

Building the Bridge to Family 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 61 participants representing employer-supported volunteers -- 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 Canadian families are looking for in volunteering today and how organizations are engaging family 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 volunteers, including information specific to family volunteers.

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

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

"I want to volunteer as a family to instill the sense of volunteerism in my children to continue the betterment of community later in life."

- Family Focus Group Participants

The Importance of Families to the Canadian Voluntary Sector

Families represent an important and largely untapped demographic, as there are currently few volunteer opportunities geared specifically toward families.

In addition, according to the 2007 *Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating*, individuals who experience volunteering when they are young are more likely to continue volunteering as adults.

Family volunteers tend to value civic engagement highly and recognize that participation in volunteer work can contribute to a happy and rewarding family life for all members.

Family volunteering is gaining prominence as a specific form of volunteering to allow children and teens to gain confidence and self-esteem through volunteering with the guiding hand of a family member.



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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 employer-supported 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.**

It's also a way of dealing with lack of time as a barrier to volunteering, as many Canadians with busy lives see family volunteering as an opportunity to spend quality time with family and at the same time, give back to their community and mentor their children.

While there are many definitions of family volunteering, a common characteristic of this volunteer group is that a family is usually comprised of more than one generation. Each generation has its own needs that may impact on the organization recruiting volunteers.

Families' Thoughts on Volunteering

The research found that many families want to volunteer, but there is a lack of awareness of available volunteer opportunities suitable for families.

"It does not occur to many people to search for volunteer opportunities; often they do not know where to search," was a sentiment offered by one focus group participant and echoed by others.

Family volunteers suggested that organizations that need volunteers should move towards greater online promotion and recruitment efforts, as today's families – especially those with teens – increasingly get information through the internet and even through social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, rather than by phone or email.

Online video conferencing resources, such as Skype, were recommended as a communication tool for busy families to connect with staff at voluntary organizations. Families who travel but want to remain engaged in their volunteering while they are away from home can volunteer virtually, and connect with the organization via Skype to deliver updates on their volunteer activities.

Understanding the Characteristics of Family Volunteers

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

- *Have busy schedules* – it is challenging for them to find enough time since they juggle multiple priorities, including careers, children at home of various ages, and increasingly, aging parents who require care.
- *Value family cohesion* – families perceive that volunteering together provides a thread to connect various members of a family.
- *Feature generational differences* – families are often made up of multiple generations, and volunteer opportunities should be meaningful for all members.



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- *Want to model certain values* – parents often look to volunteering as a way to instil values and build social awareness in their children.

Matching Skills for Family Volunteers: Barriers & Opportunities

Family volunteers often express concern about the lack of effort organizations make in getting to know their situation and using the information gleaned during the application and screening process to more effectively match family members to appropriate volunteer opportunities.

It was suggested that organizations time meetings around the availability of family care (e.g. elder care or babysitting), and reach out to ensure family members have transportation to meetings or events. Another suggestion was to organize volunteer meetings around a potluck meal as a means of incorporating child care with volunteer time.

The research also revealed other barriers to family volunteering, including:

- Challenges arise when including children in volunteer activities due to client confidentiality or sensitivity issues;
- Need for adequate supervision of children – opportunities that incorporate child care with volunteer time are valued, and;
- Lack of volunteer activities that may be appropriate for the inclusion of children.

Providing Volunteer Opportunities That Interest Families

The research found that today’s families are most interested in volunteer opportunities:

- That allow older children and teens to develop through volunteering with their family (opportunities that help build character, improve self-esteem and where parents can teach their children new skills);
- That are ‘virtual’ so families can participate from home on their own schedules via Skype or other online methods;
- That are episodic (‘one-offs’ or ‘two-offs’) as opposed to longer, more formal arrangements since short-term assignments give family volunteers a chance to try out a variety of volunteer tasks; and
- That can be perceived as ‘family-friendly’ and enjoyable for all family members regardless of their age.

Examples of Family Friendly Volunteer Tasks

- *Projects offering a range of tasks families can do together, such as festivals, fundraisers, and sports events.*
- *Tasks that do not require a particular level of skill or experience, and are appropriate for all ages, e.g. parents and children can staff a water station, decorate a hall, help with set-up and clean up, serve refreshments, run games booths, hand out programs, usher, or operate the coat-check*
- *Activities to assist other families in need directly by matching language skills, ages, and interests*
- *Opportunities to help immigrant or refugee families adjust to their new community, find places to shop for familiar foods, register for school, meet people, find their way around the city, navigate bureaucracy, and celebrate holidays*
- *Activities that emphasize compassion for others, e.g., many seniors residences welcome families to volunteer together to visit seniors, and help out with activities and special events*

Organizations Can Improve the Volunteer Experience for Families By:

- ✓ *Promoting volunteerism where families will see it – such as via social media, at community centres, recreation facilities and volunteer centres*
- ✓ *Building meaningful relationships – getting to know the individual needs and talents of each family member and the overall family situation in order to more effectively match the family with meaningful volunteer tasks*
- ✓ *Being flexible and accommodating – many families have to juggle other time commitments for their children's activities or the needs of aging parents; offering child care or creating options to volunteer where children can participate can help involve parents more often*
- ✓ *Capitalizing on technology options – offering greater online engagement and virtual communication options so families can volunteer remotely from home*
- ✓ *Risk and liability – review risk and liability issues including policies, accessibility, and physical environment in order to ensure the proper organizational resources are in place and family needs can be addressed effectively*
- ✓ *Being sensitive to differences – respecting gender, culture, language and especially age, being careful to avoid the perception of age discrimination and recognizing volunteers at all stages of life have something to offer*
- ✓ *Finding ways to make volunteering more family-friendly – offering roles and tasks that are suitable for a variety of ages and skill sets*
- ✓ *Clearly outlining the purpose and benefits of the proposed family volunteer activity – giving parents clear information they can pass on to their children about how their efforts will help others; following up and let families 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