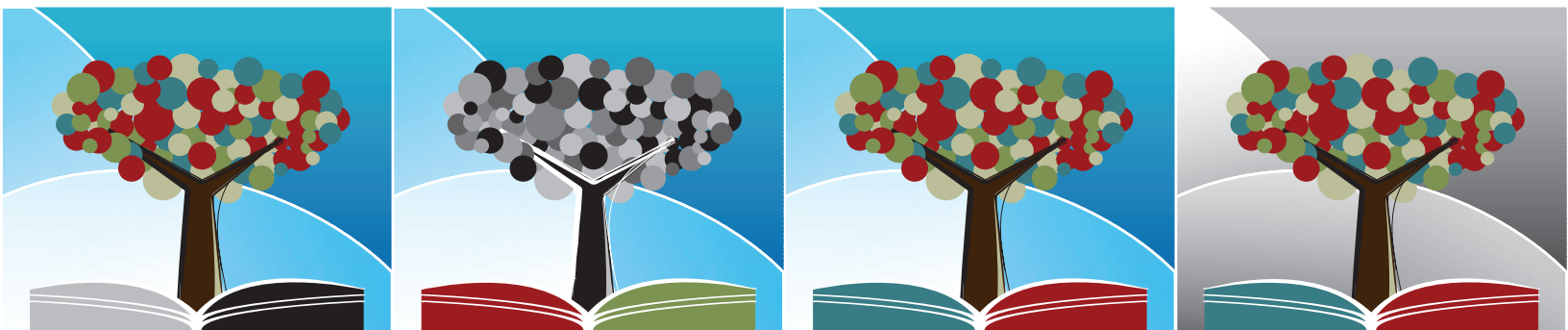


K N O W L E D G E D E V E L O P M E N T C E N T R E



Perceptions, Attitudes, and Motivations of New Canadians Regarding Volunteerism

Research report

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The logo for Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small Canadian flag icon above the letter "a".

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Perceptions, Attitudes and Motivations of New Canadians Regarding Volunteerism

Introduction and methodology

Why are new Canadians interested in volunteering?

The number of community organizations dedicated to meeting the needs of society is steadily increasing, and these organizations depend to a large extent on voluntary participation. Based on the results of a national survey, Canada's nonprofit and voluntary sector is composed of more than 161,000 organizations and, "more than half rely solely on volunteers to fulfill their mission" (Hall et al., 2005, p. 32). In fact, it is estimated that almost 12 million Canadians volunteer their time over the course of a given year (Hall et al., 2004, p. 10). However, funding cuts are forcing organizations to call increasingly on volunteers to ensure the delivery of their services. In addition, Canadian society is becoming progressively more multicultural (Scott, Selbee, & Reed, 2003, p. 2) and one of the challenges facing community organizations is how to increase civic engagement among the immigrant population.

The involvement of New Canadians in voluntary action is important for several reasons. First, immigrant volunteers are in a better position to understand the situation and expectations of immigrant clients. Furthermore, initiating newcomers to the ways of life of the host society is often one of the mandates given to volunteers. Finally, volunteerism can, in many ways, be an extremely enriching experience for volunteers. Among other things, the act of volunteering can help break through isolation and can lead to skills development and the acquisition of new knowledge. It can also make an individual feel useful to society and give him or her the feeling of belonging to a team. This is especially true for immigrants who, as a result of their volunteerism, develop valuable contacts with their new fellow citizens, discover a distinctive aspect of Canadian culture, and are sometimes even given a first concrete experience in a work environment.

Both organizations and the volunteers themselves stand to benefit when New Canadians become involved in voluntary action. However, it would seem that the parties are not as much in contact with each other as they would like. In an effort to assist community organizations with this challenge, the research described in this report aims to develop knowledge of the perceptions, attitudes, and motivations of New Canadians regarding volunteerism.

Objectives

Our objectives were to identify:

- the factors that encourage or inhibit volunteering among New Canadians; and
- the characteristics of New Canadians who are likely to engage in volunteering activities.

Methodology

The collection of data took place in two separate phases:

- 1) Exploratory phase.** One focus group was conducted among the volunteer coordinators of 11 organizations and institutions in the Estrie region of Quebec. Four with 13 immigrants from the former Yugoslavia, El Salvador, and Colombia. The purpose of this phase of the project was to identify key perceptions, attitudes, and motivations of immigrants with regard to volunteerism. This phase led to the development of a quantitative data collection tool (i.e., a questionnaire).
- 2) Quantitative data collection.** The second, and most important, phase of the research involved collecting data by way of a questionnaire. The questions were designed to obtain the information necessary for achieving the objectives (i.e., to define the major motivations for volunteering and the major barriers to voluntary action). The questions also made it possible to obtain information on the preferred methods for recruiting volunteers among New Canadians. Finally, socio-demographic data were collected so that we could determine if certain characteristics (e.g., age, profession, ethnic origin) influence peoples' attitudes. The questionnaires were completed

during one-on-one interviews with a researcher. This method was used to ensure that the participants' informed consent was obtained and that the questions were properly understood.

In total, 98 New Canadians living in Sherbrooke, Quebec answered our questionnaire. The individuals recruited had to have immigrated to Canada at least four years previously. Their socio-demographic characteristics are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of survey respondents

Variable	Description	Percentage (%)	Number of participants
Sex	Women	53	52
	Men	47	46
Age	25 to 35 ans	42	41
	36 to 45 ans	46	45
	46 to 55 ans	11	11
	56 and over	1	1
Country of origin	Africa (Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Cameroon, Somalia, Djibouti, Madagascar)	48	47
	South and Central America (Colombia, Argentina, Venezuela, Peru, El Salvador)	39	38
	Other (Bosnia, Romania, Switzerland, Morocco, Algeria, Iraq, Philippines)	13	13
Life situation	Live with their family	59	52
	Live with another person (spouse, brother or sister, friend, parent, child)	37	36
	Live alone	4	4
Occupation	Employed full-time	31	30
	Student	33	32
	Searching for a job	23	22
	Employed part-time	7	7
	At home taking care of the family	4	4
	Other	2	2
Level of education	Grade 12 or higher	84	82
	Grade 7 to 11	9	9
	Grade 6 or less	7	7
Employment status in country of origin	Employed	80	78
	Student	6	6
	Unemployed	12	11
Volunteering experience in Quebec	Volunteered in the past*	57	56
	Never volunteered	43	42

* Half the participants had between two and four years of volunteer experience; slightly more than a quarter had less than one year of volunteer experience. Slightly more than half of the participants currently volunteer or have volunteered on a weekly basis.

Results

The main results of this study were obtained with the help of a questionnaire and descriptive and comparative statistical analyses. Because the questionnaire is more confidential and reached a larger number of individuals than our focus groups, it provides more reliable data on which to draw conclusions and make recommendations. However, the information obtained during the focus group sessions will be used to gain a better understanding of the results. Please note that only the results deemed most significant or useful are reported here.

The overall results are presented first. Any significant differences observed in terms of the respondents' personal characteristics (volunteering experiences, age, sex, ethnic origin, etc.) are then examined in further detail in the following sections of this report:¹

- the meaning of volunteerism;
- motivations for volunteering;
- barriers to volunteering;
- recruitment; and
- specific characteristics to target.

The meaning of volunteerism

The questionnaire began with an open-ended question allowing respondents to explain in their own words what volunteerism means to them. The vast majority of respondents referred to the notions of *helping* and *service* in their answer. The *voluntary* and *free* nature of these actions was also frequently cited. Other notions such as an *experience of integration* or an *enriching experience* were occasionally mentioned. Only one person expressed the opinion that volunteerism was a form of *exploitation*.

Closed-ended questions revealed that volunteerism is perceived mainly as:

- an opportunity to help people in need (80% of respondents);
- an opportunity to enhance the quality of life of people (65%); and
- a way of offering more activities and services to the population (63%).

Only 26% of respondents believed that volunteering can lead to gainful employment.

Motivations for volunteering

The level of motivation for volunteering among those who participated in the study was high. While 14% of respondents said that volunteering was not a part of their plans over the next few years, 86% said that they were considering the possibility. Only 6% of participants stated that they were not in the least motivated to volunteer. There was no noticeable difference in the level of motivation of respondents on the basis of their personal characteristics (i.e., age, sex, country of origin, level of education, time schedule, or previous volunteering experience in Quebec).

Among some twenty possible reasons that might motivate the survey respondents to volunteer, those that stood out as being the most important were altruism and personal values. We also noted that the motivation to volunteer was not necessarily focused on helping immigrants. A variety of personal benefits were, however, found to be very important. Table 2 provides a list of all of the motivating factors, by order of importance.

¹ A difference was deemed significant when there was less than a 5% possibility that it occurred by chance.

Barriers to volunteering

The respondents first identified three main barriers to voluntary action: a lack of time or inflexible volunteer time schedule, a lack of information on how to become involved, and difficulties expressing themselves in French. The majority of respondents wanted greater accessibility to information on volunteer opportunities, or expressed the wish to learn more about volunteerism before making a commitment. Second, the respondents gave their views on other factors that might help influence their decision about whether or not to volunteer. The various barriers are presented in Table 3.

Variations among respondents

- People who have volunteered before, men, and people from Africa place importance on the connection between volunteering and values than do people without these characteristics.
- Older respondents (46 years of age and over) assign a greater level of importance to the opportunity to put their skills and experience into use than do individuals between the ages of 25 and 45.

Table 2. Motivations for volunteering among immigrants

Sources of motivation	Motivating factors
Altruism	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To help someone 2. To serve a cause in which I believe 3. Because it is a part of my values 4. To help other immigrants
Personal benefits	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. To create new social connections 6. To use my skills and experience 7. To achieve something I can be proud of 8. An opportunity for personal development 9. May increase my chances of finding a job 10. To help me fit better into the host society 11. To have the opportunity to practice my French 12. To acquire new skills 13. To learn more about Canadian life and culture

Table 3. Barriers preventing immigrants from volunteering

Main barriers
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Lack of time, or inflexible volunteer time schedules2. Lack of information about how to become involved3. Difficulties expressing themselves in French
Other barriers
<ol style="list-style-type: none">4. A poorly structured organization5. Need for long-term commitment6. Personal expenses incurred7. Lack of training for volunteers8. Immigrants are not well accepted in the organizations

Variations among respondents

- Respondents between the ages of 25 and 45 assign a greater level of importance to the time factor (i.e., the lack of time) than do respondents age 46 and older.
- Individuals from Africa, more often than respondents from Latin America, assign a greater level of importance to the fact that organizations' time schedules do not correspond to their availability.
- Latin American respondents, more often than Africans, assign a greater level of importance to their lack of information about how to become involved in volunteering.
- People who have no volunteer experience, more often than those who have experience, assign a greater level of importance to their lack of fluency in French.

Recruitment

The information identified as being most important to provide when recruiting immigrants as volunteers is as follows, in order of importance:

1. the services offered by the organization;
2. the cause served by the organization;
3. the duties volunteers are asked to perform;
4. the skills required to perform the assigned duties (this is particularly important for individuals who have no volunteer experience or who have less than 12 years of education); and
5. whether or not training will be provided (more women than men considered this important).

Note that 74% of respondents said that they prefer to approach an organization directly to offer their volunteer services, as opposed to having an organization approach them.

With regard to the volunteer selection process, respondents generally agreed with the following procedures:

- being asked questions about their previous work experience (74% in favour vs. 12% completely opposed);
- undergoing a selection interview (64% in favour vs. 14% completely opposed); and
- responding to a questionnaire about their criminal record (59% in favour vs. 21% completely opposed).

However, 41% of respondents felt that it was insulting to be told that a criminal record check would have to be conducted to look into their past for public safety reasons.

Specific characteristics to target

One of the objectives of our research was to identify whether certain socio-demographic characteristics of New Canadians could be targeted with a view to increasing the likelihood that members of this group would volunteer. For example, should organizations focus more on recruiting men or women, volunteers from a certain age group, or individuals from a certain cultural community? Also, would it be better for organizations to use different approaches based on individual profiles?

We were unable to draw any significant conclusions from the statistical review of the collected data. The few differences identified from the review were noted above. While these may be useful, they do not play a key role in the recruitment and retention of volunteers from the immigrant population. It is also important to recognize the limitations of a study that was based on

a survey of 98 individuals, among which we were able to consider only two ethnic “clusters.”

For a detailed picture of the patterns of volunteering based on different socio-demographic characteristics, see *Making Connections: Social and Civil Engagement among Canadian Immigrants* (Scott et al., 2003, pp. 12-15).

Highlights and discussion

This section provides a summary of the results presented above, along with additional comments.

The concept of volunteerism

Volunteerism is an action stemming from the individual initiative of citizens to bring about solutions or provide assistance to respond to the needs of the community, without the prospect of compensation (Secrétariat à l'action communautaire autonome du Québec, 2003, p. 13). Our research suggests that the concept of volunteerism among New Canadians fits in well with this vision. The notions of assistance and of community, and the fact that there is no charge for the services provided by volunteers, are integral to the concept.

The focus groups made it clear, however, that immigrants are occasionally surprised by the planned nature of volunteerism in Canada. The perceived need for a long-term commitment and regular involvement (i.e., fixed and planned schedules) differs from the more spontaneous, informal, helping activities that some immigrants are more familiar with.

Personal benefits

Although the personal benefits of volunteering are not at the top of the list of motivating factors, they are nonetheless important to the individuals we surveyed. The personal benefits derived from volunteering are integral to the general concept of volunteerism, which is seen as an opportunity to grow on a personal level or to breathe new life into one's professional life. Volunteerism, particularly among immigrants, is generally seen as an excellent means of forging connections with others, acquiring recognized work experience in Canada, and promoting a sense of commitment to their new community.

Barriers to volunteering

Language. Volunteering is often seen as a way for immigrants to learn the language of their host country. However, our findings suggest that the lack of fluency in French is viewed by some immigrants as a barrier to volunteering. This comment was more frequent among individuals who had no volunteering experience in Quebec. The need to learn a language can, therefore, be a deterrent rather than a motivation when it comes to volunteering.

Lack of time. Another factor acting as a deterrent to volunteering is lack of time. The report published by the Canadian Council on Social Development presents similar results: time was a major consideration, especially in the case of immigrants who have been living in Canada for less than 16 years (Scott et al., 2003, pp. 17 and 19). In our study, the time factor was especially important among the younger segment of the population (i.e., those between the ages of 25 and 45).

Lack of information. The fact that lack of information can be a deterrent to volunteering is, in our opinion, one of the most important factors to consider because it is a factor that organizations can do something about. Although Latin American immigrants who participated in our survey assigned a greater level of importance to the need for information than did immigrants from Africa, this is representative of a general trend among New Canadians who have not been in Canada for many years, as indicated by the results of the report produced by the Canadian Council on Social Development: one-third of respondents indicated they did not know how to become involved in volunteering (Scott et al., 2003, p. 18).

We recommend that organizations from a given community work together to develop a formal information strategy aimed at all New Canadians living in their area. On an informal level, attention could be paid to the specific information needs of certain groups or individuals.

The basic information provided should include the following:

1. the organization's cause,
2. the services offered by the organization,
3. the duties required of volunteers, the skills needed to perform such duties, and
4. whether or not training is provided.

It should be noted that individuals who had no previous volunteering experience in Quebec assigned more importance to the need for information than did those with previous experience. Therefore, it is possible that insecurity caused by a fear of the unknown acts as a deterrent to volunteering.

Personal expenses. More than half of the participants in the study stated that their volunteer activities caused them to incur personal expenses. This statement was just as common among people who had volunteer experience in Quebec as among those who did not. Where possible, volunteer activities should not cause a volunteer to incur any personal expenses as this can be detrimental to recruiting and retaining volunteers. Where appropriate, organizations should provide detailed information on this issue to help volunteers make an informed choice.

Subtle discrimination. One third of respondents felt that immigrants are not well accepted by voluntary organizations. There is, therefore, some work to be done in this area if organizations wish to recruit New Canadians as volunteers. First, it is important for each organization to verify for itself the validity of this perception, or its potential source, and then to implement actions aimed at eliminating any misunderstandings or intercultural annoyances and, if applicable, any forms of discrimination. Second, organizations should ensure, through the information they send out, that such fears are mitigated. Organizations must of course be transparent in their approach, and any information they send out must be consistent with reality. Nevertheless, it is the information transmitted by individuals who are describing their own personal experiences that will carry the most weight.

Recruitment

Initial contact. Regarding volunteer recruitment, the answers to the questionnaire indicate that the majority of respondents prefer to make the initial contact with an organization themselves. However, one third of respondents indicated that they would like the organization to make the initial contact. These findings are consistent with the information that came out of the focus groups. We also found that a number of people prefer not to be directly approached by an organization, whether by phone or by mail. However, some people feel that being contacted on an informal basis within the framework of a specific activity is acceptable. Personalized contact is seen as an asset when this type of approach is used. Therefore, it is clearly important to develop recruitment strategies that involve both direct and indirect contact.

Selection procedures. Generally, the respondents seemed willing to be interviewed or to have a criminal record check conducted. However, close to half of the respondents said that they found it insulting to be told that their past record would be looked into, even when it was explained to them that it was for public safety reasons. It is important to explain this procedure clearly and to place it within the context of the increasing need for such requirements for all citizens, whether they are born in Canada or elsewhere.

Factors that contribute to volunteer retention

In addition to recruiting volunteers, organizations must also motivate individuals to continue volunteering. The results of this research study have brought to light several issues in this regard.

Respectful and pleasant relations. First and foremost, immigrants must feel accepted, appreciated, and respected within the organization. During the focus groups, the point was made that when an organization customizes some of its practices to make it easier to work with people from another culture, it is a gesture that is much appreciated by those for whom it is intended. Several participants in the focus groups also mentioned the importance of good relations between staff and volunteers. Taking the time to sit down with volunteers and to relax over a cup of coffee was cited as one example of how to create a positive environment for immigrants. In fact, the opportunity to make new social connections was one of the factors motivating immigrants to volunteer. It goes without saying that pleasant social relations within the organization are a contributing factor to a positive volunteer retention rate.

Clearly defined structure and expectations.

A well-structured organization will have a higher retention rate than one which is not well structured. In this regard, the focus groups raised the point that volunteers like the organization with which they are involved to define their roles clearly, so that they know exactly what is expected of them. In addition, we found that the opportunity to participate in training sessions can increase a volunteer's motivation; this was especially true for women. Recommendations regarding organizational structure are beyond the scope of this project. However, local volunteer centres can provide input in this regard. Concerned about promoting volunteerism, they offer consultation and training services that focus on volunteering issues.²

² For more information, visit <http://www.volunteer.ca/volcan/eng/content/vol-centres/vol-centres.php?menutrail=&menutrail>

Recommendations

In light of the results presented above, we make the following recommendations to organizations that are interested in fostering a spirit of volunteering among the immigrant population. First, organizations should reflect on the extent to which they provide a welcoming climate for New Canadians. Once they have done this, they should focus on overcoming the one major barrier to volunteering that is within the control of the organizations themselves: lack of information. We propose, among other things, that organizations from a given community that want New Canadian volunteers pool their efforts to produce a joint information document.

Reflection and planning within the organization

Each organization must first determine:

1. whether their organization provides a warm welcome for people of different origins and, if not, what it can do to improve the situation.

Reflection can then focus on the following concerns:

2. how to meet the challenge of assigning New Canadian volunteers duties that are suitable and provide opportunities for development either personally or professionally, while at the same time meeting the needs of the organization;
3. the specific duties these volunteers could perform;
4. the skills required to perform these duties;
5. whether having experienced the immigration process is an asset in the performance of these duties;

6. the socio-demographic characteristics sought, if applicable (e.g., age, sex, education, ethnic origin);
7. the importance of fluency in French or English;
8. ways in which the organization can offer the volunteer opportunities to improve his or her knowledge of French or English;
9. the need for, or the opportunity to participate in, training sessions or some sort of coaching arrangement;
10. ways in which to foster pleasant social contact with other volunteers or staff members;
11. whether the volunteer activities in which these individuals are involved require them to incur personal expenses and, if so, how to prevent this from happening.

It would be in the organization's interest to develop a communication plan to:

12. identify formal and informal opportunities for recruiting volunteers among New Canadians;
13. determine the information that needs to be communicated in such situations;
14. determine the essential information to include in a leaflet about the organization; and
15. determine the information deemed important to include in a joint information document produced with other organizations.

Developing a joint information document

Because a lack of information on how to volunteer is viewed as a barrier to volunteering by New Canadians, we recommend that organizations within the same community develop a joint information document. This initiative may seem bold, given that the organizations are to some extent competing with one another for volunteer resources. However, we feel that a complete and concise document that provides both general and specific information on each organization participating in this group effort would be a very useful recruiting tool. Of course, we suggest that the knowledge gained from our research study be used to develop contents that would apply specifically to the volunteers targeted, by taking into account their motivations, their fears, and the barriers they perceive. We recommend that the following information be included in the joint information document.

General and common information:

1. importance of volunteering within the community;
2. reasons for approaching New Canadians;
3. benefits of volunteering for New Canadians;
4. requirements and procedures that the organizations have in common with regard to the volunteer selection process, if applicable;

Specific information on each organization (as applicable to each):

5. name and complete contact information of the organization;
6. name of the contact person;
7. organization's mission (in concise and simple terms);

8. services offered by the organization;
9. number of employees;
10. approximate number of volunteers and their ethnic diversity;
11. duties assigned to volunteers;
12. skills required to perform these duties;
13. reasons why New Canadians are targeted specifically to assist in the organization's mission;
14. level of fluency in French or in English that is required;
15. the benefits volunteers can gain from their contribution to the organization's mission (other than the benefits described in the list of general and common information above), including whether there are opportunities for making social connections, for practicing their French or English, or for building on their personal experience;
16. training or coaching opportunities;
17. minimum amount of availability required and whether schedules are flexible;
18. information about the possibility volunteers may incur personal expenses;
19. steps to take to offer one's services as a volunteer; and
20. any other information that the organization or group of organizations may consider essential.

Each organization should also produce its own information leaflet, to be used for both formal and informal contacts. The information could be a little more specific than in the joint document, which may have more limited space. It could also act as a complement to the joint document.

Conclusion

This report on a study conducted in Sherbrooke, Quebec, surveying approximately 100 respondents, highlighted the major motivations for and barriers to volunteering among New Canadians. Altruistic values were cited as the main motivation for volunteering, whereas the lack of time and information were major barriers. As reported above, these results are consistent with those of a survey conducted by the Canadian Council on Social Development.

We recommend that organizations reflect on and plan how volunteers can get involved in helping them achieve their mission. Various guidelines are provided for them to follow. Furthermore, because the dissemination of information is a factor over which organizations have control, we recommend that organizations from the same community work together to produce an information document that can be used for volunteer recruitment. The information to include in such a document has been identified based on the results of this study.

We trust that the information contained in this report will serve as a springboard for discussions within and between organizations that rely on volunteers. We believe that, if well informed, the players in the field will be the ones to bring the most creativity to identifying ways in which to ensure the recruitment and retention of volunteers from the New Canadian population.

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NOTES



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