

Emerging Trends and Issues in Volunteerism and Volunteer Program Management

by [Linda L. Graff](#)

Introduction

In the spring of 2001, Canadian Blood Services (CBS) contracted the services of an external consulting firm to conduct a review of its volunteer program. The research had two key purposes. The first was to explore how CBS might improve both the involvement, and the management, of volunteer resources. The second was to summarize current and anticipated issues and trends in volunteerism and volunteer program management both in North America in general, and in other large Canadian health sector organizations.

To address the second objective, Linda Graff And Associates Inc., the Consultants for the project, conducted an two-part External Scan. Extensive telephone interviews were conducted by Linda Graff, Principal Consultant, with four internationally acknowledged experts in volunteerism. The experts were:

Susan Ellis, President Energize Inc. (Philadelphia, USA)
Barb Gemmell, President, Gemmell Training & Consulting (Winnipeg, Canada)
Nancy Macduff, President, Macduff/Bunt Associates (Walla Walla, WA., USA)
Marilyn MacKenzie, Consultant (Retired), (Toronto, Canada)

These interviews focussed on recent and emerging changes in volunteerism in North America, and how volunteer-based organizations might respond to both minimize losses and maximize opportunities arising from those changes.

The second part of the External Scan involved extensive telephone interviews with the manager of volunteers in four very large Canadian healthcare-based organizations. Selection criteria for these practitioner respondents required that they: be working in the health sector; placing volunteers in inherently risky *and* unionized environments; and that they be located in geographically different locations. All four respondents were working with very large volunteer work forces and relying on volunteers to deliver a range of services throughout their respective organizations.

These interviews, conducted by Associates at Linda Graff And Associates Inc., focussed on the current volunteer-organizing experience of the respondent organizations. Specifically, we were looking for observed changes in volunteerism, organizational responses to those changes, and learnings from direct experience that might be shared as advice or best practice with other nonprofit organizations seeking to enhance volunteer involvement over the near future.

All eight interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. A thematic analysis was conducted on the transcripts and the repeating themes were identified. This article presents the highlights of the analysis. It is extracted from the larger report on the volunteer program research project presented by the Consultants to CBS (<http://www.bloodservices.ca>) in December, 2001 and reports the results of the External Scan. CBS has generously given its permission to publish these

results in the event that other organizations might gain from the wisdom and experience shared by the external respondents.

Please note that these findings are not in any way conclusive or exhaustive. The sample was neither large or random. The observations reported here represent a “snapshot” of some of the thinking and wisdom of a few of our most experienced and respected consultants and practitioners in volunteerism today.

External Experts: Trends in Volunteerism

This section presents a summary of key trends identified by the four external experts in volunteerism who were interviewed as part of the research process. The qualifications of these “expert” respondents have been profiled above. Let it suffice to reiterate that the opinions and perspectives profiled here were gathered from some of the most highly respected and globally recognized experts in volunteerism today.

The trends outlined here are expected to influence and transform volunteerism throughout North America over the next decade. These trends provide a contextual understanding of the climate and circumstances in which all volunteer programs operate today. It is critical, therefore, in thinking about and planning for the future of any volunteer program, and in conceptualizing the potential shapes and dimensions of new volunteer roles, that these trends be kept in sharp focus.

Short-Term Workers: Episodic Volunteering

The number one most transformational trend identified by all four experts is the increasing propensity of prospective volunteers to seek short-term volunteer positions.

“Episodic volunteering” is volunteering that takes place in short periods of time, usually defined as not more than 3-4 months in duration, or as even shorter bouts which recur, typically annually. The long-term volunteer of the past who was willing to give a great deal of time to a single organization over many years is disappearing at an alarming rate. The *2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating* reveals that a small minority of Canadian volunteers (25%) contribute 73% of all volunteer hours in 2000. What this means is that 75% of the volunteer workforce is volunteering only 27% of all of the hours volunteered in Canada in a year. With increasing frequency, volunteers do not see volunteering as a life-long commitment. In many cases the episodic volunteer wants to start with a small job to get a “taste” of volunteering with an organization. Some short-term volunteers, when they have had a good experience in their initial volunteer position, may agree to stay on for an additional term or terms. The point however, is that it is increasingly rare for a volunteer to commit to many hours in a long term, ongoing position.

This is, without doubt, the most significant and substantive shift in volunteering, both at the present time and into the foreseeable future: it is a trend discussed at length by all external experts contacted in this research.

How should organizations respond to this changing profile of the volunteer labour force? The most significant response to episodic volunteering should be in volunteer position design. Those organizations which continue in the future to concentrate volunteer involvement in long-term, or worse, apparently never-ending positions, are designing involvement that is out of sync with the available volunteer labour pool. The failure to adjust opportunities to the profile of those willing

to respond to them dooms an organization to struggle with increasingly difficult and costly recruitment and retention efforts.

From the organizational perspective, the administrative peril of trying to fit short-term volunteers into positions designed for long-term volunteers is that the costs of involvement can outweigh the contributions returned by volunteers; eventually the return on the investment becomes insufficient to warrant short-term volunteer involvement.

As well, episodic volunteers may be less attractive to staff since there is no opportunity to develop relationships with them, and since short-term volunteers leave sooner, even though the paid staff have invested heavily in their training. Paid staff gain the impression that “volunteers aren’t really committed” and “volunteers are unreliable”. Staff who are already stretched by increased work loads have less tolerance for short-term volunteers, and staff who used to be supportive of volunteer involvement may be less so now with increasing numbers of short-term workers who are expected to turn in long-term service.

The experts said that it is a universal pattern. Episodic volunteering will increase into the future.

Long-Term Volunteers Are Harder to Find

Long-term volunteers are harder and harder to recruit these days. There are fewer of them out there, and there is a variety of reasons for this trend. For example, many women who used to “squeeze volunteering in” to busy lives are saying “no” more frequently. Many women who began to volunteer in the 1950's and 1960's were able to dedicate much of their adult lives to volunteering because they were not active in the paid labour force. They developed a loyalty to the cause and many stayed with the same organization for decades. Now that women have moved into the paid labour force in larger proportions, and now that two-wage-earner families are more prevalent, work life absorbs greater proportions of people’s lives.

Some people are reserving free spaces in their busy calendars for time with their families. Increased geographic and employment mobility make it increasingly difficult for people to feel that they can make long-term commitments. The presence of a myriad of free time alternatives makes people less willing to deny themselves other possibilities. Younger people will volunteer, but unpaid work is most often viewed as secondary to the search for paid employment and future possibilities pressure young people to keep their options open. Older adults are also increasingly reluctant to make long-term commitments; they have plenty of other alternatives, and often the financial resources to pursue them.

Increasingly, volunteering is getting squeezed out of people’s lives as more demands and other leisure opportunities expand. As the 2000 Canadian survey indicates, volunteer participation rates have declined in the very recent past. In the three year period from 1997 to 2000, Canada experienced a 5% drop in the number of volunteer hours volunteered in a year. That represents a decrease of 29,000 full-time year-round volunteer job equivalents. Clearly, volunteering has to be responsive to these substantive shifts in the volunteer labour pool. A key learning is that volunteering will need to become much more attractive if it is to compete with all of the other demands and attractions in people’s lives. Creativity and “outside the box” thinking are required in volunteer position design. The traditional work done by long-term volunteers is simply not attractive to today’s episodic volunteers.

Changing Demographics

As David Foot has outlined in his popular *Boom, Bust, and Echo: Profiting from the Demographic Shift in the 21st Century*, demographic shifts are redefining society and modern life. In addition to the demographic shift to “booming” episodic volunteering, other shifts in population demographics will influence volunteering in other ways.

Today, organizations everywhere are faced with an aging population and, consequently, an aging volunteer workforce. Within this larger aging population, baby boomers are aging; they have for three decades made up the largest bulge in the volunteer labour force, and have been proportionately over-represented therein.

When asked to volunteer, today’s older adults are likely to say “I’ve done my time”, and “I’ve volunteered all my life; now’s the time for me”. The responses make it sound like volunteering is a “sentence” which it either has been, in their experience, or has the reputation of being. Since older adults have been harder to recruit, and are under-represented in the volunteer labour force, it seems reasonable to posit that the older adults of the near future may not volunteer in the same proportions as they have been volunteering in their 30's and 40's.

In communities where there is a disproportionate number of older adults, organizations are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit volunteers. As a result, it has been difficult to maintain work that has traditionally been done by volunteers; in some communities, work that was traditionally performed by volunteers simply is not getting done. Experts consulted in this research give evidence that some organizations are failing because of the shortage of volunteers or at least because of their inability to recruit new volunteers. The impact of this phenomenon appears to be greatest in small communities

People who are currently in their 20's to 40's make up, proportionately the largest *potential* pool of volunteer labour in the near future. The consensus is that the “Generation X’er’s” and their slightly older and slightly younger age peers will not have the same long-term loyalty to organizations that their parents had. Their paid work experience will be dominated by sequential employment characterized by short-term positions with a series of employers across a range of professions and careers. Long-term loyalty to an employer (and including “unpaying employers”) will be foreign to most of them.

The “birth dearth”, combined with the predictions that older adults will not volunteer in the proportions that they have been volunteering in their younger and middle years, the sense that Generation X’ers won’t volunteer in such large numbers, and certainly not for long periods, may all coincide to create an even more critically short supply of volunteers in the relatively near future.

The younger “new” volunteers of today often bring excellent experience from the workforce and they have higher expectations of voluntary organizations - they feel they can afford to be choosy. David Foot recently labelled these persons “vigilante volunteers”.¹ Increasingly, they want to know that their time is well spent and never wasted. In this and in other ways they demand a greater accountability from the organization that seeks their involvement. They demand interesting work, and to many that may mean hands on work; at a minimum, it must be work that clearly makes a difference.

Small Numbers of Volunteers Doing Most of the Work

The experts suggested that people are not rallying to civic causes the way they used to - they are not “joiners” anymore. Recent Canadian statistics are, at this point, showing a substantial decline in the numbers of active volunteers. The overall scale of volunteering is being maintained because the fewer remaining volunteers are contributing more hours. Increasing reliance on a smaller volunteer base may burn out some of the best volunteer resources currently available. With the advancing age of baby boomers, the experts are concerned that this may be just the beginning of a much larger problem.

New Sources of Volunteers

While traditional sources of volunteers threaten to shrink, new sources of unpaid or stipended workers are creating a larger pool from which organizations may draw assistance: mandated community service, workfare, compulsory community service as part of school graduation requirements, and so on all stream unpaid resources into the community. However, the often short periods of availability, combined with the increased record keeping associated with these types of workers creates special challenges in their deployment and management. Wide scale deployment of these new resources may force reconsideration of what is “paid” and “unpaid” work, and will generate increasing complexities in unionized environments.

At the same time, there are growing markets in the volunteer labour pool. For example, corporate volunteer programs are increasing in popularity in Canada. The private sector is beginning to tune into social philanthropy and cause-based marketing. Encouraging and facilitating the involvement of employees in community service is a prime component of the new thinking. This creates the potential for new independent sector-private sector partnerships, opening up a significant new source of “volunteers”.

Family volunteering is another new growth market. As busy people search for ways to do more in less time, combining time with one’s family and community work translates into “family volunteering”. The alert volunteer-based organization will see the value in creating volunteer positions that can be done by family teams. These positions are designed to engage groups of people with a range of skill sets and levels, or to engage family members in a volunteer equivalent of “job sharing”. Research and pilot initiatives from both the United States and Canada are generating specific guidelines to successful involvement of family teams.

While many organizations lament the fact that long-term volunteers are no longer available, one cannot change demography. Forward-looking organizations realize that the only effective response is to create new positions that are attractive to the “new volunteers”. Those organizations that are able to do so will be rewarded with a much greater chance of success in their volunteer programs in the future. Those organizations that work harder at staying the same will suffer long term loss, leading in many cases to eventual failure.

Technology

Technology is revolutionizing most aspects of twenty-first century life. Volunteer work is no exception.

The existence of new communications technology creates boundless opportunity for organizations to connect with volunteers in new and more effective ways. In this sense, technology is a critical tool of volunteer program management. Traditional communication tools

such as meetings, newsletters, reminder calls on land lines, hard copy reporting, in-person check-ins and check-outs can all be revamped through the application of new technology. New communication technologies provide an excellent way to keep in touch with volunteers off site and in remote locations.

Experts agree, however, that these new tools are consistently under-utilized by volunteer program managers who seem, across the board, to have technology or access to technology, but tend not to be maximizing its potential, e.g., they do not collect or use volunteers' cell phone numbers; they do not bother to determine whether volunteers can be reached by email or faxed at work. The technology is there to support new ways of working with new sources of volunteers. It is just not being utilized.

The experts also provided a warning: while it is possible to reach out, increase profile, and promote volunteering on the net, all evidence indicates that many of those persons who do not volunteer say the reason for their non-involvement is that "no one asked me". So the "anonymous ask" of the 'Net may be a particularly ineffective method of recruiting. This is consistent with all recruitment research over decades which has confirmed time after time that a personal approach is, by far, the most effective recruitment mechanism.

Technology is particularly valuable in permitting corporate volunteering to take place - groups of employees can commit to a cause and work electronically, from work, during breaks, during lunch, at either end of the workday, making it easy for them to squeeze volunteering into busy schedules.

Additionally, virtual volunteering is a quickly growing form that has nearly infinite potential as technology becomes increasingly accessible to more people. This use of technology has the potential to change how volunteers do their work and how organizations relate to their volunteers. The experts caution, however, that while technology has vast potential, it is not necessarily the panacea we might hope for in response to shrinking volunteer pools and "vigilante volunteers" seeking to meet their own needs and interests through community service as much as they wish to help others.

Risk Management

Risk management is becoming a much more prominent issue in volunteer management because organizations are performing more serious, demanding, complex work/interventions in the voluntary sector, and because volunteers are more often directly involved in that work. Volunteers are not confined to the back rooms any longer.

Volunteer positions need to be evaluated for risk in the same way that paid staff positions do, and the organizational response needs to be handled in the same way: reduce risks in the position and the environment as much as possible; prepare volunteers well (screen, train, supervise) to handle the remaining risks; put back-up and contingency systems in place; and continue to monitor residual risks.

Experts agree that there is no indicator that volunteers are inherently less competent or less reliable than paid staff when they are properly trained, matched, and supported. Therefore, volunteers can be relied on to perform many important and complex functions. The point,

however, is that the infrastructure must be in place to prepare and support volunteers in the same way that that infrastructure is put into place to support paid staff.

Experts suggested that partnering volunteers with staff can often provide the supervision volunteers need to do their work safely. Marginalizing volunteers to the sidelines, confining them to indirect and menial positions, will constitute a huge deterrent to retaining the new, short-term and vigilante volunteers.

However, it is also true that risk management is forcing some organizations to pull volunteers out of positions that have been deemed to be too risky for them. When job modifications and infrastructure supports cannot sufficiently resolve risk and liability concerns, moving volunteers into alternate positions can sometimes be the only viable option.

Tension Between Volunteers and Paid Staff

All experts agreed that the relationship between volunteers and paid staff is one of the most important variables in volunteer program success. Where is the reward in volunteering where one is resented, devalued, or even mistreated? But equally valid, how can we expect staff to know how to work with volunteers, what is reasonable to expect, what volunteers need to be productive and satisfied? This is not taught in school, it is not in the curriculum of technical or professional courses, it is not a standing item in the orientation to new workplaces or training for new positions. One expert noted that there is no job done by paid staff which is either too big or too small to warrant their not being trained in how to work effectively with volunteers. Experts agreed that it is critical for organizations to train staff about volunteers and about trends in volunteerism:

- who volunteers now
- what their needs and limitations are
- what can be reasonably expected of volunteers today
- what volunteers need from their paid staff partners

Many staff still base their beliefs about volunteers on the stereotypes of the 1950's and 1960's. Those images are remarkably resilient, and in organizations that have retained long-term volunteers, they may still be somewhat accurate. Repeated and reinforced messages to staff are needed to supplant old ideas with more accurate portrayals of what volunteers are and can be in the new millennium.

It was suggested that volunteers should never be placed where staff are resistant to their involvement. It is important to look for occasions where staff are open to volunteer assistance, where they will value help with busy schedules and heavy demands. There may be opportunities to create positions that genuinely help staff to deal with some of the things they just never get around to doing. While it was acknowledged by the experts that due caution is needed around collective agreements, if volunteers are carefully placed to demonstrate how genuinely helpful they can be, staff will be more inclined to be accepting of their involvement into the future. Organizations need to be certain in this process to ask staff where *they* think volunteers could be most helpful.

The experts agreed that staff resistance to volunteer involvement can be eased over time by helping staff to understand that volunteer involvement is directly connected to enhanced services to clients and client satisfaction, which, therefore, ultimately provides more security for staff who are required to deliver increased units of service with often fewer resources. As noted before, it is harder in some ways for staff to work with short-term volunteers. This being said, volunteers were more of a threat to paid staff in the past when they were volunteering many hours over many years of long term service. Short-term volunteers are typically less threatening.

Experts also asserted that organizations need to work closely with organized labour. Importantly, clear boundaries need to be set and respected around where volunteers will never be asked to work. These boundaries need to be enshrined in policy and fervently respected.

It is also important, the experts said, to remember that the involvement of volunteers is often the reason why agencies have come into existence in the first place. Without volunteers pioneering services and pitching in during times of need, many organizations would not exist now, and many positions would never have been created in the first place.

FOOTNOTE for Section 1

¹David Foot. “The Vigilante Volunteer: Demographics and the Voluntary Sector.” Plenary address, International Conference on Volunteer Administration, October 4, 2001, Toronto, Canada.

Responding to Emerging Trends in Volunteerism

It is the general sense among experts that there is an awareness in the voluntary sector of the emerging trends in volunteerism, but relatively few organizations are actually being proactive about current or imminent change. The experts had substantive advice to offer to volunteer agencies who want to be “ahead of the pack”.

Organizing Volunteer Involvement: Start At the Top

Boards and senior management need to know and understand why volunteers are being involved in the service delivery system. The organization, as a whole, needs to have a clear vision of the volunteer program five years into the future. The lesson is to “keep the end in mind”. With the vision clear, an inventory needs to be undertaken to assess strengths and weaknesses in the current volunteer corps and its management systems. Strategic planning must be undertaken for the volunteer program in the same way that it is required for other programs and services, and the organization needs to allocate sufficient staff and other resources to ensure that volunteers are well organized and that their involvement is well coordinated.

An organization-wide effort is called for if volunteering is to be successful and productive. It must be led from the top and vigorously enforced throughout.

Integrate into Planning

Volunteers should not be a “band-aid” that is stuck on to a service after the delivery system has been fully planned and implemented. The availability and contributions (and limitations and needs) of volunteers need to be considered from the very beginning so that the environment and systems are designed to facilitate their involvement rather than impede it.

To this end, managers of volunteer services should be on their respective senior management teams and involved at the beginning of all significant planning decisions. They must be consulted on how volunteer resources can be mobilized and coordinated to respond to all organizational needs.

Again, starting with the end in mind, organizations should be connecting volunteers to what the organization is trying to achieve in larger terms, rather than remembering their presence at the end of the process and limiting their contributions to just helping out with specific tasks.

Volunteers as a Human Resource - Integrated into the Organization

Experts agree that volunteers should not be conceptualized as “workers for the volunteer services department”. Volunteers need to be conceptualized and appropriately managed as human resources in the departments where they work. To illustrate the concept, paid staff are not seen as “employees of the human resources department”. Rather, they are planned for, budgeted for, possibly recruited and trained by the human resources department, but they are placed in, and subsequently managed by, the departments for which they have been recruited. The same should hold true for volunteers. Volunteers do not *work for* the volunteer resources department. They should be fully integrated as unpaid workers in the departments where they are assigned. Staff, of course, must be trained in how to work with and supervise volunteer workers.

The “human resources approach” to volunteer management views volunteers as an integral part of the human resources pool available to the whole organization. It recognizes that managers of volunteers have the potential to rally literally any kind or scale of community response an organization might need. Given appropriate time and resources, managers of volunteers can find and recruit volunteers to do virtually any job that an organization identifies. In this view, volunteers are not just workers doing little jobs; they are members of a vast pool of community resources that can be strategically marshalled to address organizational challenges and goals.

Additionally, volunteers are a significantly expandable workforce that can be mobilized to extend the resources of increasingly burdened organizations. With downsizing and cut backs, volunteers may be placed in certain positions to enhance and support the work of overburdened paid staff. Once again, however, volunteers must be considered in human resources planning from the beginning, and human resources staff and volunteer resources staff must work closely together on an ongoing basis.

Volunteers as Donors

Managers of volunteers mobilize often large numbers of workers and therefore have potentially vast influence over both that workforce and the communities to which those workers connect. Research indicates that people who volunteer are typically more likely to donate funds to the organization. The volunteer resources department should be closely connected to the resource development department in every organization.

Volunteer Program Management Skills

Volunteer involvement needs to be carefully and thoughtfully orchestrated, and volunteers themselves need to be attentively organized. Our experts reflected that volunteers who have a negative experience in their volunteer positions are quite likely to abandon volunteering completely. A person who has had a bad experience as a volunteer will be a less than great ambassador for the organization.

Managing volunteers takes specialized skills and knowledge. It is a serious error to place less than qualified persons in the volunteer coordination role. It is widely recognized that professional credentials are now appropriate as minimum qualifications in volunteer program management positions. Certificate courses are available in nearly every community college in the country, and this should be a prerequisite for all volunteer program management staff. When volunteer management staff are poorly qualified or do not stay current with the developments in their field, it damages and impairs the capacity of the whole organization.

Managers of volunteers should be recruited on the basis of these kinds of volunteer program management qualifications specifically. They need to be remunerated at reasonable rates if the high turnover typical in volunteer program management is to be avoided. Constant staff turnover is antithetical to program success.

Managers of volunteers need to stay current with emerging patterns and trends in volunteering. The face and practice of volunteering are changing so fast that it is easy to become out of date, or miss a significant shift that will influence the program in the future. A careful scan of the volunteerism environment at least annually is currently warranted. In many organizations the volunteer resources department is under-resourced, and the managers are so over-burdened that they simply do not have the time to attend courses, connect with colleagues, and stay current with changes and developments in their field.

Managers of volunteers need to keep in mind that, like other staff, it is often possible to recruit volunteers to help with certain aspects of their own work load. As examples, external experts noted that volunteers can often be recruited to conduct research, which is a good way to stay current with trends in the field. Volunteers can also be recruited to help with automated record systems - they can work at a distance electronically.

First Impressions Are Increasingly Important

Increasingly more volunteers are having less than stellar experiences, and we may be losing them to volunteering forever due to poor management, unattractive jobs, and improperly planned and implemented “mandatory service” programs. First impressions are even more important to the episodic volunteer who is not there to make a long-term commitment. If it isn’t a good experience from the beginning, they will feel less reluctance to move on sooner. If an organization is not seen to be offering interesting positions, volunteers simply drop out or go shopping for other work.

Connect to Mission

The experts concurred that volunteers need to know that their time has been well spent and that their efforts have made a difference. They need to be connected to the larger cause and outcome of their contributions. This is particularly true for volunteers in roles that feel menial or peripheral.

If a volunteer’s involvement can be visibly connected to the lives that are changed or the community that is improved by the mission of the organization, or better still, by the presence of volunteers in the accomplishment of that mission, there will be a greater pull to get involved and stay involved.

Recruitment

The currently observable decline in volunteer numbers, combined with predictable demographic shifts, suggests a looming shortage of volunteers. As a result, recruitment must be both more deliberate and more effective in today's increasingly competitive market.

Recruitment campaigns need to be well thought out, and well resourced to be successful. Success clearly depends on making sure that the new position descriptions are in place *before* new volunteers are recruited. In the same way that the private sector segments and targets its product markets, targeted recruitment is critical in the increasingly diverse society in which we live. The successful recruiting organization of the near future will be sensitive to volunteer market segments and design effective campaigns directed at specific targets: young people; the corporate sector; families, and ethnically and racially diverse communities. Experts suggested key markets for development:

- ***Target a Younger Workforce***

In recognition of the aging volunteer workforce, and in anticipation of ongoing losses as a result, organizations need to deliberately target recruit younger (if not “young”) volunteers. It is possible to intentionally change the demographics of a volunteer program; an organization does not have to be “married” to the kind of volunteer that has traditionally volunteered for it or any of its specific programs. It requires vision, commitment, and resources to bring about such a change.

It is important to keep in mind that younger people respond better to a younger recruiter; specialized campaigns will be needed; celebrity endorsements seem to have reaped good results to date.

- ***Corporate Volunteering***

The phenomenon of corporate volunteering is more highly developed in the United States. Canadian organizations have been slower to pursue this avenue. Technology works well in the closed environment of the corporate volunteer corps. Corporate social responsibility and employee volunteering present a vast new market.

- ***Ethnically and Racially Diverse Communities***

Mainstream organizations in the voluntary sector, like organizations everywhere, have been slow off the mark in responding to the increasing diversity of Canada's population. As a result, organizations are scrambling to identify and remove barriers to participation by these diverse communities as staff, volunteers and “users” of service. Again, here are vast, virtually untapped markets for those organizations willing to invest in sensitivity, awareness, and appropriate adaptation.

Job Design

The experts warned against making the critical error of conceptualizing volunteer roles in the future just as they have been in the past.

To increase the effectiveness of job design, the experts recommend doing a full review of the work of the organization and considering where volunteering could be useful; thinking carefully about the margin between what it costs to find and keep volunteers involved against what

volunteers return through their work; developing positions that are attractive to volunteers and where the “return margin” is the greatest.

The older baby boomers who are accustomed to having control in their paid work will want to make a difference in their volunteer work, and they will be cued to fixing system failures. Organizations would do well, therefore, to allow these volunteers to “think as well as do”.

Older baby boomers need flexible positions that change with seasons (golfers, cottagers, snow birds, etc.). Some will, at least initially, want hands-on, relationship-oriented positions; others will be looking to apply their high level skills and experience and will want challenging positions that provide a good deal of independence, authority, and scope. In return they will offer important leadership and far-reaching influence.

To meet these demands and expectations, volunteer jobs in the future will need to be very attractive. Organizations must, therefore, be analytical about job design, consider all of the components, and work with staff to identify meaningful roles. It may not be a good idea to place short-term volunteers along side long-term volunteers. Creative job design and job streaming are important in volunteer programs that involve a diverse volunteer base.

External Organizational Respondents

This section elaborates on themes and issues highlighted by external organization respondents who were interviewed as part of the research process. The research participants represented four national, provincial, or large regional health or health-related organizations and were Directors or Managers of volunteer resources at a provincial or national level within their respective organizations. They were interviewed to provide information on the current volunteer-organizing experience of other Canadian organizations.

The demographic details about these organizational representatives have been profiled in the “Sample” section above. All of the external organizations represented by these respondents have very large volunteer work forces and rely heavily on volunteers to deliver a range of services including, but not limited to:

- fund raising/development
- direct service to clients, e.g., individual and group support, guides, visiting, escorting
- administrative and clerical
- information
- communications, education and awareness
- advocacy (case and system)
- training

- specialized speakers, research and writing (“professional volunteers”)

All of the external organizational respondents have a national board guiding their organization, and have organizational structures that include provincial districts or divisions and local level branches or units. Some have a regional structure or are moving to one. The level of staffing support which exists for the management and coordination of volunteers in each of these organizations varies considerably, e.g., most (N= 3) have staff support at the provincial level; only one has staff support at the national level; two have volunteer program staff at local levels (but in one organization this is not consistent from province to province).

Issues and Themes

There was a good deal of consistency among external organizational respondents regarding the identification of future directions in role development for volunteers, and new “learnings” about, and “essentials” of, volunteer program management. The same themes emerged repeatedly. Each arose as frequently or was emphasized as much as the next. So, in no particular order, they are presented here.

New and Changing Roles

All external respondents reported new and changing roles for volunteers in their respective organizations and, consistently, these new roles were concentrated in the following areas:

- leadership
- education and awareness
- promotion (including health promotion)
- communications
- training

Several reasons were cited for these changes:

- growing recognition on the part of the organization of the value added by volunteers
- better understanding about, and increased comfort level with, what volunteers can do
- striving to link volunteer development to the strategic goals of the organization as well as its vision
- recognition of skilled volunteers being “under utilized”
- recognition that the “new” volunteer can bring a high level of skill to an organization and carry greater responsibility than previously considered possible
- volunteers in leadership roles free staff to do other things

It is important to note that respondents spoke about dealing with, and continuing to deal with, lingering organizational fears about deploying volunteers in the kinds of roles listed above - in delivering “the message” on behalf of the organization. Respondents stressed the need to be ever vigilant to ensure that appropriate checks and balances, including training, are in place in the

system. Some talked about the need to engage paid staff as “partners” in these ventures not only to build their support for the initiative, but to ensure volunteers operate within the boundaries of their jobs.

Volunteers Add Value

Respondents talked about a growing awareness of just how much volunteers can “add value” to the organizations they serve. This notion of volunteers not merely doing “fluff” work, but contributing in significant and substantive ways to the real work of the organization has been a key “learning” at both corporate and staff levels of their organizations. It is evidenced by the changing roles of volunteers described above, and staff’s increasing understanding of, and comfort level with, what volunteers do, and can do, for the organization.

Volunteers Need Good Management

In spite of the growing acceptance among the respondents’ organizations that volunteers add significant value, all respondents cited one or more of the following as ongoing issues for the volunteer program:

- under-resourcing
- lack of supportive infrastructure
- lack of integration² of volunteer programs into overall organizational planning efforts

Most respondents alluded to a kind of gap or “disconnect” between an apparent understanding on the part of the organization of what it takes to have an effective volunteer program and what one respondent described as a “deer caught in the headlights look” when it comes to making it happen. Some respondents felt that organizations would do well to look upon the management of volunteers as a human resources function; others stressed the importance of hiring qualified professionals to ensure sound volunteer program management. Perhaps the phrase of one respondent sums it up best: “It’s a serious, legitimate job managing volunteers”. And who would argue that managing a workforce of 100,000 and 220,000³ isn’t?

Staff Training a Key Factor in Ensuring Effective Volunteer Programs

Unanimously, respondents identified the importance of training paid staff who work with volunteers in the following subjects:

- what volunteers do and can do for the organization
- what it takes to create and maintain an efficient and healthy volunteer program
- staff’s roles and responsibilities in ensuring an effective volunteer program

Most respondents testified that investment in staff training always paid off in more positive volunteer/paid staff relations. Some respondents also identified the value of sensitizing volunteers to possible concerns of staff regarding job security. In general the lesson learned was this: education eases tensions and promotes trusting, productive partnerships.

National Office Has Key Role to Support Volunteer Involvement

Most respondents stressed that volunteer program management needs a voice at the national level to:

- ensure visibility, support, and a clear and accurate understanding of infrastructure requirements and their associated resource implications
- ensure the creation of clear policy
- ensure the standardization of policies and procedures

Respondents said a voice for volunteer management at the national level can also facilitate the development of a vision of volunteer involvement in the organization, which should guide all planning and policy development.

Preconditions of volunteer program success seem to exist despite the fact that structures, operations, and even missions of organizations can differ widely. This is reinforced by the continuity of advice received from the four external experts, and the four external organizational representatives. What has emerged is a great congruency in messages from the theoretical and practical arenas of volunteer program management about what organizations should expect in the near future in volunteering and what organizations can do now to ensure successful volunteer involvement in that near future.

Organizational Responses to Identified Trends

Despite the fact that volunteer program staff in the external respondent organizations identified, with considerable consistency, the emerging patterns and trends in volunteerism, they also give evidence that organizations are still slow to integrate that knowledge through changes to program structures and systems. As a consequence, these respondents reported very little in the way of new initiatives or creative enhancements to their volunteer programs. Following is a quick sketch of the few pertinent undertakings and efforts in which they are currently involved:

- A pilot project involving the recruitment of eight (paid) coordinators of volunteers and their placement at local level units of the organization, with the view to assessing the impact of designated professional volunteer management staff on volunteer program effectiveness.
- Integration of planning and development activities among program areas including volunteer development, i.e., the Manager of Volunteer Development works in collaboration with her counterparts in other program areas so that policies and processes complement each other.
- Increased orientation and training of staff regarding the roles of volunteers, why volunteers volunteer, the role of staff in ensuring effective volunteer involvement; the objectives are to address the concerns of staff regarding volunteer involvement and to promote positive staff-volunteer relations.
- One organization is developing a program to recognize and reward effective employee-volunteer teams.
- Development of a task group which is mandated to create a policy manual for the volunteer program across the country.

- Use of technology to make all materials for “signature” (core) programs available on-line or through the Internet to all provincial and local sites of the organization.
- New leadership level positions for volunteers.

While these small, pilot initiatives clearly demonstrate a responsiveness to some of the emerging trends and issues in North American volunteerism, it would appear that organization managers in the voluntary sector have been relatively slow to integrate new knowledge about volunteerism into system changes. Any organization that decides to move in that direction will definitely be breaking new ground. It must be kept in mind, however, that the sample of external organization respondents was very small and by no means exhaustive. While sweeping changes were not observable in this sample, there are undoubtedly other organizations that are pioneering new territory, launching small pilot initiatives, and testing new approaches to successful volunteer involvement.

Footnotes for this Section

² One of the external respondents interviewed indicated that she, as manager of the volunteer program, works in conjunction with her “counterparts”, e.g., other managers in her area of operation, so that policies and planning processes complement each other. Planning, therefore, happens in a more integrated fashion.

³ One of the external respondents interviewed quoted a volunteer base of 100,000; another quoted 220,000.