

BRIDGING



THE GAP

ENRICHING THE VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE  
TO BUILD A BETTER FUTURE  
FOR OUR COMMUNITIES

## Summary of Findings of a Pan-Canadian Research Study

Volunteer Canada, in partnership with Manulife Financial, Carleton University  
Centre for Voluntary Sector Research & Development and Harris/Decima



VOLUNTEER  
BÉNÉVOLES  
CANADA



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WHAT CANADIANS  
ARE LOOKING FOR  
IN VOLUNTEERING



HOW ORGANIZATIONS  
ARE ENGAGING  
VOLUNTEERS



## Introduction

How can we bridge the gap between what Canadians are looking for in volunteering today and how organizations are engaging volunteers?

As a first step, we must recognize that the volunteer experiences individuals are looking for change significantly as they move through the different stages of life. Organizations need to be aware of and adapt their volunteer recruitment and retention programs accordingly. This is critical for sustaining and growing an effective and vibrant voluntary sector in Canada.

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, families, boomers and employer-supported volunteers.

To support this process, a research study conducted on behalf of Volunteer Canada in the summer of 2010 provides the most current national data about the changing culture of Canada's voluntary sector and the perspectives of four key groups: youth, baby boomers, families, and employer-supported volunteers.

The results offer practical information that non-profit and charitable organizations can use to improve the way they involve volunteers by

exploring the characteristics, motivations, and experiences of current volunteers, past volunteers, and those who have yet to try volunteering.

Specifically, the study captured what these groups want in their volunteer experiences, how easy it is for them to find satisfying volunteer roles and what organizations can do to enhance their volunteer base and ultimately build stronger communities.

The results show that 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.

Respondents indicated that 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.

As we had learned from the “Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating 2007”, our study also found that about half of Canadians over the age of 15 were currently involved as volunteers (within the last 12 months), and we gained some additional insights into what drives their loyalty.

Recognized as one of the largest voluntary sectors in the world, Canadians are generous with their time and passionate about their communities, collectively contributing two billion hours of volunteer time yearly, an average of 168 hours each.

Ultimately, volunteering in Canada 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.

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## What’s Different About This Research?

While the role of volunteers was explored on a general level in the four national surveys between 1997-2007, the objective of this new 2010 research was to gather practical information through a more in-depth exploration of four specific demographic groups: youth, families, baby boomers and employer-supported volunteers.

The thrust of the research approach was based on the premise that building the capacity of organizations to effectively engage volunteers involves:

- Greater promotion of volunteering to the public; and
- Helping organizations to create quality volunteer opportunities that appeal to today’s volunteers.

People with the ‘on-the-ground experience’ who coordinate volunteers or lead volunteer teams may recognize findings that confirm what they have known anecdotally from their own experiences.

In other cases, the research challenged myths about volunteering and also uncovered some new insights [please see ‘The Characteristics of Volunteering Today’ on pg. 9].

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

## Highlights of the Findings

### **The Legacy of ‘Uber Volunteers’**

A key discovery common to past surveys was the fact that a small group of ‘uber volunteers’ was responsible for the vast majority of volunteer hours. This fact highlighted the vulnerability of volunteer engagement – that it relies on a small group of individuals.

Given that these ‘uber volunteers’ are aging, and tend to represent the traditional volunteer, it is critical to be aware of the demographic groups who are following this age group, and be strategic in how to engage them in order to mitigate future shortages of volunteer contribution.

### **Identifying the Gaps**

It was therefore apparent that some Canadians are motivated to volunteer extensively, many occasionally, and a minority not at all. This disparity points to a disconnect between the volunteer opportunities that organizations are offering, and the kind of volunteer experiences that Canadians are looking for to move them to action.

#### **The primary gaps identified by the research were:**

- 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 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.

### **The Potential of ‘Past Volunteers’**

This study identified that 33% of Canadians are not currently volunteering, but have done so in the past. Analyzing this group shed some light on the barriers, challenges, and disappointments they encountered.

The results also suggest the most promising opportunity to expand the volunteer base is among past volunteers by addressing their issues -- such as perceived organizational politics or not feeling that they were making a real difference – and by helping match their interests and skills with activities that will have a direct benefit to people.

We also heard from the 13% of Canadians who have never volunteered and we received some ideas about what might attract them in the future, such as volunteer opportunities involving manual labour.

### **What Trends Are We Seeing 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 five 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. Most 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
5. Many do not have the capacity to involve groups.

## Advice to Organizations

### Unique Versus Common Findings

Some findings were unique to a specific group. For example, while youth cited volunteering with friends as a priority, family volunteers prefer group activities where their children can actively participate, and boomers indicated being driven by an organization's cause as their primary motivation. Employer-supported volunteers pointed to the equalizing benefits of volunteering, where more rigid corporate hierarchies could be put aside.

### What Does This Mean For Organizations That Engage Volunteers?

Despite these differences, all groups shared the following recommendations for improving the volunteer experience:

- **Build meaningful relationships with volunteers** – Understanding where potential volunteers are in their life cycle as well as their personal goals and motivations is as important as knowing what skills and experience they can offer. Try to create an open dialogue where volunteers feel comfortable letting organizations know what would make their experiences most satisfying, when they need a change, and when it is time for them to move on.
- **Develop integrated HR strategies that include volunteer management** – HR policies and practices need to be based on the scope, requirements, and boundaries of the position and not whether or not the person is paid. These strategies should include the creation of an inclusive and safe working environment, effective initial engagement techniques, opportunities for training and recognition, how work will be evaluated, and feedback mechanisms to ensure two-way communication between the organization and those working on the front line.
- **Be flexible and accommodating with volunteers** – Being willing to adapt to the changing schedules of volunteers and creatively modify volunteer roles to respond to any specific physical and mental health issues in order to make volunteering accessible. This can help an organization broaden its community engagement and gain valuable insights that will potentially expand the organization's reach.
- **Be sensitive to gender, culture, language and age** – Multi-generational, multi-cultural, diverse volunteer bases that reflect the changing demographics of today's society will better position an organization to serve a range of communities. Closely examining the nature and scope of volunteer programs through these different lenses will have positive ripple effects throughout the organization. Remember that human rights and employment standards also apply to volunteer engagement.
- **Provide greater online engagement** – Leveraging the power of the internet and social media technologies are imperative as these are the primary means to search for and promote volunteer opportunities in today's increasingly wired world.
- **Develop customized, balanced approach to engagement** – Ensuring a quality volunteer experience and tailoring approaches to individual volunteers will help to solidify and increase our national volunteer base.



## Common Themes

There were several common threads in the findings across all four groups, which also captured the views of Canadians in three distinct categories: current volunteers, past volunteers (those who have volunteered before, but currently don't), and 'never' volunteers (those with no volunteer experience).

### Current Volunteers

Current volunteers tend to be loyal and perhaps even champions of volunteering for at least some period of time. They indicated an extremely high commitment to volunteering, with 88% offering responses of eight out of 10 to represent their likelihood of volunteering in 2011. Nearly nine out of 10 (88%) current volunteers also offered very high ratings (eight or higher out of 10) on how strongly they would recommend volunteering to others.

### Past Volunteers

Past volunteers placed slightly higher importance on self-improvement, such as learning a new skill, gaining new experience or accessing training, as well as improving employment or academic prospects. Almost a third (31%) of past volunteers said they will likely volunteer in the next 12 months, and 76% indicated that they would recommend volunteering to others.

31% of past volunteers said they will likely volunteer in the next 12 months, and 76% indicated that they would recommend volunteering to others – focusing recruitment and retention efforts on this group would most likely yield the most success.

Volunteers tend to be loyal even though some felt their expectations for the volunteer experience were not met to their satisfaction. Current and past volunteers listed the following examples to describe why they felt their volunteer experience was less than ideal:

- Perceived organizational politics;
- Belief that their skills were not being put to the best use;
- Feeling like they were not making a difference; and
- Frustration with lack of organization related to the volunteer activity.

The research suggests that focusing renewed recruitment and retention efforts on past volunteers would most likely yield the most success to boost volunteer rates and expand the volunteer base.

### 'Never' Volunteers

While only 13% of respondents indicated they have never been a volunteer before, almost two-thirds (62%) of this group also indicated it is unlikely they would volunteer in the next 12 months.

One of the most unique findings was that, as disinclined as they are to become volunteers, more than a quarter (26%) of this small segment of the population indicated they would be particularly interested in providing volunteer support in the form of hands-on trade knowledge or manual labour.

# The Characteristics of Volunteering Today

The research provided a new understanding of the complexities of the volunteering relationship, including identification of the following characteristics that shape the nature of the interaction between today's volunteers and volunteer-involving organizations.

## Volunteering Changes Throughout Our Lifecycle

What volunteer opportunities Canadians seek evolves during our lifetime with changing priorities and circumstances related to the demands of school, work, and family. For example, parents may be volunteering in their children's activities, or with an organization related to the illness of a family member, and volunteers often withdraw when this direct link no longer is applicable to their lives. Organizations need to find ways to help people make the transition to supporting broader community issues.

## Volunteers Today Are Different

Today's Canadians tend to be more goal-oriented and have greater structure in their school, work, family, and social lives. They are mobile, technologically savvy, value autonomy, and have multiple interests and roles within the community.

## Volunteering is a Two-way Relationship

The research uncovered a common emphasis on the need for reciprocity in the volunteer relationship. That is, the goals of the volunteer should be addressed while at the same time considering the needs of the organization. Respondents indicated a preference for having these mutual needs openly expressed, negotiated and met whenever possible.

## Volunteering is Personal

The study found that Canadians consider how they want to volunteer as a very personal decision. Some want to work directly with people, others said they prefer more opportunities to volunteer virtually ('remote' or online volunteering), while others indicated a specific preference for manual labour.

## Volunteering is a way to Transfer and Develop Skills

The study found three key ways in which volunteering allows for the transfer and development of skills:

**Developing skills** – volunteers can gain experience to satisfy educational or community requirements as well as to enhance their future employability;

**Offering skills** – through volunteering, individuals can share their skills, talents, knowledge and professional services; and

**Mentoring** – volunteers can mentor others directly to pass along specific skills to those seeking to gain them.

## Volunteering in Groups Appeals to All Ages

Respondents in all age groups noted the appeal of opportunities to volunteer as part of a group, especially among those who fell in the youth, family and employer-supporter volunteer categories. The benefits of group volunteering include the chance to engage in a social activity and expand business networks.

## Finding Satisfying Volunteering is Not Easy for Everyone

Many past volunteers and those who have never volunteered indicated that they did not know where to find a volunteer opportunity that matches their interests, skills, and schedule. This was particularly true among youth.

# YOUTH

*"Organizations need to get to know their youth volunteers personally, and learn about their skill set; this will improve long-term engagement with us."*

Defined as between 15-24 years old, youth represent the future of volunteering and the relatively small size of this group makes effective recruitment techniques particularly important. The following are highlights of the study's key findings related to youth volunteers:

## **The Characteristics of Youth Volunteers**

- Career-focused, flexible and receptive to new ideas
- More open-minded – have grown up being exposed to greater diversity than previous generations
- Energetic and enthusiastic – have high levels of vitality
- Technologically savvy – respond to innovative online communications and recruitment techniques
- Prefer peer camaraderie – enjoy meeting new people and volunteering with friends
- Affected by mandatory community service requirements needed for high school graduation in some provinces and territories
- See volunteering as supporting their job search, skills development, and networking
- Sensitive to perceived age discrimination – need to feel respected and given responsibility

## **Youth Volunteer Interests**

- Most likely to volunteer for education/research organizations, or sports/recreation
- Somewhat more likely to volunteer for social service organizations
- Enjoy international volunteering as 'world citizens' and define 'community' as being global
- Most likely to volunteer for organizations that support environmental issues
- Need flexible volunteer opportunities to accommodate other commitments for school, work, friends and family
- Look for volunteer descriptions that clearly define what they will do and its broader impact
- Appreciate opportunities to receive constructive feedback and certification where possible
- Relate best to other youth and therefore value volunteer activities involving other youth

## **Barriers to Youth Volunteering**

- Lack of time or inability to make a long-term commitment
- Not being asked or unsure how to become involved
- Feeling that their opinions and insights are not valued, respected or taken into account
- Perception that youth need services instead of seeing youth as having skills to give to organizations)

ENERGY  
ENTHUSIASM



SKILLS  
FLEXIBILITY  
FRIENDS



*"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."*

The relationship between the private sector and the voluntary sector assumes corporations are held accountable for their social and environmental impact, as well as their financial performance. Employee Volunteer Programs (EVPs) are based on the philosophy that community volunteer work is a matter of corporate concern and another measure of social responsibility. EVPs can also have a positive impact on workforce morale, skill development, productivity, job satisfaction and employee retention.

The following are highlights of the study's key findings related to employer-supported volunteers (ESVs):

### **The Characteristics of Employer-Supported Volunteers**

- Results-oriented – ESVs want short-term, high-skilled volunteering opportunities
- Measuring progress – ESVs like to measure their efforts and know the impact is worth the time they're contributing
- Volunteerism as a hobby – volunteering is seen as an activity distinct from work, with a clear end product
- Flexible volunteering – ESVs want the ability to work remotely and to know the minimum hours expected
- Structured volunteering – ESVs do not want to contribute to an organization that isn't structured or efficient

### **Employer-Supported Volunteer Interests**

- Prefer opportunities to learn new skills, valuable to both employee and their company
- Some indicated they do not want to perform the same job for a volunteer organization as they do for their employer
- Prefer organizations with the admin and HR support to efficiently run programs and ensure follow-up
- Look for opportunities without rigid hierarchies and volunteers are treated equally
- Enjoy meaningful volunteer engagement, not just 'one-day' company volunteer events

### **Barriers to Employer-Supported Volunteering**

- 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 diversity issues, inflexibility re: time/space; inability to volunteer remotely

SKILLS  
PASSION



NEW SKILLS  
RESULTS  
NO HIERARCHY



*"I want to volunteer as a family to instil the sense of volunteerism in my children to continue the betterment of community later in life."*

The demand for opportunities where families can volunteer together is great, but the current supply of these opportunities is small. However, the number of volunteers who are parents of school-aged children make this a distinct demographic worth considering. Family volunteers tend to value charitable activities highly and recognize that family participation in volunteer work can contribute to a happy, stable and rewarding life.

Family volunteering is gaining prominence as a specific form of volunteering to allow children and teens to gain confidence and self-esteem through volunteering with the guiding hand of a family member.

It's also a way of dealing with lack of time as a barrier to volunteering, as many Canadians with busy lives see family volunteering as an opportunity to spend quality time with family, while also giving back to their community and mentoring their children. The following are highlights of the study's key findings related to family volunteers:

### **The Characteristics of Family Volunteers**

- Busy schedules – challenging to find enough time and juggle the schedules around babies, young children and teens, and sometimes aging parents
- Family cohesion – perception that volunteering together provides a thread to connect various members of a family
- Generational differences – organizations need to recognize and handle the range of family members differently
- Passing on values – parents often look for ways to engage their teenage children in volunteering in order to instil values, shift attitudes of entitlement and boost social awareness

### **Family Volunteer Interests**

- Opportunities to develop youth through volunteering (builds character and parents can teach skills)
- Virtual volunteer opportunities where families can participate via Skype or other online methods
- Casual opportunities ('one-offs' or 'two-offs') to allow family volunteers to try out assignments
- Opportunities that can be perceived as 'family-friendly' and enjoyable for all ages

### **Barriers to Family Volunteering**

- Lack of time
- Inappropriate volunteer activities for children due to client confidentiality or sensitivity issues
- Need for adequate supervision of children – opportunities that incorporate child care with volunteer time are valued
- Lack of awareness of volunteer activities that may be appropriate for the inclusion of children
- Concern that organizations don't make enough of an effort to get to know family members in order to match them with appropriate activities





INTEREST  
COMMITMENT



TIME TOGETHER  
INSTILL VALUES  
FAMILY-FRIENDLY  
OPPORTUNITIES

# BOOMERS

*"Canada has a wealth of boomers – foot soldiers of social change. They bring skill sets not being properly harvested; instead they are disappearing on golf courses."*

Baby boomers are defined as being the generation born between 1945 and 1962, who are now approaching retirement.

With the average number of hours volunteered highest among seniors, the addition of retired boomers could have a dramatic impact on the number of volunteers, their skills pool and collective commitment. This is particularly important to offset the current group of aging seniors who have made up the bulk of the 'uber volunteers' thus far, and are now edging into later years and retiring from their 'volunteer careers'.

Of particular note are the increasing numbers of recent immigrants of boomer age. This group could play a pivotal volunteer role in helping to integrate and support new immigrants into Canadian society, thanks to their unique cultural and linguistic skills. The following are highlights of the study's key findings related to boomer volunteers:

## **The Characteristics of Boomer Volunteers**

- Clear leaders -- in terms of average hours of volunteering compared to other groups
- Impressive overall participation rates – consistently among the highest
- Meaningful engagement – boomers look for purpose in their volunteer activities
- Available time and flexibility – boomers have more time and relatively flexible schedules compared to other groups
- Expectation of organization – boomers want organizations to be efficient and effective in their management of volunteers and staff
- Loyalty – Boomers indicated they are willing to stay at an organization for many years as long as they are treated well

## **Boomer Volunteer Interests**

- Activities that reinforce their strong sense of social commitment
- Organizations that allow boomer volunteers to work independently and have a sense of ownership over the project
- Projects where boomers can clearly see the impact they are making
- Activities that offer a chance to act outside their skill/knowledge base (boomers perceived activities different from their daily work to be refreshing)
- Casual or short-term opportunities where boomers can see what the organization is like before making a long-term commitment

## **Barriers to Boomer Volunteering**

- Smaller organizations that need volunteers to do 'everything' and don't match boomers' skills with tasks
- The perception that larger organizations are downloading the responsibility of unwanted tasks from staff to volunteers
- Not being recognized as a person with a wide skill set, but simply 'a volunteer body'

LOYAL  
ENGAGEMENT  
LEADERSHIP

IMPACT  
PURPOSE  
NEW SKILLS



## Recommendations

This latest research underlines the necessity of tailored approaches in order to retain and increase the volunteer base, especially if organizations are to have success with re-engaging past volunteers.

The results of this study clearly demonstrate that fostering meaningful volunteer engagement in Canada must evolve with the times to meet the needs of both volunteers and volunteer involving organizations.

Volunteers in all four groups shared the following general recommendations for improving the volunteer experience:

- Build meaningful relationships with volunteers;
- Develop integrated HR strategies and practices for both paid employment and volunteer activities;
- Be flexible and accommodating with volunteers;
- Be sensitive to gender, culture, language and age; and
- Provide greater online engagement.

### **Organizations can create a more rewarding volunteer experience by:**

- Laying out the goals, projected impact and value of the volunteer commitment;
- Clarifying 'the what', and being more flexible regarding 'the where, how and when' of volunteer activities;
- Engaging a volunteer's unique skills, talents and interests to increase engagement and satisfaction; and
- Getting to know their volunteers better, including what individuals are looking to achieve by volunteering.

## In Conclusion

The motivations, interests and kinds of experiences individuals are looking for when considering volunteering change and evolve as Canadians move through the different stages of their lives.

Now, more than ever, organizations need to understand and facilitate these shifts in order to optimize their volunteer recruitment and retention programs. This is essential for sustaining and growing an effective and vibrant voluntary sector in Canada.

The optimal formula to build organizational capacity and strategically engage volunteers is one that strikes a balance between:

- Designing specific, set roles and being open to volunteers initiating/defining 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.

Finding this balance as we aim to build a better future for our communities is essential because Canada's voluntary sector is an important third pillar of Canadian society (in conjunction with the public and private sectors), and a major contributor to our nation's world-renowned ability to build quality communities.

As such, government, business and volunteer-involving organizations have a critical role to play in fostering a more meaningful volunteer experience, since the achievements of our nation's volunteers are directly linked to Canada's cultural, social and economic health and potential.

Every day, the lives of Canadians from coast to coast to coast are touched by volunteering, and it is an enriching experience both for the volunteers themselves, as well as those who are recipients or 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 information, or to review the research summary report: 'The World of Volunteering Today – Engaging Youth, Workplace, Family & Boomer Volunteers', please visit [www.volunteer.ca](http://www.volunteer.ca)**

