

**Bridging the Gap: Enriching the Volunteer Experience to  
Build a Better Future for Our Communities**

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**Abstract**

*The world of volunteering has changed dramatically over the past decade. Practitioners, policy-makers, and social scientists have been monitoring the impact of the recent trends in Canadian society, shifts in social policy, the evolution of Volunteer Resource Management, and the emergence of more integrated corporate community investment strategies. Key drivers, including technology, the economy, and globalization, have had a profound influence on the voluntary sector broadly and on volunteer programs, in particular. The research explored this changing landscape with a focus on youth, families, baby-boomers, and employer-supported volunteers. It identified the gaps between what today's volunteers are looking for and the opportunities being offered by organizations and offered insights and advice to improve the volunteer experience.*

**Key Words:**

youth, baby-boomers, family volunteering, employer-supported volunteering

**Linking Research to Practice**

Volunteer Resource Managers, volunteer centres, leaders in the voluntary sector, and potential volunteers were reporting on the growing gap they were observing between what today's volunteers were looking for and the opportunities organizations were offering. There was a need to verify and further explore this anecdotal information in order to develop strategies to better engage volunteers and to improve the volunteer experience. "Bridging the Gap: Enriching the Volunteer Experience to Build a Better Future for Our Communities" is a summary report of a comprehensive pan-Canadian study (Centre for Voluntary Sector Research and Development, 2010), produced by Volunteer Canada and Manulife Financial Corporation.

While the research began with a wide lens, as the world of volunteering was explored, there was a particular focus on learning more about youth, families, baby-boomers, and employer-supported volunteers. This focus was determined based on the analysis of the Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating (Statistics Canada, 2009) which identified these as priority groups for strategic engagement.

Through a total of 18 focus groups, held in every region of the country, with a total of 237 participants, a literature review of more than 200 documents, a snapshot of 200 organizations, a survey of more than 500 volunteers, and a telephone survey of over 1000 households, a clearer picture emerged of the motivations, characteristics, barriers, and aspirations of Canadians for

their volunteer experience. The findings reflected the voices of current volunteers, past volunteers, and those who have never volunteered and captured views from Canadians, in both rural and urban settings. All materials and survey instruments were available in both English and French. A more detailed description of the methodology is available in the full report of the study.

The summary report portrayed today's volunteers as being more goal-oriented, results-driven, mobile, self-directed, with multiple interests. Many seek short-term, skills-based volunteer opportunities that directly improve someone's life. The study also gathered some very direct advice to organizations on how to better engage today's volunteers.

### **Gaps Identified**

The study confirmed and illuminated some serious gaps between what volunteers are looking for and the opportunities organizations are currently offering. These findings will not be surprising for the seasoned practitioner, however, the width of the gap and the risk it poses to the future of volunteering is becoming increasingly critical. While there were differences between youth, families, baby-boomers, and employer-supported volunteers, the following gaps were cross-cutting:

- 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.

### **Advice to Organizations**

Volunteers and potential volunteers of all ages and stages gave some very direct advice to organizations on how they can improve the way they engage volunteers. This included basic practices such as building a meaningful relationship with volunteers, understanding where they are in their life cycle, and learning more about their personal goals, motivations, and skills. Developing more integrated human resources strategies was also seen as important so that, regardless of a person's status in an organization, some basic policies, support, and benefits equally apply to both volunteers and paid employees.

Being flexible and accommodating the unpredictable schedule of volunteers as they deal with the competing demands of their work, education, and family life was emphasized by all age groups. Greater sensitivity is needed with respect to gender, culture, language, and age so that organizations are welcoming and inclusive. Finally, while many organizations have really embraced technology and social media, volunteers want more information about volunteering available on-line.

### **Improving the Volunteer Experience**

Two-thirds of current and past volunteers indicated that they had had at least one negative volunteer experience. Respondents identified a number of issues that influenced their level of satisfaction

including organizational politics, a sense that their skills were not well used, and a sense that the organization was not well prepared for them. Many youth talked about their perception of organizations being too bureaucratic or having experienced age discrimination. Families felt that there were not enough intergenerational volunteer opportunities. Baby-boomers wanted to see the impact of their volunteer efforts. Volunteers who were supported by their employers wanted an opportunity to expand their experience and their networks.

### **Usefulness of this Research Report**

The report would be useful for any volunteer-involving organization interested in renewing their volunteer programs by deepening their understanding of today's volunteers and, in particular, how to engage youth, families, baby-boomers, and employer-supported volunteers. Professional associations of Volunteer Resource Managers may use the findings to identify professional development topics or themes for workshops and conferences. Post-secondary institutions with courses in non-profit management or Volunteer Resource Management certificates may also want to incorporate some of the material into the curriculum. Funders, policy-makers, and corporate community investment managers will also find the research helpful in designing their programs, assessing grant proposals, and developing policies. The information about the various cohorts can help decision-makers target their investments more strategically.

### **The Broader Landscape**

The context in which volunteering occurs was examined in great depth, during the study. This included key trends in Canadian society, public policy, the non-profit sector, Volunteer Resource Management, and the field of corporate community investment. Changing demographics, the labour market, immigration patterns, technology, globalization, and shifts in social policy were identified, as key drivers, and were linked to the challenges facing the field of Volunteer Resource management. This component of the research would also be of interest to those working or researching the field of citizen participation, social inclusion, or community engagement.

The summary report is available in both English and French at [www.volunteer.ca](http://www.volunteer.ca) and the full report is available in English, by request [PSpeevak-sladowski@volunteer.ca](mailto:PSpeevak-sladowski@volunteer.ca)

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### **About the Author**

Paula Speevak Sladowski joined Volunteer Canada, as the Director of Applied Research and Public Policy, after a 30 year career in the voluntary sector. She teaches non-profit management and community service-learning at the University of Ottawa and at Carleton University and holds a Master of Management degree from McGill University (The McGill-McConnell Program for National Voluntary Sector Leaders.)

Appreciation is expressed to Ruth MacKenzie and Don Lapierre, of Volunteer Canada and to Melanie Hientz, of the Carleton University Centre for Voluntary Sector Research and Development, for their insights and contributions to the ideas in this article.