

Bridging the Gap between Volunteer Programs and Today's Volunteers

By Paula Speevak-Sladowski

How can associations and other non-profits best attract, retain and involve volunteers in the second decade of the 21st century? Volunteer Canada, in partnership with Manulife Financial, recently released a report, *Bridging the Gap*, which may provide some of the answers.

The report is based on research done in the summer of 2010. The work included a literature review, a general population telephone survey of 1,016 households, a survey of 551 volunteers, 18 focus groups around the country and an online survey of 208 non-profit and voluntary organizations.

Our study zeroed in on four specific groups: youth, baby boomers, families and employer-supported volunteers. As might be expected, significant differences from one group to another were identified. For example, while youth saw volunteering as supporting their job search, skills development and networking, baby boomers wanted activities outside their skill/knowledge base, seeing these as “refreshing.”

Demographic differences aside, five key gaps between organization and volunteer perspectives emerged from the study:

- Many organizations still want long-term commitment, BUT many more volunteers are looking for shorter-term opportunities.
- Many organizations focus on what they need, BUT many volunteers come with their own goals to be met.
- Volunteers want the organization to clearly define their roles, BUT many also want flexibility to create their own opportunities.
- 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 different from their work life.

Action steps that associations may want to consider in order to bridge these gaps:

- **Build meaningful relationships with volunteers:** Understanding where potential volunteers are in their life cycle as well as their personal goals and motivations is as important as knowing what skills and experience they can offer. Try to create an open dialogue where volunteers feel comfortable letting organizations know what would
- Bridging the Gap between Volunteer Programs and today's Volunteers

By Paula Speevak-Sladowski make their experiences most satisfying, when they need a change and when it is time for them to move on.

- **Develop integrated HR strategies that include volunteer management:** HR policies and practices need to be based on the scope, requirements and boundaries of the position and not whether or not the person is paid. These strategies should include an inclusive and safe working environment, effective initial engagement techniques, opportunities for training and recognition, how work will be evaluated and feedback mechanisms to ensure two-way communication.
- **Be flexible and accommodating with volunteers:** Be willing to adapt to the changing schedules of volunteers and creatively modify volunteer roles to respond to any specific physical and mental health issues in order to make volunteering accessible.
- **Be sensitive to gender, culture, language and age:** Multi-generational, multi-cultural, diverse volunteer bases that reflect the changing demographics of today's society will better position an organization to serve a range of communities.
- **Provide greater online engagement:** Leveraging the power of the Internet and social media technologies is imperative because these are the primary means to search for and promote volunteer opportunities in today's increasingly wired world.
- **Develop customized, balanced approach to engagement:** Ensuring a quality volunteer experience and tailoring approaches to individual volunteers will help solidify and increase the volunteer base.

The research for Bridging the Gap was conducted by Carleton University and Harris/Decima.

The full report is available on Volunteer Canada's website at www.volunteer.ca. Reading it may provide insights into how your association can adapt its volunteer program to meet current realities and thus help Canada maintain its long-established position as a world leader in volunteerism and social capital.

Paula Speevak-Sladowski is Director of Applied Research and Public Policy for Volunteer Canada and was Principal Investigator for Bridging the Gap. She previously served as Managing Director of the Carleton University Centre for Voluntary Sector Research and Development and as Executive Director of Volunteer Ottawa. She can be reached at 613-231-4371 ext. 240 and pspeevak-sladowski@volunteer.ca.

This article was originally published in the March 2011 CSAE Trillium Chapter FORUM E-Newsmagazine <http://www.csaecanada.com/Chapters/Trillium/Newsletter.aspx>