

Building the Bridge to Youth Volunteers

Enriching the volunteer experience to build a better future for our communities

About the Research Study

The 2010 pan-Canadian research study was a joint project commissioned by Manulife Financial in partnership with Volunteer Canada, and conducted by the Carleton University Centre for Voluntary Sector Research & Development, in collaboration with Harris/Decima.

The study involved a literature review of over 200 documents, a general population phone survey of 1,016 Canadian households, a survey of 551 volunteers, 18 focus groups -- including 79 youth participants -- in both urban and rural settings, and an online survey of 208 non-profit and voluntary organizations.

The research yielded practical information for use by volunteer organizations to attract and retain skilled, dedicated volunteers among four specific demographic groups: youth, family, baby boomers, and employer-supporter volunteers.

How can we bridge the gap between what youth – young Canadians aged 15-24 years old -- are looking for in volunteering today and how organizations are engaging youth volunteers?

Conducted in the summer of 2010, a new pan-Canadian research study provides the most current national data about the changing culture of Canada's voluntary sector, including information specific to the nation's youth population.

Unlike earlier surveys that emphasized overall participation rates, this new research captured:

- **What youth want in their volunteer experiences;**
- **The issues youth have in finding satisfying volunteer roles; and**
- **What organizations can do to enhance the volunteer experience for youth,** which in turn can help them achieve their missions and ultimately build stronger communities.

The Importance of Youth to the Canadian Voluntary Landscape

Youth represent a particularly important demographic because they are the future of volunteering.

Youth make up a relatively small percentage of the total number of volunteers in Canada, but their recruitment and engagement is critical to ensuring the future sustainability of the voluntary sector. Seniors are currently the most active volunteers in Canada, but as they age, they will begin to reduce their volunteer participation. Effective youth recruitment techniques are crucial to maintaining a strong voluntary sector as Canada's most engaged volunteer cohort – seniors – begins to retire from their volunteer careers.

Youth Thoughts on Volunteering

Youth see volunteering from a variety of perspectives, and their motivations for volunteering are professional, social, and personal in nature.

Often volunteering is seen as contributing to their job search by providing an opportunity to network, improve their skills and raise their profile among potential employers.



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Common Trends Among Today's Volunteers

The research revealed the following trends, which apply broadly across the majority of today's volunteers, including youth volunteers:

- **Volunteering changes throughout our lifecycle**, along with evolving priorities, circumstances and interests;
- **Today's volunteers are more goal-oriented, autonomous, tech-savvy and mobile**;
- **Volunteering is a two-way relationship** that needs to meet the goals of the volunteer and the organization;
- **Volunteering is personal** and stems from individual preferences and motivations;
- **Volunteering is a way to transfer and develop skills** by gaining or sharing experiences;
- **Volunteering in groups appeals to all ages** for social and business networking; and
- **Finding satisfying volunteering is not easy for everyone.**

Some youth cited the social importance of volunteering and the satisfaction derived from seeing the benefit of their work for others. Many young people in Canada are introduced to volunteering through mandated programs in schools, which can build long-term interest in community engagement. While volunteering was generally seen by youth as an opportunity to meet different kinds of people, make new friends, and socialize, many wondered why they should volunteer for free when they could make money instead through paid jobs.

This underlines the importance for voluntary organizations to provide incentives for attracting youth to volunteer opportunities. Organizations should try to make the experience fun and rewarding for young people, so they will be more likely to continue their engagement into the future, as their life circumstances change.

Understanding the Characteristics of Youth Volunteers

To be more effective at attracting and retaining volunteers in a particular demographic, it helps to first understand their general characteristics. Canadian youth are:

- *Career-focused, flexible and receptive to new ideas*
- *More open-minded* – have grown up being exposed to greater diversity than previous generations
- *Energetic and enthusiastic* – have high levels of vitality
- *Technologically savvy* – respond to innovative online communications and recruitment techniques
- *Prefer peer camaraderie* – as social beings, youth enjoy meeting new people and participating in volunteer activities with their friends
- *In many instances affected by mandatory community service requirements* – e.g., community service hours are required for high school graduation in some provinces and territories
- *Seeing volunteering as a bridge* – something that supports their search for employment, skills development, and networking
- *Sensitive to perceived age discrimination* – prefer volunteer tasks where they feel respected and are given some responsibility



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Matching Skills for Youth Volunteers: Barriers & Opportunities

Youth often feel it is up to them to present their abilities and actively seek out volunteer opportunities that match their skill set. Many volunteer in areas that allow them to improve their skills and gain access to training.

While youth felt some organizations are very effective and have systems in place to match volunteers to opportunities, in other instances youth said they had to create opportunities themselves.

Youth indicated finding volunteer experiences with organizations online is particularly challenging. Because youth are a particularly tech-savvy demographic, providing opportunities that deal with technology – such as roles involving social media outreach or web design – can make volunteering more accessible and attractive to young people.

Volunteer roles with age restrictions for youth can be a barrier to their engagement; minimum age requirements such as 18 and older are perceived by youth as unfair to younger potential volunteers. Youth feel discriminated against due to their age and believe they are not respected or are given menial tasks that nobody else would do.

Other barriers to youth volunteering include:

- Lack of time
- Inability to make a long-term commitment
- Not being asked
- Unsure how to become involved
- Feeling that their opinions and insights are not valued, respected or taken into account
- Organizations' perception that youth need services and help instead of seeing youth as having something to give to organizations (especially communications and technology skills)

While many youth volunteers felt they weren't given enough responsibility in their roles, some thought they were thrown in over their heads by organizations, to the point of sometimes being given more responsibility than they were willing to take on. Occasionally, they also felt they didn't have the required skills for a certain position, but were placed in the role anyway.

Providing Volunteer Opportunities That Interest Youth

The research found that today's youth are most interested in volunteer opportunities:

- With education and research organizations, as well as sports and recreation organizations, followed by social service organizations;
- That are international, as youth see themselves as world citizens and tend to define 'community' as being global in nature;
- With organizations that support environmental issues;
- That are flexible enough to accommodate their other commitments for school, work, friends, and family;
- With volunteer job descriptions that give youth a clear understanding of what they will do and the broader significance of their participation;
- Where youth can receive constructive feedback and certification where possible; and
- Where they can volunteer with other youth, including their friends.

Examples of Youth-Friendly Volunteer Tasks

- *Tasks that can be done virtually*, such as maintaining an organization's social networking pages, designing a website, doing research, or writing a theme song
- *Activities that can be done in pairs or groups* are highly valued by youth, such as animation work, helping out in a homework club, cleaning parks, making presentations in high schools, or participating in planning days
- *Opportunities that allow the volunteer to learn job-related skills*

Organizations Can Improve the Volunteer Experience for Youth By:

- ✓ *Promoting volunteerism where youth will see it* – such as via social media and at youth centres or community centres
- ✓ *Building meaningful relationships* – getting to know the individual needs and talents of youth volunteers better by encouraging and mentoring them
- ✓ *Capitalizing on technology options* – offering greater online engagement of youth such as websites with volunteer listings and matching capacities, and volunteer opportunities that can be completed virtually
- ✓ *Being sensitive to differences* – respecting gender, culture, language, and especially age, being careful to avoid the perception of age discrimination and recognizing youth have unique skills to offer
- ✓ *Being respectful about the tasks and roles that are assigned to youth* – avoid automatically giving youth jobs considered unskilled 'grunt work'
- ✓ *Being flexible and accommodating* – many youth have to juggle other time commitments for school or part-time work
- ✓ *Offering benefits and incentives* – such as volunteer appreciation parties, concert or theatre tickets, or bus tickets for youth who need transportation support to attend meetings or events
- ✓ *Communicating feedback to youth volunteers regularly and constructively* – recognizing their efforts in a positive manner will help them learn and grow so they can also gain from their volunteer experience
- ✓ *Clearly outlining the purpose of the proposed youth volunteer activity* – explaining how it will make a difference, as well as following up and letting youth volunteers know the impact of the time, energy, and skills they contributed

For more details, please refer to the report, '*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