
Top ten trends in volunteering

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The International Year of Volunteers created an unprecedented opportunity for dialogue and reflection on volunteering in Canada. The Year shone a spotlight on a phenomenon largely taken for granted and normally seen as 'nice but not necessary'. A nation-wide survey revealed changes in volunteering behaviours; promotional campaigns got people feeling proud and talking about their volunteering; releases of numerous capacity building resources encouraged Managers of Volunteers to consider new ways to recruit, oversee and support volunteers in more than 180,000 non-profit and voluntary organisations.

During IYV, Volunteer Canada, as the national volunteer centre, provided leadership, wrote most of the new resources and generally tried to push the envelope of people's thinking. A tool that has proven a successful vehicle for influencing people's thinking is the monthly newsletter. Short 'think-pieces' and opinion columns are designed more to get people thinking than to provide lengthy or instructional information. Toward the end of IYV, I wrote a piece identifying the 'top ten' trends in volunteering. The following list reflects most of that thinking although changes have been made in deference to an international audience.

1. MUCH COMES FROM THE FEW

The *2000 National Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating* (Statistics Canada) revealed a rather small and yet extremely significant fact. While one in four Canadians (26%) does some volunteering in a year, a very small minority of Canadians (less than 7 per cent) does most (73%) of all the volunteer work. Add to this the fact that in 2000 the total number of hours volunteered in Canada went up from the previous

(1997) survey and we see that this sub-set of *uber-volunteers* are carrying an ever heavier load.

It appears that in the face of a shrinking number of volunteers, (the volunteer rate in Canada dipped to 26% in 2000 compared to 31% in 1997) voluntary organisations keep turning to their old faithfuls. While it seems that for the moment this 'old guard' do keep stepping up to the plate and giving more and more time, how long can this last? What challenges will face the Manager of Volunteers who isn't able (or inclined?) to recruit a new cohort of volunteers? Could volunteers who perhaps have less time to give fill the void left by burned-out super volunteers? An over-dependence on existing volunteers is a troubling trend and one that needs close examination in the near future. Full results of the NSGVP can be viewed at <www.nsgvp.org>

2. VOLUNTEERS HAVE (OR SEEM TO HAVE) CHANGED

- More young people volunteer to gain work-related skills.
- More seniors who travel or have multiple activities have less time available for concentrated volunteering.
- More new Canadians volunteer in order to develop work experience and practice language skills.
- More people with disabilities seeking meaningful ways to participate in community life are now volunteering.

3. VOLUNTEER JOB DESIGN IS THE BEST DEFENCE AGAINST DEMOGRAPHIC AND FUNDING CHANGES

While a certain amount of hand-wringing and bemoaning may be called for, as a kind of wake for the

disappearing 'super volunteer', in general it is not that helpful for organisations to merely mourn the loss of the nine to five, ever available, traditional volunteer. People are clearly willing to give less time than in the past. Volunteer demographics are changing but so is our understanding of better ways to involve people, to get the most out of their contribution of time and energy. By employing job design theory which has informed human resource management in the business sector for quite some time, voluntary organisations can learn to think in new ways about how volunteers can help them get the work done and achieve their mission.

Volunteer Canada has published a new resource, available on-line at <www.volunteer.ca>, entitled *A Matter of Design* that provides background and guidance on job design specifically for volunteer programming.

4. MANDATORY VOLUNTEERING

Mandatory volunteering has introduced a new concept to volunteerism in Canada. Volunteering, is defined in our country as being activities undertaken:

1. Without remuneration
2. For the benefit of others
3. By choice.

Even the term *mandatory volunteering* is oxymoronic (ha!) and the phenomenon itself creates many challenges. From high school students required to volunteer to graduate to recipients of social assistance 'volunteering' in order to maintain their benefits – or (my own personal favourite!) the use of volunteering as an alternative to incarceration – mandated volunteers can be a questionable boon to organisations. On the other hand a public policy argument can be made for *requiring* people to earn benefits or for including service learning in the range of educational experiences offered by schools. Whether this particular trend survives political and systemic changes, the current impact of mandatory volunteering challenges voluntary organisations to find ways to benefit from the programs.

5. VOLUNTEERING BY CONTRACT

Volunteering by contract is an emerging trend that sees a volunteer commitment as a negotiated and mutually beneficial arrangement (by contract) rather

than a one-way sacrifice of time by the volunteer. Introducing the idea of a contracted relationship acknowledges the interdependence of organisation and volunteer and opens up opportunities for each to discuss what they want out of the arrangement, terms of engagement and perhaps most important to define, how much and for how long.

6. RISK MANAGEMENT/SCREENING

In many parts of the world concerns have arisen over the access that can be potentially gained by volunteers (or paid staff for that matter) to vulnerable people. To a lesser extent there are also concerns about access to money or organisational assets. Required both by law and by moral imperative to do so, voluntary organisations are moving toward adopting risk management recruitment and management strategies. These include the implementation of police and other external checks on potential volunteers and the development of screening-based recruitment, training and oversight approaches to ensure that people with intent to harm are not allowed to work with vulnerable people, especially children.

Volunteer Canada has worked extensively on the issue of volunteer screening and a number of reports and resources can be found at <www.volunteer.ca/volunteer/screening.htm>

7. THE IMPORTING OF CORPORATE AND PUBLIC SECTOR MANAGEMENT PRACTICES INTO THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

This trend leads to greater interest in things like:

- a. Standards, codes of conduct.
- b. Accountability and transparency measures around program administration.
- c. Demand for evaluation, outcome measurement, even impact measurement.
- d. Professionalisation of individuals working in the field of volunteer management.

8. MANAGERS OF VOLUNTEERS/ADMINISTRATORS OF VOLUNTEER RESOURCES NEED TO BE TAKEN MORE SERIOUSLY WITHIN THE COHORT OF PAID PROFESSIONALS IN THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

While Canada has a number of provincial, and one national association representing Managers of Volun-

teers the profession is still relatively new both in concept and influence. A vast amount of volunteer management is still carried out by people who would not designate themselves as 'professional' in this field, who often have a range of other duties or who, in many, many organisations, are themselves volunteers. Volunteer Canada is currently working with Carleton University, AVA and the University of Texas to develop an innovative advanced program of study for Managers of Volunteers that could be taken fully on-line. This Masters level Certificate will introduce a higher level of educational material targeted at people interested in the management of volunteer programming and should enrich the profession markedly.

9. CHALLENGES POSED BY THE VOLUNTEER GOVERNANCE MODEL OF THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

On a whimsical or perhaps audacious day this trend could be re-titled *Volunteer Boards Don't Work*. While this would be, obviously, to overstate the matter, it is true that many organisations face challenges associated with recruiting enough/the right/appropriately active volunteer board members or governors. Despite the abundance of literature on how boards work, different models of board governance and guidelines for board behaviours, there is hardly a voluntary organisation that has not had board level struggles at some point in its history. Add to this, concerns emerging in Canada regarding the liability of boards and board members as well as the trends already noted about the reduction in the amount of time many volunteers are willing to contribute and we see an emerging trend that may have significant impact.

10. VOLUNTEER DEVELOPMENT NEEDS TO BE TAKEN MORE SERIOUSLY BY THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

Despite the seemingly self-evident fact that there would be no voluntary sector without the more than a billion hours of volunteer work contributed by 6.5 million volunteers every year in Canada, volunteer development is one of the last things on the radar of senior level staff and volunteers in many organisations. Where there is a paid professional manager of volunteers organisations will usually have the appropriate policies and procedures in place to manage volunteer programming. It is often true, however, even in these organisations that the board, or senior staff, pay little attention to challenges and opportunities associated with volunteer involvement. In organisations with few paid staff or with a limited history of volunteer involvement volunteer management practices can be pretty much 'seat of the pants' resulting in low levels of volunteer activity and reduced positive impacts by volunteers. IYV went some way to raising the profile of the importance of voluntary action but much can be done to encourage organisations to invest time, money and expertise into efforts that will enhance their volunteer management tactics and promote and recognize the importance of volunteers.

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Volunteerism in America

Points of Light

BACKBONE OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

From the earliest days of the history of the United States, the spirit of volunteer service has been reflected by neighbours helping neighbours to overcome obstacles in the pursuit of happiness. In fact, this spirit of volunteer service was a critical ingredient in the successful development of today's form of democratic government.

The freedom and individual rights at the core of American society, however, come with a shared responsibility for the health and well-being of our communities, and for each other. Volunteering helps to connect people to vital and fundamental resources required for successful living within our society. Volunteering connects communities. Volunteering offers a way for people to help others and themselves.

ESTABLISHING A NEW SOCIETY

Historically, volunteering has been a necessary and critical component in the successful evolution of America. Communities relied heavily on the commitment of their members to help establish a new society where each individual could have access to the resources necessary for success. Volunteers were the backbone of American democracy in action. Many believed that if all people were created equal, then all people must have equal access to the opportunities of life and the resources of society.

Today, individuals, families, and organisations continue to volunteer for a variety of reasons. Volunteers coach local sports teams for young people. They volunteer to work at schools to help children learn to read. Volunteers visit the sick, feed the homeless, and mentor those in need.

VOLUNTEERING AS A SOLUTION

Whatever people do as volunteers, their personal contributions are helping others connect with people and resources and when the human family stays connected, serious social problems are diminished. From the viewpoint of the Points of Light Foundation and the Volunteer Center National Network, connecting through volunteer service is a powerful tool for bringing people together and solving many of the problems that face our communities. Our particular brand of volunteering focuses on solving serious social problems by connecting people from every walk of life within local communities. Volunteers are looking beyond their own familiar circumstances to connect with others. They are teaching people how to connect or reconnect to the social resources that should be available to everyone. More than 90 per cent of Americans believe that volunteering is the primary way to bring people together to reconnect society and alleviate many of our social problems. It is also the most cost-effective way.

Consider the astronomical cost of solving our social problems without the help of volunteers. In the United States, more than half – approximately 100 million – of all adults volunteer. This volunteer workforce represents the equivalent of over nine million full-time employees whose combined efforts are worth an estimated \$250 billion (based on \$16.05 an hour in 2001).

FINDING THE RIGHT PLACE TO START

We are all responsible to each other to keep our society connected so that we all succeed. As members of this human family, many of us continue to feel a natu-