

1

4.0 Understanding Today's Volunteers



Key Idea

An up-to-date understanding of modern volunteers is critical to the successful mobilization of volunteers. It may seem obvious, but ask yourself this question: "How can we expect to work effectively with volunteers if we do not understand who the prospective volunteers are and what they want to do?" The critical point is that today's volunteers are very unlike the volunteers of just a short while ago.

As with so many other things that have changed over recent years, volunteers, their interests, needs, motivations and limitations have undergone profound transformations. The volunteer labour pool in the twenty-first century hardly resembles at all what it looked like as little as fifteen years ago. **The organization that does not track such changes in volunteers and modernize its volunteer program management practices accordingly is doomed to declining success in recruitment, shortened volunteer**



TIP TO LEADERS

retention, premature attrition rates, and generally increased costs (as well as headaches) related to the involvement of volunteers.

"The most frequently identified human resources capacity issue was the need for more volunteers. Most participants reported that the volunteer pool has shrunk considerably over the past five to ten years. Many also expressed the view that volunteers are increasingly unwilling to take on leadership or administrative roles or to make long-term commitments. They attributed these problems primarily to the social and economic environment in which nonprofit and voluntary organizations operate. Changes in the availability of volunteers have led to challenges for volunteer recruitment, management, and retention – all of which were identified by most participants as major capacity issues."

Source: Key finding of the *Capacity To Serve* report on the challenges facing nonprofit organizations in Canada. (Michael H. Hall et al., 2003: 28)

While a detailed qualitative and statistical profile of the volunteer labour force is beyond what we can cover here, following are a few things that we do know about changes in the pool of prospective volunteers available to volunteer-based organizations.

- *The number of volunteers is declining.* It is still too early to understand all of the factors contributing to the decrease in numbers, but the pattern is both clear and significant in Canada. With the exception of Australia where volunteer participation rates have risen recently, volunteer participation rates are remaining constant or declining in many western countries.

- As common sense would tell us, baby boomers, who have been the mainstay of many volunteer programs over the last two or three decades – largely because there have been so many of them and they have been of an age when people are inclined to volunteer – are aging. What is less well known is that *baby boomers*

are now approaching an age when research tells us they are inclined to diminish their involvement in volunteer work. The population bell curve with baby boomers at the apex reveals that there are far fewer citizens in the age category of young adulthood, which is the stage of the life cycle at which most people are inclined to volunteer. The consequence is that the main supply of volunteers is likely to dwindle and there are simply fewer younger people to replace them.

- *Young people may not have inherited the volunteer spirit.* Compounding the current and anticipated decline in the number of volunteers available, recent studies suggest that younger generations do not volunteer in the same proportions as those citizens who are now approaching retirement age. So proportionately, there are fewer younger people and fewer of them volunteer.
- *Episodic volunteering represents the single most influential shift in the volunteer labour pool over the last decade.* Simply put, more and more volunteers are inclined to seek short-term positions. Instead of being willing to take on positions of either long (measured in years) or indeterminate duration, a huge proportion of volunteers now seek volunteer positions time-limited positions measured in hours or days.
- *While they are willing to give you some of their precious time, episodic volunteers insist that you treat it with the respect it deserves.* They want their time to be expended on meaningful endeavours that demonstrate observable outcomes. In short, they want to make a difference through their volunteer work. Endless work with invisible products is unattractive to the growing majority of volunteers. And the very worst thing an organization can do is to recruit volunteers and be anything less than totally ready to engage them immediately. If you call a volunteer in and do not have the workplace ready, the tools in place, or worse, a specific, meaningful job for them to do, expect to see nothing but their backs as they head out the door.

"Many organizations need volunteers to perform tasks that require training and specific, sometimes fairly lengthy, time commitments. Yet most organizations are finding that volunteers today prefer short-term assignments and are less committed to their volunteer activities than in the past."

Source: Key finding of the *Capacity To Serve* report on the challenges facing nonprofit organizations in Canada. (Michael H. Hall et al., 2003: 30)

1

- *Volunteers do not want to attend an endless round of meetings.* Leadership positions such as those on boards of directors and committees are among those for which it is increasingly difficult to find volunteers.

"Many organizations need volunteers to take on front-line service delivery tasks. They also need volunteers who are willing to accept leadership roles. However, several participants told us they are finding that many people, particularly young people, are less willing to take on leadership roles than in the past."

Source: Key finding of the Capacity To Serve report on the challenges facing nonprofit organizations in Canada. (Michael H. Hall et al., 2003: 30)

Routine, monotonous tasks, or any kind of organizing work that is at some distance from where the "real work" appears to take place tends to be unappealing to the majority of volunteers. For many organizations that have been sustained by long-term volunteers, and in particular, for those organizations that have engaged significant numbers of volunteers in administrative, leadership, and chapter/branch/unit maintenance work, this trend may turn out to be nothing short of catastrophic.

- *Volunteers want positions that are easy to get into and easy to get out of.* Active, product-driven work is "in;" relationship- and companionship-based positions are "out." While we would not go so far as to suggest that this may signal the death-knell for programs such as friendly visiting, mentoring, companionship, and leisure buddies, which engage volunteers in relationship-intensive positions, organizers of programs such as these should expect to have to expend more effort to find and sustain a volunteer labour force.
- Some have argued that altruism is a disappearing phenomenon. Whether complete selflessness without consideration of return *ever* existed is perhaps debatable, but the pragmatic organizer of volunteer effort must take note that *more people are looking for specific returns on their investment of time and influence.* The more "returns" you are able to build in to your volunteer positions, the more volunteers you are likely to attract.

These are just a few of the more obvious trends now observable in the volunteer labour force. As with anything statistical, there are exceptions to the patterns. It is not suggested that there will never be another director on a board of directors, or that long-term volunteers are completely a thing of the past. But the trends are beyond debate, and those organizations that remain ignorant of the changes, or worse, choose to ignore the unmistakable, do so at their own peril. At a time when the need of organizations to engage volunteers has never been higher, easy



volunteer availability is declining. **The convergence of increasing demand and decreasing supply will almost certainly make the volunteer recruitment climate much more competitive among nonprofit organizations over the coming years. Those organizations that do not, right now, adapt to shifts in the volunteer labour pool will experience even greater difficulties finding and sustaining volunteers in the future.**

The changing volunteer labour force is one of the most important variables in volunteer program planning. As you consider what you are currently asking volunteers to do in your organization, think about how that activity fits with what we know about today's volunteers. For example,

- Could current positions be modified to make them more attractive to episodic volunteers?
- Are there new roles that might be developed for which it would be easier (and less costly) to recruit?
- Can some of the larger roles be broken down into segments and shared among a series of volunteer workers, or assigned to a team of volunteers, a group of employee volunteers, or a family who want to volunteer together, rather than the entire function being assigned to just one person?

Review the section of this guide on volunteer position design. There are plenty of tips on how volunteer positions can be developed for a wider range of volunteer preferences.

Keep in mind that shifts in the volunteer labour pool have implications beyond position design. For example, these shifts affect how we relate to volunteers on an ongoing basis, including,

- how we supervise volunteers
- the kind of support we offer them
- how we recognize their efforts
- how we manage their performance

Judy Esmond's *Boomnet: Capturing the Baby Boomer Volunteers* (2001) presents an excellent overview of additional shifts in the volunteer labour pool and their implications for volunteer program management. It is written from the Australian perspective but has far wider applicability, and is available as a free download. Nancy Macduff's revised *Episodic*

Volunteering: Organizing and Managing the Short-Term Volunteer Program (2004) presents a detailed review of this increasingly prevalent volunteer characteristic, including different sub-types of episodic volunteers and how to modify volunteer program management practices to better suit them. See the listings in the resources section at the end of this chapter for details on these two important publications.

5.0 Other Trends Affecting Volunteer Involvement

In addition to shifts in the volunteer labour pool itself, there are many other changes taking place in the broader society that influence who is available to volunteer, what they bring, and how we need to support them so that they can be as effective as possible. With change as the ever-present constant in modern life, there are dozens of important shifts that are having an impact on volunteering. Here are just a few of the more salient that volunteer program managers report.

- *Technology is changing everything*, volunteering included. Technology provides organizations with new ways to reach out to new populations of volunteers; it offers a myriad of ways to connect with, and provide support to, existing volunteers; it raises expectations regarding response time and deadlines; it is *the* method of communication for some, often younger, population segments; its ever-widening availability makes it a must-use element for the contemporary and successful volunteer leader.
- *Globalization makes the world smaller and closer*. Linked to global communication, the capacity to reach out, stay in touch, and keep up with changes elsewhere requires the contemporary manager of volunteer involvement to coordinate information as much as s/he coordinates people. Borders have taken on new meaning and volunteering-related travel and *voluntourism* are new items on the list of opportunities that volunteering can offer. Changing immigration patterns mean increasingly diverse populations and that has major implications for volunteer programs that seek to be representative of their communities.
- *Security, both global and personal, has gained a higher profile*. Terrorism is the accelerant of fear, and people pretty much everywhere are more attuned to matters of safety and security. Prospective volunteers are no

different. They think about safety issues as they make choices about what they will and will not pursue. Organizations that also think about safety in the design of volunteer positions, and in the building of program infrastructure and volunteer support systems will be more successful in the increasingly competitive volunteer recruitment marketplace.

- *Increasing litigiousness raises standards and cautions.* Lawsuits and the fear of lawsuits are changing the nonprofit landscape. The potential for false allegations may be deterring many great volunteers from stepping forward to offer their services. The potential for lawsuits is often a question asked early in the conversation with prospective board members. Organizations can typically be held responsible both in the courts and the court of public opinion for the acts of their volunteers. That alters what we ask volunteers to do, how we decide who we will accept as volunteers, and how we connect with, support, and monitor their work for us on an ongoing basis. Transparency and accountability have become essential elements in successful programming.
- *Time is our most precious commodity.* The faster pace of life means people are trying to juggle more activities and often competing demands in the same 24-hour day. Since volunteering is fundamentally about gifts of time (as well as skills, expertise, and influence), the value of the gift of volunteering has escalated dramatically. That requires better and more respectful use of it by organizations. It means that volunteers are much more picky about how they will and will not spend that most precious resource.

There are, of course, many other shifts in volunteers, volunteering, the nonprofit sector, and the world in general that are affecting volunteering today. The point is that volunteering does not take place in a vacuum. It evolves in response to changes in its wider context. The organization that does not understand or appreciate the extent to which continual adaptation is essential to successful volunteer involvement significantly reduces the potential value that volunteers can add to mission accomplishment.