to the sea change is by increasing internal recruitment efforts. Seeking a flexible and common sense approach to the retention issue, modern volunteer organizations are increasingly cultivating participation from those who have been directly impacted by the service provided: the clients. This has benefitted those organizations, at the recruitment and retention ends. People who have been directly impacted by the work of the organization are a vital source of recruitment and they also tend to become longer-serving volunteers due to their personal connection to the cause and mission of the organization.

By continuing to adapt to the ever-shifting waters of Canadian volunteerism, leaders of volunteers today are once again demonstrating the flexibility and resourcefulness of the sector. Rather than fighting the current, volunteer leaders are navigating deftly by embracing change and opportunity. The resulting transformation will equate to volunteer organizations that are more sophisticated and innovative.

With 20 years of experience in the mental health care sector in Ottawa, Annmarie Nicholson is the Director of Volunteer Services for The Royal and leads a team of over 460 volunteers annually across 4 different sites in both Ottawa and Brockville, Ontario.

### **Volunteer recruitment across the ages**

by Leslie Scott, Ottawa, ON

Long gone are the days of standing on the sidewalk near your business wearing a sandwich board with “Join us!” written in big fluorescent lettering waving to passing cars in hopes of recruiting individuals to join your team of volunteers.

Instead, we are looking for new and exciting ways to attract the right volunteers to our organizations. Since we cannot always hire Ryan Gosling or Sofia Vergara to headline our ad campaigns, we need to be in the now, in real time, to grasp the attention of everyone around us.

First of all, I always ask myself, when running recruiting campaigns for the Distress Centre of Ottawa & Region, “Which demographic of volunteers am I looking for? Seniors? Young adults? Professionals?” I cannot expect an upbeat campaign with bright colours and slang to catch the attention of my 55+ group, nor would I expect a photo of a senior citizen to attract my young 20-somethings. I tend to focus certain recruitment campaigns on the right media outlet, whether it be social media, radio or television. Even though our organization deals with many calls around sad topics, I do not want our focus to be the sadness but instead there is help available and it can brighten someone’s day.

#### **How do I take on recruiting in social media?**

Twitter, since you limit me to 140 characters, I need to be quick, sharp and to the point with recruitment notices. This helps me grab the attention of the 20- to 40-year olds, who are quick to the punch on Twitter. They retweet, they favourite and they tag their friends in a response.

Facebook, you are a tricky fellow, with your limited views on posts and other quirks. The more you encourage people to like your posts, the more they are seen by others, but it is not always easy. Facebook does have very affordable ad campaigns you can utilize to attract the right demographic, so if I am trying to attract the 55+ group in our area, I can put as many limitations as I want and set my daily campaign dollar expenditure. These ads have proven to be quite effective in sending people directly to our website to learn more about volunteering.

Recruiting volunteers through social media does not always provide the return on investment you are looking for, but it truly is a great way to get the word out. Remember, word of mouth is sometimes the best recruitment campaign. Your current volunteers have their own network of potential volunteers, so it does not hurt to ask your team to spread the word.

Online applications sent straight to our volunteer scheduler have the application process down to a science. The scheduler receives the applications, reviews them and sends approvals for the next step in the process. At this stage, we move forward with screening, which is a good old phone conversation with the applicant and references. There truly is no way to replace a great phone conversation with someone who is interested in your organization.

Once you have the volunteers in hand, they have done their training and they are fully engaged in your organization.... how do you keep them? They are giving you the most precious gift of time to your organization, so in return, you should treat them like gold, not like the Canadian dollar against United States currency. Our budget allows us to ensure that there is always coffee, tea and snacks readily available for any volunteer coming in for a shift. For our overnight volunteers, we have provided a cozy sleep room with daily fresh sheets, Netflix and the ease of knowing that they can rest easily on their shift. Currently, we are working on a sponsored “welcome” package for our volunteers upon completion of their training. This will be an overnight bag containing toothpaste, toothbrush and other goodies that will focus on the need for being here overnight. We are not saying that we give the moon, but we are definitely reaching to the stars to make sure our volunteers feel appreciated and welcomed at all times. It is like a warm hug every shift. We also recognize and award long-standing volunteers with special gifts to thank them for their time.

Technology is ever evolving, so it is important to be sure that your volunteers are always in the know about any changes that are happening on the technology side of your organization. For instance, our phone line system periodically has changes made to accommodate call volume growth or a change to a partnership. Sometimes it is a simple note that “this button now does this instead of this.” We make sure that for every change that is made, a notification is sent out to our database of volunteers and a notice is posted in phone rooms. You should ensure that technology is a key element of your pre-service training program.

Not only do we need to consider adaptation and innovation in our recruitment of volunteers but we also have to be creative in ensuring that they feel welcomed and valued once they have joined us. Recognizing and retaining the volunteers we attract to our organization will ensure that our recruitment is largely related to natural and expected turnover or recruitment campaigns for new programs.

Leslie Scott is the Community Relations Coordinator for the Distress Centre of Ottawa & Region. Leslie’s background in media & marketing allows her to continuously put the Distress Centre in the minds of those in need of support.

## A trending conversation

by Janet Canavan, Burlington, ON

I read an interesting statistic in The Canadian Volunteer Landscape Survey that identified the trend to short-term and episodic volunteerism. It showed that a startling 37% of formal volunteer roles are episodic and of the six in ten Canadians who volunteer, 82% desire informal roles. The voice shared across these statistics was a lack of time and an unwillingness to make a long-term commitment.

This article however, speaks from my unique perspective and to the 25% of volunteers identified in the survey who are engaged in the health and social service sectors and in long-term volunteer roles. These roles have the potential for lasting impact, relationship building, psychosocial support and engagement beyond what may be possible in a short-term assignment. These are the roles I see expanding as the baby-boomer generation has more time to volunteer (39% of all volunteer hours are conducted by people 55 years of age and older). This group of volunteers will potentially access these services and they and their families may be personally impacted. The known volunteer motivators for these roles include community contribution, shared experiences, improved sense of wellbeing and the need to support a cause. In terms of volunteer resource management they are not for the faint of heart!

I wish to share my knowledge and experience managing a provincial peer support program that engages volunteers in long-term, minimum two year, assignments. It is my unwavering belief, based on this experience, that the key to engaging and sustaining volunteers in long-term assignments is their personal motivation: the inherent why of it all. The why, in the case of peer support, is the motivation stemming from a personal experience with a life-threatening illness. I learned that the motivation is a desire to make sense of their experience, to move on in a healthy manner with their new normal and support others beginning a similar journey. It is a dedicated, sincere, cathartic and passionate desire to make a significant difference in the life of another human being.

In my years with the program, it was not uncommon to recognize volunteers for five, ten, fifteen and even longer years of service. Research confirms the reciprocal psychosocial impacts of peer support programming. We heard incredible testimonials about clients' improved ability to cope, improved communications, increased hope and support, and improved quality of life. I was humbled daily and honoured to be involved with such an impactful program: a program with volunteer assignments that go against the trend.

I saw how receiving peer support realizes a change in health and social status. It impacts people and helps to normalize the lived experience. There are many other services in the health and social sectors that offer similar impacts through long-term volunteer assignments. Consider education, literacy, hospital auxiliaries, health care agencies, hospice and support for Canadian newcomers. These meet the essential motivational criteria and potential for significant impacts mentioned earlier. Twenty five percent of volunteers in formal services are motivated to sign up for these roles. It may be more if we tap into the 51% of people who indicated in the survey they were never asked or those 27% who are uncertain how to contact us.



This article has a limited scope and my goal is a hope that long-term volunteer assignments are not unduly eliminated at a time when economic influences, diminished resources and workload strain is a reality faced by many managers of volunteer resources and their organizations.

If we place short- and long-term volunteer assignments on opposite ends of a scale, it would tip heavily in favour of the former. Statistics provide powerful quantitative evidence echoed during strategic planning conversations. At these tables I hope we also listen to the powerful qualitative insights shared through our clients' and volunteers' own voices, the stories echoed as volunteer legacies, honours presented at volunteer appreciation and fundraising events. These powerful legacies and conversations resonate in family photo albums, at family celebrations, in coffee shops and even at bedsides. This is the evidence in support of long-term assignments where the motivation is personal.

I value my 25 years in volunteer resource management in the nonprofit health care sector. long-term volunteer assignments were the norm. I learned that people who seek these roles truly wish to make a difference in people's lives. Their commitment and attachment to our organizations is strong. They are our clients' advocates and generators of insights into our clients' needs that are not accessible to many staff.

Research shows that volunteers with tenure also fundraise, donate, share our resources and provide referrals. They take part in focus groups, program development and on our boards and committees. They are with us for the long haul because of their personal motivation to make the difference that makes all the difference.

I believe longer term volunteer assignments:

- are renewable and sustainable because motivation stems from a personal life experience, insight and a sincere desire to help people;
- provide staff with meaningful engagement as mentors and coaches for these blossoming relationships;
- create a powerful connection with mission and motivation; and
- succeed when volunteers have confidence in our professional and empathetic programming.

Volunteer Canada states that volunteers should be involved in meaningful ways and in roles that reflect their skills, needs, interests and backgrounds. I know volunteers who stayed with the program for years and who supported hundreds of clients from the comfort and security of their homes and with the support of experienced staff. They cared deeply about making a difference in the lives of others and built the kind of relationships our organizations promise.

These are the gifts presented by our dedicated long-term volunteers. I hope we will not diminish these gifts at strategic planning session discussions through the lens of current trends. I believe we can balance the scale.

## Resources

Statistics Canada, General Social Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating, 2013.

<http://www.volunteer.ca>

Janet Canavan, CVA, has dedicated over 25 years to the field of Volunteer Resource Management evidenced in her career in the not for profit health care sector, education and personal service. The value of community service was instilled in her at an early age by her parents and this value is the driving force and motivation to help make a difference in people's lives. Currently, she is a member of the CCVA certification committee, a Rotary District training team, President of a non-profit board and Owner of a consulting company. With diplomas in Non-Profit Volunteer Management, Management in the Non-Profit Sector, Adult Education and Journalism she is looking forward to joining the CJVRM team as a regional representative.

### **Board volunteers: long-term investments**

by Elva Keip, Ottawa, ON

It used to be that serving on the board of directors for an organization was considered a long-term commitment lasting five, ten and perhaps even 15 years. Guess what? It still is, but now the commitment is likely to be one to five years. And five years is considered a very long time!

Short-term (two weeks to six months) volunteer commitments are very popular nowadays and there are many places where a volunteer, and indeed, many volunteers, can serve very effectively and meet both their needs and those of your organization. Music festivals, fundraising events and even rink management at a local park are prime examples. The board of directors, however, is not one of those. If the board meets monthly, it usually takes about six months before a new member functions well with knowledge and confidence. If the board meets quarterly, it could be a year before the new board member has integrated and understood policies, plans, programs and key issues.

Ideally, the nominations committee is actively looking all year for new board members to replace those leaving at the next annual general meeting (AGM). The all-too-frequent reality is that the nominations committee scrambles in the one to two months prior to the AGM, hunting high and low for someone, sometimes really almost anyone, to fill the vacant spot(s). And it is sorely tempting to agree to an individual's demand that they be allowed to sit on the board for three, maybe six, months because they are not willing to commit to the typical board term of one to two years.

What if the nominations committee said "yes" to that individual, relieved that someone was willing to join the board? Think first about the investment needed to equip a new board member so they are a

fully functioning, fully contributing participant in discussions and decisions at board meetings. Besides the time spent and the effort expended, money is also often disbursed. Your investment includes:

- recruiting and screening: to identify and locate great candidates; to closely review their suitability and the organization's ability to meet their needs; and to interview all potential candidates; and then to select the best fit;
- orienting and training: to familiarize new board members both to the organization and to the responsibilities involved in being a board member (especially important if new members have never served on a board and very helpful for experienced members, because it establishes a common base of information and expectation); to send board members to seminars and workshops where they increase their knowledge and enhance their skills, and thereby increase their value to the organization;
- mentoring: to link a new board member to an experienced member who can answer questions and discuss history and issues in knowledgeable detail between meetings;
- succession planning: to determine who is best suited to fill which of the major roles on the board and when they will be ready; for example, it is very rare that a board member becomes president or chairperson the first year they serve on the board, for the very good reason that they are not ready.

Of these, one can argue that succession planning is most important. The board is not a stand-alone, one-year-only entity. It continues year after year and must be nurtured; its members groomed carefully for more responsibility in various capacities.

In this current culture of short-term volunteerism, it is very important to give careful consideration to the organization's requirements. Stability is a key requirement for any board if the organization is to be effective and efficient in carrying out its mandate. Stability and short-term do not go together.

#### **Tips for enticing people to become board members**

- Encourage your high-performance board members to refer someone they know well who would be an excellent addition to the board, based on the needs of the organization in the next year. Staff might also know some great potential candidates.
- Highlight the good qualities of the organization. Avoid apologizing for the required time commitment or other possibly negative aspects. Remember, you have the best interests of the organization at the forefront, and your organization is the best!
- Show your pride and enthusiasm for the organization, its programs and accomplishments, the clients, the staff and the volunteers. Enthusiasm is contagious.
- Speak frankly about why you want this person and why they are an excellent fit for the organization's needs, especially in the upcoming one to two years.
- Explore with each candidate what they want from their volunteer effort. When you are sure you understand them well, discuss how the board can meet at least some of those needs.



- Describe how the board functions and how the estimated hours per month are usually used by a board member, particularly if there is an expectation of other work, such as sitting on a committee or specific fundraising activities.
- Remember that you are looking for competent people and your job is to get them excited about your organization's work. Or you are looking for people passionate about the work and your job is to help them become competent to serve on the board. If there is no specific competency that the board needs in the upcoming year and there is no passion, do not try to recruit the person.
- If you ask for a one-year commitment, be truthful about your hope or expectation that they will become so engaged that they will want to serve at least one more year. Think about asking for a two-year commitment and, if you have to, agree to a one-year term.
- Talk about how they will get started and what happens next.
- Ask! In other words, close the deal.

Elva Keip is a lifelong volunteer who has worked with many boards of directors in the Ottawa area, assisting them to become more effective in carrying out their responsibilities. She works for a nonprofit organization and is currently taking a break from serving on a board of directors at another organization.

### **Encouraging long-term volunteer retention: a look at Meals on Wheels – La Popote roulante in Ottawa**

by Jena Davarajah, Ottawa, ON

What attracts a volunteer to stay long-term with an organization? Nonprofits like Meals on Wheels – La Popote roulante in Ottawa rely on committed and consistent volunteer hours to maintain a certain level of service and program delivery within their agency. However volunteer trends have shifted within the last decade forecasting end of an era of long-term volunteerism.<sup>1</sup> In part, this is due to changing demographics, as many agencies have noted a steady decline of volunteers related to more and more baby boomers heading towards retirement.<sup>2</sup> Despite these predicted trends, Meals on Wheels is still able to maintain a relatively stable base of committed volunteers through its commitment to foundational practices. These practices hinge on two core factors: strong coordinator support and positive role identity. These factors have not only been identified through various literature, but have also been documented from volunteers at Meals on Wheels.

#### **Coordinator support**

According to studies, one of the key issues leading to the decline of volunteerism and decreasing volunteer retention is the lack of volunteer coordinator support.<sup>3</sup> Feeling isolated in their roles, limited contact with the volunteer coordinators and administrators tends to foster feelings of isolation and under-appreciation in volunteers: a contributing factor to shorter-term volunteer retention.<sup>4</sup>

When Meals on Wheels volunteers were asked in their annual volunteer satisfaction survey about what contributes to their positive experience with the organization, a consistent response remained the support and friendliness of staff. Despite the varying age demographic among the volunteers, these responses indicate a unifying factor of positive interaction with clients and with the organization, which was reinforced by positive and consistent volunteer coordinator support.

This support can in fact be correlated with volunteer longevity in the organization. For example, Sara Wiebe, a Meals on Wheels veteran of more than 15 years, attributes the strong level of support she received from coordinators as one of the main factors rooting her in her volunteer position. Wiebe recalls regularly being able to provide feedback, recommendations, and complaints as demonstrative of a well-developed relationship with staff. Without this, she notes, she would not feel as genuinely appreciated and valued as a volunteer.

The structure of Meals on Wheels' coordinator-to-volunteer model sustains these interactions as part of their rigorous adherence to organizational standards. Time-sensitive meal delivery and serving schedules, alongside other daily check-ins, are all part of the routine tasks that work to ensure that coordinator staff maintain continuous lines of communication with volunteers while simultaneously providing volunteers with an outlet to voice legitimate concerns. While the level of supervision may seem above the expected norm for many nonprofits, and may even be perceived as a source of deterrence for some, Meals on Wheels volunteers agree that a strong connection with the organization is directly related to the support provided by coordinators.

### **Positive role identity and experiences**

The positive experience that volunteers attribute to their time with an agency has also been considered a key factor in sustaining a lengthy and mutually beneficial relationship between the volunteer and the agency.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, the role identity<sup>6</sup> of the volunteer should be perceived as integral or critical to the overall success of the organization. If the volunteer can foster greater connection with their work but also determine their level of involvement, then this flexibility will encourage a long-term commitment. Ultimately, if a volunteer feels that their contribution to an organization is valued and, more importantly, can see the tangible results they bring to a nonprofit, the more willing they may be to remain.

Oftentimes a volunteer's greatest motivation to continue his or her service is a heartfelt "thank you" from a client. When asked why many continue to volunteer, common responses are "I'm helping people who are in need" and "I know I am contributing to their overall wellbeing."<sup>7</sup> Meals on Wheels emphasizes these kinds of interactions during recruitment and training sessions by bringing in experienced volunteers like Suzanne Allyson Morello. Suzanne often exclaims to new recruits that she felt she "belonged from the very beginning" with "such wonderful welcoming, friendly staff."<sup>8</sup> While the essential mechanics of the role are enforced in training, encouraging volunteers to see the human impact of their interaction with vulnerable seniors is a key take-away for new recruits.

With changing volunteer trends, many nonprofits may feel required to prepare for short-term volunteer retention. Meals on Wheels – La Popote roulante in Ottawa, however, demonstrates that long-term

volunteer retention is possible despite future trends that suggest otherwise. Meals on Wheels presents a model that proves invested coordinator support, alongside reinforcement of positive role identity and experience, greatly contribute to longer retention of volunteers regardless of the demographics.

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## **In it for the long haul: long-term volunteering bucking the trend**

by Shelley Ann Morris, Ottawa, ON

Why do some volunteers choose to commit to long-term volunteer assignments with today's focus on short-term and episodic volunteering? What keeps volunteers coming back year after year?

I have been volunteering as an advocate with Citizen Advocacy (CA), an organization that matches volunteers with people with disabilities, for more than 31 years. I am matched with a lady who has mental health concerns and now has physical issues related to aging. Like any long-term friendship, ours has endured ups, downs and changes. Through it all, CA has remained a constant and, I believe, has contributed greatly to the longevity of our match.

### **Passion, interest and motivation**

I decided to volunteer with CA when I was a university student with a little free time and the need for real world experience. In the past, volunteers had taken time to help me, and I felt that it was time for me to pay it forward. CA staff took a lot of time and consideration when pairing us up. As I do not drive, proximity was one of the key reasons for our particular match. My friend lived in a boarding home in my neighbourhood. As I am visually-impaired, I wanted to be matched with someone who loved to talk and visit. Another key feature in our match was our many common interests such as shopping, going out for coffee and favourite TV shows and songs.

### **On-going support**

Over time, our needs have changed, and CA has been there to support us through those transitions. CA provided helpful guidance during my friend's sudden relocation from living in the boarding home to placement into a long-term care facility and CA also supported me as I advocated for her to receive Para Transpo services. Some changes are positive—she became a grandmother; she proudly displays pictures of her five grandkids at CA functions. By nature, volunteers love to help others and CA has helped me to set realistic boundaries with regard to my own time and resources. With each new turn of events, CA staff have been there to listen, answer questions, offer support and provide resources.

### **Regular activities**

My friend and I have attended many annual holiday parties. These have involved good food, the opportunity to win prizes at the raffle and see Elvis. We have also attended some of CA's special events and concerts when tickets were made available for advocate/protégé pairs.

### **Ability to work with volunteers' challenges**

CA has always listened and helped me to remove barriers that come along with having impaired vision. They make sure that newsletters are in a format that can be read by my screen readers. As I needed assistance with transportation to be able to attend CA events, they introduced me to a fellow advocate who provides us with transportation and then went on to act as a sighted guide as we participate in 5k and 10k runs.

### **Recognition**

As an Advocate, we are recognized every five years with a gift and honourable mention at the annual holiday party, offering us both the opportunity to stand up and take a bow.

### **Continued education, training opportunity and the provision of information**

There have been many new developments in disability management, advocacy processes, the rights of those who have disabilities, advances in adaptive technology and so much more! Through newsletters and education/training sessions, CA helps to keep volunteers well informed.

### **Tapping into talents**

Volunteers often possess many different skills, abilities and talents that can benefit their chosen organization. In my case, I love writing and have contributed many articles to CA newsletters and publications chronicling my friendship match through the years.

While our true friendship endures, Citizen Advocacy as an organization has been crucial in supporting me in my commitment as a volunteer advocate.

Shelley Ann Morris is the Champion of Membership and Volunteer Services at Volunteer Ottawa. She co-hosts a weekly radio show exploring disability issues called Welcome to My World on CKCU FM in Ottawa, and is an accomplished triathlete.

### **Virtual volunteerism enables CNIB to provide enhanced service**

by Perpetua Quigley, Ottawa, ON

As a registered charity, CNIB provides community-based support, knowledge and a national voice to ensure Canadians who are blind or partially sighted have the confidence, skills and opportunities to participate fully in life.

In addition to post-vision loss rehabilitation therapy, CNIB also offers programming through volunteer services. Whether it is supporting individuals with leisure and recreational activities or providing personalized services such as reading and organizing things around the home, CNIB has recognized the need to revolutionize its traditional model of face-to-face volunteering.

The organization has started to leverage technology to enable virtual volunteers to connect with individuals who may be at risk of isolation. Thanks to phone calls, emails and text messages, technology has helped with managing wait lists for “adjusting to vision loss” programs. People who may be unable to travel to a braille literacy class have an opportunity to benefit from conference calls and take advantage of remote tutoring.

“Jim gives me great comfort for my anxiety. He’s already been through this. I was so depressed and it lifted my spirits. He’s given me light in a dark world,” says Paul Cave, CNIB client. “I’ve been on death’s door with cancer, but the vision loss has been the hardest. Every couple of weeks, we talk and he gives me great comfort. Without Jim, I’d be right out of my tree. He’s a great confidant, a friend who I’ve never met. He’s very knowledgeable and when he doesn’t have the answer, he gets it for me. If he hadn’t been there, I’d have sunk...he’s a lifeboat.”

Virtual volunteerism has also improved education for students who are blind or partially sighted. According to virtual volunteer Ryan Sandarage, volunteers provide support by converting print and portable document format (PDF) documents into accessible formats, such as Microsoft Word, to ensure students have access to information in a timely manner. Once the conversions are complete, students



may use a screen-reader. Documents can be converted in 24 to 48 hours whereas it could take a year for a university to provide a document in an accessible format.

“I have found this form of volunteer support to be highly effective in terms of meeting my needs” says Vangelis Nikias. “It’s a flexible working arrangement that doesn’t require in-person appointments, but it allows me to continue with my studies. I’m thankful that CNIB Ottawa volunteers make this possible.”

CNIB staff also benefit from virtual volunteerism. Administrative tasks such as data entry, writing and outreach to individuals with vision loss can be done remotely. Integrating volunteers through technology reduces wait lists, saves time and creates opportunities to make meaningful connections.

Volunteer trends suggest a decrease in volunteerism of retirees and stay-at-home parents. However, virtual volunteerism is creating a new market for organizations and volunteers. Recent trends in volunteering show an increase in student volunteers. While a student’s availability to volunteer is determined by their course load and work schedule, university admissions are expecting students to volunteer to strengthen their applications for graduate studies, and more candidates are seeking work experience to add to their resume for competitive job markets. Virtual volunteerism provides students with the required flexibility and accessibility for managing school, work and volunteer commitments, and it enables CNIB to provide enhanced service.

With virtual volunteerism on the rise, CNIB is also turning to virtual promotional tools for volunteer recruitment. The organization uses Facebook, Twitter and its website to advertise positions and illustrate how volunteers are making a lasting difference in the lives of individuals who are blind or partially sighted. CNIB staff also participate in virtual volunteer fairs through live chats with prospective candidates, and volunteers benefit from online training if they are unable to attend a training session in person.

With the goal of developing a volunteer assignment that is client-focused, CNIB welcomes opportunities to enable virtual volunteerism. Virtual volunteers extend the reach of programs and services offered by staff. The virtual volunteer program is spearheading new trends while creating opportunities for meaningful engagement between volunteers and community members.

Since 2010, Perpetua Quigley has worked as Coordinator Volunteer Services, CNIB Ontario East. Earlier in her career she was a National Project Coordinator for Canadian Public Health Association and was a Case Manager of Volunteers for Big Sisters. Perpetua is certified as a Volunteer Administrator through the Council of Certified Volunteer Administrators, USA, and specialized in marketing for her Management Certificate, Carleton University, Ottawa. She is a graduate of Bachelor Arts in Psychology, University of Ottawa. Believing in community engagement, Perpetua volunteered with Kiwanis Music Festival and was Chair of the RA Photo Club. She enjoys sailing, skiing, photography, the arts and is passionate about her family.

## **Microvolunteering: micro effort, macro impact!**

by Mike Bright, UK

In 2011, the United Nation published a report in which it highlighted three of the fastest growing trends in volunteering around the world, one of them being microvolunteering. Five years on and the momentum behind the concept still shows no sign of abating, as it continues its reach beyond its founding days in Spain, the UK, and the US.

To borrow a definition from the UK-based Institute of Volunteering Research..., “microvolunteering is bite-size volunteering with no commitment to repeat and with minimum formality, involving short and specific actions that are quick to start and complete...”.<sup>1</sup> A recent study, again from the Institute of Volunteering Research, has indicated, “The demand for microvolunteering from individuals is likely to grow because it meets people’s desire to be in control of their time and engagement, and suits their increasingly busy and unpredictable lives”.<sup>2</sup>

### **Characteristics**

Although various distinguishing features can be identified within a microvolunteering action, not all of them may be present in any one opportunity. However, they all have one thing in common: the economy of time, thus the prefix “micro”. Different platforms adopt different time criteria. Those that promote skilled microvolunteering opportunities, for example, [SkillsForChange.com](http://SkillsForChange.com) tend to place an upper limit of two hours on a task, while those that promote unskilled micro-actions, such as [HelpFromHome.org](http://HelpFromHome.org) tend to restrict it to 30 minutes.

Among its other characteristics, a micro-action is also:

- able to be performed by a single volunteer
- one-off or repeatable
- conducted online or offline (although it is usually associated with online)
- either skilled or unskilled
- available on demand and on the go
- unlikely to require an application process, screening or special training
- not likely to require a formal agreement between volunteer and nonprofit
- usually marked by a beginning and an end
- free from ongoing commitment
- usually crowdsourced (whether by a few people or by thousands)
- rarely of critical immediate importance to the organization
- not involved in handling sensitive or proprietary data

### **Developing a microvolunteering action**

Creating a micro-action that perhaps only lasts ten minutes might seem a bit daunting, especially when most volunteer managers' gut reaction is to question whether the time taken to create an action is

worth the impact generated. It all depends on what type of action you are creating. Typically there are three different types:

- One-off, non-repeatable skilled action. Examples include logo design, a short translation, proofreading a document etc.
- Repeatable skilled actions. Examples include brainstorming project slogans, providing input for additional text on presentations or videos etc.
- Repeatable unskilled actions. Examples include converting public domain books into eBooks, analyzing tumour images to help cure cancer and mapping disabled access issues. Although some of these actions may appear to require substantial skills, in all cases the sponsors have designed them so that no specialized skills are required to participate.

The UK-based HelpFromHome microvolunteering platform is a primary resource for creating micro-actions. It provides links to how-to guides, micro-task suggestions, photos of microvolunteering events, as well as ideas on how to generate discussions on the concept among your supporters.<sup>3</sup>

### **Red tape issues**

With microvolunteers seemingly able to volunteer on the go, on demand, and on their own terms, how does a nonprofit protect itself from insurance claims? It should be no different to insure traditional volunteering, so long as a risk analysis has covered all the bases. For a handy article on this topic visit the HelpFromHome website which includes a long list of possible scenarios that a nonprofit could consider. Be sure to check insurance regulations in your region.<sup>4</sup>

Health and safety is another issue often raised in relation to the anywhere, anytime, anyplace ethos of microvolunteering. Like insurance, so long as the advice given out to volunteers has been thoroughly backed up by a risk analysis, there should be no problem. There is a useful write-up of the salient points on the HelpFromHome website that also addresses screening, equal opportunities and personal information security issues.<sup>5</sup>

### **Motivating microvolunteers**

In this world where volunteering competes with so many other alluring pastime activities, how does a volunteer manager prise their way into the spare moments of somebody's life. Here are a few ideas that have been used on various microvolunteering platforms:

- Give one percent: during a typical one-hour lunchbreak, one percent equates to roughly 30 seconds, enough time to sign a petition.
- Challenge2016: it is the year 2016, where 2016 seconds equate to just over 33 minutes, enough time for volunteers to be challenged to critique some campaign ideas.
- PyjamaPower: invite people to don their PJs and perhaps research free resources or information on the web that your nonprofit could use, all without getting out of bed.

### **Growing trends**

The microvolunteering concept seems to be constantly challenging the pre-conceived ideas of how volunteering can be conducted. It was initially touted as something that could be participated from your own home, as well as in between your latte and roll during your work lunchbreak. With the Internet's reach becoming all pervading, it has been suggested that microvolunteering can be participated in-flight on airplanes, as well as on cruise ships during activity sessions. But what of the current and growing trends within the microvolunteering arena?

- Nonprofits seem to be interested in a microvolunteering task completion, rather than the retention of volunteers beyond the given task.
- Employee-supported volunteering schemes are using the microvolunteering concept to include their more “on the road, no permanent office” workforce within their Corporate Social Responsibility impact statistics.
- Students and volunteer centres are using their laptops to entice visitors to their pop-up stalls at volunteering fairs and the like, to take part in on-demand tasks.
- Some nonprofits have been renaming their more traditional small roles and referring to them as microvolunteering ones.
- More microvolunteering smartphone apps are being created, which focus on a volunteering action rather than as a gateway into a directory of volunteering opportunities.
- Roughly 70% of microvolunteers are younger than 29, and approximately 75% of microvolunteers are female.<sup>6</sup>
- More charitably minded disabled people are tapping into the convenience of the microvolunteering concept.
- Participation in Microvolunteering Day on April 15th has been gaining in popularity every year.

### **What's next**

It is a dizzying world we live in, and in the very near future “right-around-the-corner” technologies will open up new ways to microvolunteer. Nonprofits are already experimenting with such concepts as 3D printing, smartwear, QR codes and drones. Other ways in which microvolunteering could be integrated into society are:

- health and well-being programs to aid convalescing patients
- social responsibility projects for prisoners to aid their rehabilitation back into society
- cause marketing to help smaller businesses and nonprofits co-promote their brand and cause

The term microvolunteering gained its first blip on the voluntary radar in 2008 and over the years has been seen as either an evolution or a revolution in volunteering. With its huge potential to transform the way in which nonprofits and volunteers create impact in the world, can you afford to ignore those spare moments in people's lives that are just waiting to be tapped into via technology that enables them to create macro impact from micro effort?

## References

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<sup>2</sup> <http://bit.ly/LU82ad>

<sup>3</sup> <http://bit.ly/1j9g6FK>

<sup>4</sup> <http://bit.ly/1MUzFOe>

<sup>5</sup> <http://bit.ly/1IsjtYW>

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Mike Bright is the founder of HelpFromHome ([www.helpfromhome.org](http://www.helpfromhome.org)), an initiative that promotes and encourages people to participate in easy, no-commitment, microvolunteering opportunities via its tagline, 'Change The World in Just Your Pyjamas'. Mike has been involved in the microvolunteering arena since 2005, initially as a participant and then more fully from December 2008 with his HelpFromHome initiative. He is considered one of the pioneers of the microvolunteering concept, as well as the organizer behind an annual Microvolunteering Day.