

## **Volunteer engagement: Challenges in a new economic age**

**By Andy Levy-Ajzenkopf**

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An anemic economy closed out 2008, and if pundits and experts across the globe are correct, the condition may well worsen in 2009. Though stories of economic hardship are, unfortunately, hardly rare for the charitable sector, the end of the decade may prove to be one of the toughest in at least one area: recruitment of volunteers.

As organizations struggle to find new funding, reassure longtime donors, and fulfill their social mandates, the pool of volunteers that help them do all of this could be in danger of drying up, as Canadians begin clueing in to the need to ration their time in the name of opportunity-cost.

So how can voluntary sector organizations best engage, retain, and recruit much-needed help in 2009; in the year the economy may tank more than it has since the Great Depression? Simple, say the experts: adapt to changing times and increase volunteer recognition programs.

### **Understand volunteer needs**

**Ruth MacKenzie**, president of [Volunteer Canada](#), and **Don Lapierre**, senior manager, programs and voluntary sector relations, offer their advice on the subject.

"Any experienced manager of volunteers knows that if you're having a hard time recruiting volunteers, it's usually because you're not recruiting for the right position," MacKenzie says. "I would also add that good volunteer recognition is critically important to motivating and retaining volunteers. And one of the best ways you can demonstrate to a volunteer their value to your organization is to demonstrate good volunteer management practices - practices that show you're approaching volunteer involvement in a thoughtful way, that provides them with the tools and information to do their job professionally, that provides opportunities for learning and feedback, and recognizes the contribution they've made." Lapierre concurs.

"Strong and vibrant volunteer-involving organizations must always be rethinking and restructuring how they work. Basic change management theory applies," he says, adding that delivery of crucial services will "always depend on whether or not volunteers can be attracted and retained. Strategic volunteer management in these challenging times means making changes in all aspects of organizational operations with full participation, from CEO to frontline staff."

Lapierre asks us to consider the basic motivators that attract volunteers to any given position. They are:

- To support a cause that they believe in
- To make a contribution to society
- To share their skills
- To do something meaningful with their friends and colleagues

On the flip side, voluntary sector managers and recruiters must also recognize the challenges today's volunteers face. According to Volunteer Canada:

- They don't have enough time
- They don't have time during traditional work hours
- They don't identify with traditional images of volunteers
- They don't want to do routine or menial volunteer tasks

"Organizations need to think about whether or not their current volunteer opportunities and volunteer management practices reflect these changes to make volunteering more appealing," Lapierre says. He urges charities and nonprofits to consult the [Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement](#) (PDF) and to use it as a "road map" for how best to examine current operations and practices in volunteer management.

## Communication breakdown

Not only should organizations reexamine their internal management mechanisms vis-à-vis volunteers; they should also take a hard look at the way they communicate with them.

So says **Donna Lockhart**, partner with [The Rethink Group](#) and noted expert, workshop leader, and speaker on Canadian community volunteerism.

"It's really time to develop open communications where challenges as well as successes are shared with all paid and unpaid staff resources. Ask volunteers for ideas, suggestions etc., especially in tough times," she says. "Research indicates that when volunteers are connected to the cause of an organization they are less likely to leave...so this would help strengthen the ties with existing volunteers. No one likes rumours or surprises. Keep volunteers apprised. Information is knowledge and knowledge is power. Volunteers can have a powerful influence on the direction and solutions to problems in organizations."

MacKenzie and Lapierre share the sentiment and assert that "now is the time to integrate volunteer roles into your total HR strategy."

Lapierre cites a recent pilot project undertaken by [Volunteer Calgary](#) that sought to recruit and involve "high-skilled or professionally-skilled individuals" in voluntary organizations. Its objective was to provide meaning to the volunteers and capacity for the organizations. There were five major points/lessons identified via the project:

1. **Essential strategic leadership** - The CEO or ED must champion a culture and structure that supports the full integration of high-skills volunteers.
2. **Role and place of the manager of volunteers** - Organizations need a staff manager of volunteers who is a member of the management team.
3. **Professionally managed volunteer programs** - Require an alignment of systems, policies and processes for paid and unpaid staff.
4. **Valuing volunteers** - Volunteers and staff need to understand the "value" that volunteers contribute to the organization to overcome the outdated perceptions of "I am/you are just a volunteer".
5. **Readiness for an integrated human resource strategy approach** - To succeed, this approach needs to be integrated with the organization's strategic plan.

## **Managing for success**

Speaking to point number two above, Lockhart firmly believes the time has come for many organizations to create a new staff position of 'manager of volunteers'.

"I personally believe it is time for organizations to fully recognize the valuable contribution of volunteers and support the work of volunteers by engaging [this position]," she insists. "As competition for volunteers continues to increase, and as baby boomers move into retirement, those with qualified, experienced and dedicated managers of volunteers will definitely be successful in engaging volunteers. Senior staff needs to understand, acknowledge, and support the value of managing these volunteer resources in the same way as they see supporting paid resources. To successfully fulfill the mission and goals of organizations, we require all types of people. And those people, whether paid or unpaid, need to be supported. We witnessed the incredible move forward in philanthropy when organizations started to engage full-time, highly qualified fundraisers to support the financial needs of the organization. We now need to move forward on supporting the human resources needs in organizations from the volunteer perspective."

Intertwined with this last notion is the idea that a volunteer manager would help with one of the more confounding problems experienced by many would-be volunteers: the dreaded no-call-back abyss.

When asked about why there is sometimes a disconnect between willing, but unengaged, Canadian volunteers and the organizations who desperately need them, Lockhart, MacKenzie and Lapierre all agree that this is a problem and could be resolved with better staffing and standard operating procedures.

Lockhart: "If no one in the organization is accountable for volunteer engagement, then inquiries may get lost or follow-up does not take place. Or, if the person who is responsible for volunteers is not well trained or qualified they just do not understand the importance of, or impact of not following up with a potential volunteer. This is not a good practice in volunteer engagement. That potential volunteer will go elsewhere because there are so many choices and places for him/her to give their time. So organizations need to establish some best practices for volunteer engagement."

***"Volunteer program management simply can't be something that is relegated to being managed off the corner of a desk."***

MacKenzie: "Databases are often not kept as up-to-date as they should be, so sometimes posted positions have long been filled. The reality is, for organizations and volunteer centres, maintaining a database of volunteer opportunities still requires human interaction to review and assess applications and to follow up with individuals. Organizations need to be certain they are appropriately dedicating staffing resources to manage. I think the follow-up piece also speaks strongly to the need for dedicated resources to volunteer program management - it simply can't be something that is relegated to being managed off the corner of a desk."

## **Picking the right target**

A piece of good news for sector organizations looking for skilled volunteers is that the pool is about to expand. As noted in a previous [CharityVillage cover story](#), the baby boomer generation is retiring in greater numbers and seeking meaningful volunteer opportunities in which to use their years of accumulated skills.

According to MacKenzie and Lapierre, nonprofits should also be looking at youth, newcomers, and adult people with disabilities, and targeting recruitment engagement plans appropriately. Lockhart views it the same way.

"Organizations who continue to recruit for long-term, traditional volunteer roles will not secure the volunteers they need," she cautions. "Our volunteer profile in Canada is changing and we are seeing more diverse groups, such as this large group of baby boomers, youth, culturally diverse groups, and the technologically savvy, all of whom will demand different relationships and experiences in organizations. Those organizations who respond creatively - with new opportunities and also the ability to engage volunteers who come to them with an idea for a project or program - and are open to new and different ways of engaging volunteers, I believe, will have the edge on recruitment."

### **Spending, not thrift will beat the recession**

As a last point, MacKenzie advises voluntary sector organizations to try to budget as much as possible for volunteer programming.

"Increasingly, there's the challenge of the costs related to volunteering. In tough economic times, if there are costs involved, that could be a real barrier to volunteering," she says. "Organizations need to ensure that they are provided [with] adequate budgets for their volunteer program so that managers of volunteers are empowered to support the associated costs as much as possible. And this same message can be delivered to funders so that they recognize the costs of volunteering and account for that when providing funds."

According to Lockhart, it's not just setting aside the extra money, but also how you spend time and resources on engaging volunteers that will determine how well your organization moves forward in this changing climate.

"Any successful engagement plan has to be flexible. Offer long and short-term opportunities; meet the needs of the volunteer as well as the organization; provide meaningful work; respond to times when volunteers are available and use the skills and experience of the volunteers," she says. "Volunteers may be doing work from home, or be virtual volunteers, or a group of employees coming to tackle a specific issue the organization has in a more project-like time frame. Organizations will be working with each volunteer most likely in a different way. This is very new...[because] in most cases we have applied one management strategy to all volunteers. Now our engagement plan has to be pliable to meet and balance the needs of the organization and the volunteer."

If your organization is still using "old school" methods in approaching volunteerism, it may be time to get with the new program.