

## **Volunteering for Skills & Experience**

### ***Description***

There may be a shortage of jobs in communities across Canada but there is no end of useful work to be done. Fortunately, volunteering is a significant part of the nation's social and economic fabric. Estimates of the number of volunteers range from 4 to 7.5 million, but the demand for voluntary services is escalating. Analysts suggest this increased demand is based in part on demographic trends such as the aging population, social trends such as increased familial breakdown, and health trends such as the accelerating incidence of HIV and other ailments.

Clearly, a strong volunteer sector is a key component of a healthy community. Agencies that engage volunteers can optimize the magnitude and effectiveness of volunteerism by working together to develop their community's capacity to provide support for volunteer recruitment, referral, orientation, training, and promotion. Thus a key part of promoting volunteerism is some sort of Volunteer Centre.

A crucial function for such a centre is the matching of volunteers with community agencies. This involves helping the volunteers identify their skills and interests, and then making an appropriate match. Publicly accessible computer databases can be of considerable assistance in connecting volunteers with appropriate opportunities. Virtual volunteering through the internet provides a significant new vehicle for volunteer activities such as technical advising, research, advocacy and social support.

Helping volunteers and agencies develop the knowledge and skills to improve their performance is another key service. In some cases, the training is specific to a particular job. Other training may be more general in nature, for example, board member effectiveness training. Agencies who use volunteers benefit from knowing what practices have worked well for others, including best practices for providing volunteers with support, development and feedback. They also need to understand their legal responsibilities.

Targeting the populations in the community that may not be aware of volunteer opportunities and benefits (low income residents, for example) should occur within a broader human resource development system. This will allow some initial training to be done and ensure that the individual is linked to a volunteer centre or other support system.

For related entries, see the sub-topic Developing Leadership in the section on Doing the Planning, Research & Advocacy.

### ***Benefits***

If the organizational structures are in place to promote and support volunteering, individuals can benefit tremendously from the experience, skills and contacts that volunteering provides. Young people in search of work options can use volunteering to help them determine where their greatest interest and skills lie, as well as giving them work experience for their resumé. Others can make local connections in the field of their choice that may lead to actual work, mentoring support, etc. In some cases volunteering provides much needed practical experience in order to pursue further education. In every case, however, volunteer activities demonstrate to potential employers that a person is committed and proactive.

All this in turn contributes to the overall social and economic health of the community, as people are engaged, positive and productively contributing. In particular, people with special needs, people living in poverty and others who are often marginalized, stand to benefit from becoming volunteers. Organizational support through a volunteer network or centre can help facilitate their inclusion.

From the community standpoint, volunteers provide substantive services from support to disadvantaged citizens, through cultural, educational and environmental activities, to improved public perceptions, laws and policies. Left to ad hoc processes, many opportunities to provide these services would be lost.

### ***Major challenges***

For volunteer centres or networks to be effective, some funding is usually required to cover core staffing and infrastructure. Getting this funding can be quite challenging as these organizations are by nature simply enable other groups to do their work and do not directly produce the 'deliverables' that funding agencies are often calling for. Fortunately, some new sources of funding for this type of capacity building are emerging as governments recognize the role of the non-profit sector in filling some of the gaps left by social spending reductions. In British Columbia, for example, a new Ministry of Community Development, Co-operatives and Volunteers was established in 1999.

Another challenge is that just as the demand seems to be increasing there is a decline in the number of potential volunteers available because women, a strong traditional source, are more and more joining the paid labour force. A similar effect is happening as the generations that have been traditionally active in volunteerism age and reduce their level of activity. However, virtual volunteering via the internet may provide a more flexible and practical option for some of these people. Facilitating opportunities for families to volunteer together is another strategy aimed at building participation rates. Concentrated efforts to recruit youth and younger adults may also be helpful.

Once up and running a volunteer network or centre is likely to very busy handling high volumes of interactions. There is a tendency to focus on immediate logistical tasks and to hope that volunteers who are quietly working away are doing fine. However, commitment and interest may drop off if volunteers do not periodically get encouragement and recognition. It is important that the volunteer support organization builds in operational procedures to maintain rapport with volunteers and ensure that volunteer contributions are acknowledged. It is also important to address their on-going need for development, growth and change.

Still another challenge lies in developing broad community appreciation for the role and value of volunteers. This may be because many people are still operating under the belief that our governments remain the real guardians of our social services. It is also due to the common perception that volunteerism is a relatively minor social enterprise, unrelated to the economic health of our community. Overcoming these perceptions will require determined and skillful communication efforts.

***Some practical steps***

1. Undertake a needs assessment of existing agencies that use volunteers, determine the level of interest in collaboration and consider what type of organizational structure might be helpful.
2. Contact Volunteer Canada for information and development support through their program for emerging volunteer centres.
3. Contact provincial organizations such as Volunteer BC for a list of volunteer centres that can be used for additional guidance and networking.
4. Identify core staffing and infrastructure needs and, if appropriate, pursue funding.
5. In order to maximize the opportunities for individuals to use volunteering as a “pre-employment” activity, communities need to target specific groups in the community (youth, single parents, etc.) and provide training and supports for them that link their volunteer work to their career goals.

***Resource organizations***

- Charity Village ([www.charityvillage.com](http://www.charityvillage.com)) is designed to encourage, support and serve Canadian charities and non-profit organizations. This site has sections for managers, staffers, fundraisers, volunteers, donors and supporters. There are also a career centre, bookstore and a collection of how-to articles.
- Volunteer Canada, 430 Gilmour Street, Ottawa, Ont. K2P 0R8, (tel. 800-670-0401; website: [www.volunteer.ca](http://www.volunteer.ca)). The national resource centre for volunteerism facilitates the

## *Tools & Techniques*

work of volunteers, volunteer centres and voluntary organizations to develop resources and skills.

- Volunteer Opportunity Exchange (website: [www.voe-reb.org](http://www.voe-reb.org)) uses the internet to match volunteers with appropriate positions. It is a joint project of Volunteer Canada and Human Resources Development Canada.
- Volunteer Vancouver, #301-3102 Main Street, Vancouver, BC V5T 3G7 (tel. 604-875-9144; website: [vancouver.volunteer.ca](http://vancouver.volunteer.ca)). Provides training and consultation, research and program development, an extensive library and resource centre, and agency services which publicize volunteer opportunities.

### ***Publications***

- Judy Stevens, *The Complete Guide to Assessing and Improving Your Volunteer Program*. A workbook that can be used to examine volunteer programs and adapt strategies to the changing volunteer environment. It is available from Volunteer Vancouver.
- *Emerging Centres Manual* is intended for use by individuals or communities interested in starting a volunteer centre. It teaches how to get started, plan ahead, build a legal entity, get funding, organize fundraising events and build an administrative structure. The manual is available from Volunteer Canada.
- Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era* ((New York: J.P. Tarcher, 1996). Offers some challenging solutions to the global unemployment brought on by productivity advances of new technologies.
- *Vantage Point* is the quarterly newsletter of Volunteer Vancouver and provides a forum for ideas and issues of the volunteer sector. Articles offer new perspectives, stories of best practice and analysis of public policy.
- Susan Ellis, *Volunteer Program Success*. Provides detailed information about issues relating to policy, budgeting, staffing, employee/volunteer relations and risk management. It is available from Volunteer Canada.