

## **Research in Action: ‘Building the Bridge’**

*Helping organizations enrich the volunteer experience to build a better future for our communities*

The findings of a new pan-Canadian research study provide insight on how to bridge the gap between what Canadians are looking for in volunteering today and how organizations are engaging volunteers.

Conducted in late 2010, the research gathered practical information volunteer organizations can use to attract and retain skilled, dedicated volunteers among four specific demographic groups: youth, family, baby boomers, and employer-supporter volunteers.

The research findings captured what Canadians want in their volunteer experiences, their issues in finding satisfying volunteer roles, and what organizations can do to enhance their volunteer base, achieve their missions and ultimately build stronger communities.

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

Some findings were unique to a particular population, but all groups shared the following recommendations for converting the research findings into actions to improve the volunteer experience:

#### ***THE GOAL: Build meaningful relationships with volunteers***

##### **THE OBJECTIVES:**

- ✓ 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.
- ✓ 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.

##### **ACTIONS TO HELP GET THERE:**

- Review useful [interview questions](#) that help you get to know potential volunteers.
- Use [ice breakers](#) at volunteer orientation sessions.
- Hold regular volunteer meetings, with guest speakers, skills-development learning, etc.
- Conduct [volunteer satisfaction surveys](#).
- Host social events and [volunteer recognition](#) events.
- Set up a suggestion box.

#### ***THE GOAL: Develop integrated HR strategies that include volunteer management***

##### **THE OBJECTIVES:**

- ✓ 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.

##### **ACTIONS TO HELP GET THERE:**

- Complete the [Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement audit](#) and commit to meeting and upholding the standards outlined in the [Code](#).
- Host volunteer training sessions to inform volunteers of the protection offered to them by law against harassment and work place hazards.
- Hold volunteer information sessions that outline human rights legislation and labour laws that apply to all employees, including volunteers.
- Arrange training sessions for volunteer managers by the HR department on harassment, safety, and labour laws and how these apply to volunteers.

***THE GOAL: Be flexible and accommodating with volunteers***

**THE OBJECTIVE:**

- ✓ Be willing to adapt to the changing schedules of volunteers.
- ✓ Creatively modify volunteer roles to respond to any specific physical and mental health issues in order to make volunteering accessible.

**ACTIONS TO HELP GET THERE:**

- Whenever possible, give volunteers the option to work remotely, at a time of their choosing.
- Create [volunteer position descriptions](#) that describe the commitment required and the level of flexibility in the position.
- Whenever possible, offer volunteers the opportunity to [work in groups](#).

***THE GOAL: Be sensitive to gender, culture, language and age***

**THE OBJECTIVES:**

- ✓ 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.

**ACTIONS TO HELP GET THERE:**

- Utilize [tools](#) that help organizations assess their volunteer opportunities for cultural sensitivity.
- Ensure your organization offers opportunities that take into account the different needs of [youth families](#) and [seniors](#).
- Use [resources](#) that help organizations assess their accessibility for people with disabilities.

***THE GOAL: Provide greater online engagement***

**THE OBJECTIVE:**

- ✓ 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 wired world.

**ACTIONS TO HELP GET THERE:**

- Develop Twitter and Facebook pages for your organization, and [advertise volunteer opportunities](#) on social media sites, as well as your organization's website.
- Initiate community conversations about volunteering on your social media sites to get your audience active and engaged.
- Speak about volunteer-related issues on social media sites and the organization's blog to position your organization as a leader in the sector.

***THE GOAL: Develop customized, balanced approaches to engagement***

***THE OBJECTIVE:***

- ✓ Ensuring a quality volunteer experience and tailoring approaches to individual volunteers will help to solidify and increase our national volunteer base.

***ACTIONS TO HELP GET THERE:***

- Hold preliminary meetings with volunteers to discuss expectations and tailor volunteer opportunities to the individual.
- Take time during the interview to determine the specific skill sets and interests of the candidate in order to utilize these in your organization.
- Whenever possible, allow volunteers to choose their own hours, and establish their own level of engagement.

This is a space for sharing resources that assist organizations that engage volunteers. It contains links to tools, examples, and suggested practices that help bridge the gap between the needs of volunteers and the needs of organizations that rely on their work. To submit further links and help keep this resource growing, please e-mail Phoebe Powell, Communications Coordinator at Volunteer Canada:

[ppowell@volunteer.ca](mailto:ppowell@volunteer.ca).

The study was conducted on behalf of **Volunteer Canada**, in partnership with **Manulife Financial**, the Carleton University Centre for Voluntary Sector Research & Development and Harris/Decima.

**For more details, please refer to the full document**

***'Bridging the Gap: Enriching the volunteer experience to build a better future for our communities – Highlights of a pan-Canadian research study'*** at [www.volunteer.ca](http://www.volunteer.ca)