

What Motivates Core Volunteers?

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Without committed volunteers, many nonprofit and voluntary organizations would not be able to deliver their missions. The 2003 National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations found that 54% of Canada's nonprofit and voluntary organizations are operated entirely by volunteers (Hall et al., 2005). The 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating found that 73% of all volunteer hours came from the top 25% of volunteers who gave at least 188 hours of their time annually (Hall et al., 2001). We call these individuals *core volunteers*.

To learn more about core volunteers and how they differ from mainstream volunteers (those who contribute less than 188 hours per year), Imagine Canada conducted in-depth interviews with 26 core volunteers and 24 mainstream volunteers from across the country. Our goal was to gather information that would help managers of volunteers effectively recruit, retain, recognize, and support core volunteers.¹

We learned that core volunteers, like all volunteers, are motivated by a desire to give back to their community, help others, and make connections with others. Core volunteers, however, are more likely than mainstream volunteers to have a professional or personal connection to the organization they support and much more likely to express a strong passion for the organization's cause. This fact sheet discusses the unique motivations of core volunteers and provides suggestions for recruiting and retaining them.

¹ The full results of the study can be found in L.G. Conn, & C. Barr. (2006). *Core volunteers: Exploring the values, attitudes, and behaviours underlying sustained volunteerism in Canada*. Toronto: Knowledge Development Centre.

Professional connection to the organization

Core volunteers were much more likely than mainstream volunteers to serve organizations that were closely related to their professional interests. Many were motivated to give their time to causes that they had been involved with professionally for many years.

"I worked in government for 32 years and I always felt that there was not enough information being given out to citizens. I felt that sometime down the road when I retired I would start volunteering and try to get involved in some kind of activity or project which would get out more information to citizens."

"I didn't used to volunteer a lot, when I was in university. Then I started working, and I got involved with a nonprofit literacy organization as one of my first jobs and we did a lot of extracurricular work there. We planned festivals, we did a lot of outreach, we did promotion, and mostly that was done outside of our working hours. We did it because we were interested in doing it. So probably the seed was planted there."

Personal connection to the organization

Many core volunteers reported having a personal connection to the organization they served. They were motivated to volunteer and keep volunteering because they were a member of the organization themselves or had children involved with the organization.

“I got involved with the Irish Association because I’m of Irish descent – my parents are Irish – and so I spent a lot of time down there, and I just got to know people. I have a true passion for the culture myself and want to see it continue. It’s getting to the point now where the people who started the club up are spending less time there and are turning to the younger members to keep the club going. So, short answer, because I love being Irish.”

“In terms of school council, the reason I got involved was that about 12 to 16 years ago, the Yukon went to the system of developing school councils, sort of like parent advisory councils, and my son wasn’t in school. He was four years old at the time, and I didn’t know anything about the Yukon school system. I’d had my second child at this point and I wasn’t working and I thought, well, let’s get involved.”

Passion for the cause

Almost all the core volunteers we interviewed expressed a deep passion for the causes to which they gave their time. Many reported that being able to make a difference in an area they were passionate about motivated them to get involved and stay involved.

“To me it’s being a part of something that can bring change. I have a real passion and drive to be involved in what’s out there. I don’t like feeling isolated, and I don’t like feeling that I live on Burden Street and that’s it. To me, I need more to be a part of.”

“I think it requires real passion for what you’re volunteering for. If you don’t have that, you’re not going to put a lot of hours into it.”

Suggestions for recruiting and retaining core volunteers

Given the unique motivations of core volunteers, managers of volunteers should consider targeting their recruitment efforts towards those who are already involved in the cause their organization supports. For example, youth sports organizations looking for coaches might approach players in adult sports leagues. Health organizations looking for volunteers might approach local health professionals or the families of patients. Manager of volunteers could also find a promising pool of potential core volunteers by looking to professional organizations in their existing network.

To turn new volunteers into core volunteers, managers of volunteers should be sure to explain their organization’s mission and how the activities of volunteers contribute to it. If possible, new volunteers should be placed in positions where they can see for themselves the impact of their efforts. Finally, new volunteers should be placed in positions where they will interact with staff or other volunteers who are passionate about the cause.

References

- Hall, M., McKeown, L., & Roberts, K. (2001). *Caring Canadians, involved Canadians: Highlights from the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating*. (Catalogue no. 71–542–XPE). Ottawa: Statistics Canada.
- Hall, M. H., de Wit, M. L., Lasby, D., McIver, D., Evers, T., & Johnson, C. et al. (2005). *Cornerstones of community: Highlights of the National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations*. (Catalogue No. 61–533–XPE, Rev. ed.) Ottawa: Statistics Canada.