

Bridging the Gap: How can we bridge the gap between what Canadians are looking for in Volunteering and how organizations are engaging volunteers?

The following is a synopsis of the Bridging the Gap Summary Report prepared by the Sooke Region Volunteer Centre.

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.

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.

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.

The primary gaps identified by researchers are:

- Many people are looking for group activities BUT few organizations are offering them
- Many people come with professional skills BUT are looking for volunteer tasks that involve something different from their work life;
- Organizations are expected to clearly define the rolls 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 commitments BUT many more volunteers are looking for short term opportunities, and
- Many organizations focus on what the need BUT besides helping others, many volunteers come with their own goals to be met.

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 and by helping match their interests and skills with activities that will have a direct benefit to people.

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.

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.

Family volunteering is 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.

Recommendations from the report:

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.

Fostering meaningful volunteer engagement must evolve with the times to meet the needs of both volunteers and volunteer involving organizations.

Volunteers 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

For the full report go to <http://volunteer.ca/content/bridging-gap-summary-report>

This research and related resources can be accessed by visiting www.volunteer.ca