

Attracting and Retaining Young Adults in Voluntary Organizations

Forum Report - February 2007



Hosted by:

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In Newfoundland and Labrador, it is often expressed that “young people won’t get involved” as volunteers with community groups. The assumption generally is that the problem rests with young people. Yet most research shows that many young people are actively engaged. According to Statistics Canada, youth aged 15-24 have the highest volunteer participation rate of any age group in Newfoundland and Labrador (53%). The rate of participation for the 24-35 year age group is somewhat lower at 42%, but is still substantial. In Newfoundland and Labrador, young people age 15-24 volunteer an average of 164 hours per year and those ages 25-34 volunteer an average of 156 hours.

The **Community Services Council Newfoundland and Labrador (CSC)** set out to find out more about the perceptions of young adults and to help organizations find effective ways to engage them, especially in leadership roles.

On February 9, 2007, CSC brought together representatives of voluntary organizations and youth volunteers together for the *Attracting and Retaining Young Adults in Voluntary Organizations Forum*. The Forum focused on ways that organizations might make fundamental changes to become more attractive and accommodating to young adults in their 20s and 30s, especially to key positions.

*Our organization is fairly traditional in culture and structure. We need to be more open to including others, especially youth.
- Forum participant*

Guest facilitator for the event was Rachael Dhawan from **Apathy is Boring**, a national organization that uses art, media and technology to encourage youth to become more involved in their communities and the democratic process. **Apathy is Boring** has developed the *Youth-Friendly Guide*, a manual that helps organizations learn innovative ways of forming and maintaining intergenerational partnerships.

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More than a numbers game

Youth engagement is not merely about recruitment or having a youth representative on the Board of Directors. The number of young volunteers does not provide a measure of an organization’s success at youth *engagement*. While recruiting youth is obviously important, participants at the Forum delved beyond the typical recruitment strategies to discuss what it means to truly engage youth and make organizations more youth-friendly. To be engaged young people need:

- √ meaningful participation
- √ equal contribution
- √ a cause they believe in
- √ an organization that is accessible and accommodating

Youth must be engaged in a meaningful way – it is about relationship building.

The view from up here

Representatives from voluntary organizations highlighted some of the challenges of recruiting and sustaining young adult volunteers. It is usually never about not wanting youth involved, rather it is a lack of awareness for ways to recruit and retain them. Even if youth are involved, retention and engagement are ongoing issues. Specific challenges highlighted by organizations included the following.

Organizations need to find new ways of attracting young people.

Sometimes young people are not willing to take on leadership roles. They may be more willing to donate money or help out at specific events.

Many organizations are run by older volunteers with little involvement by young people; this can further isolate potential newcomers.

Organizations need to adapt in order to effectively engage young people but it is sometimes difficult for organizations to change.

Youth engagement doesn't "happen" – it takes work, dedication and a desire to change.

Making organizations relevant to young people can be an issue.

The perceptions of young people about voluntary organizations are not always accurate; sometimes organizations are willing to

change and adapt.

Organizations sometimes resist the involvement of young people because of preconceived notions about youth.

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Building communities – perspectives of young people

Several young adults who are highly involved volunteers also attended the Forum. These participants reported taking on leadership roles in many voluntary organizations, either through paid employment or volunteer effort. Perspectives on youth engagement from the point of view of those currently engaged resulted in candid and thought-provoking discussion on young people's experiences in the voluntary sector. Highlights included the following.

Young people sometimes lack the confidence needed to take on leadership roles.

Leaders sometimes refer to their length of service like a badge of honour – this can be intimidating to new people with little experience.

Young people are often the token youth representative and become pigeonholed in "youth issues".

Mentorship can enable youth to learn about an organization and grow into leadership roles.

Voluntary organizations can provide young people with the opportunity to learn many new skills.

Young people can be turned off from organizations by bad behaviour (swearing, arguing) or by being talked "down to" ("Listen here, young man").

There is a difference between integrating youth and working with youth groups.

It is not about catering to specific demographics but having young people truly involved in the organization.

Young people are action-oriented – they are not interested in long meetings with no results.

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Why bother? The benefits to voluntary organizations

Young people can bring many benefits to voluntary organizations, as several Forum participants indicated by sharing their experiences as young adults in the voluntary sector.

Young adults can bring new ideas to voluntary organizations. They may challenge the “old ways” of doing things.

Young people can bring new energy to an organization. This helps avoid burnout of older, overburdened volunteers.

Young people, sometimes referred to as the *Information Age Generation*, can sometimes do things better, easier or faster (especially when it comes to technology).

Older volunteers with years of experience and knowledge, working together with younger people who bring new ideas and energy, benefit the entire community.

Young people are often the least resistant to change. In a world that is changing rapidly, this trait can be very beneficial to voluntary organizations struggling to keep up.

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What’s in it for me? Why young people get involved

Young people today live active lifestyles and are conscious of time commitments. Those who get involved do so for many of the following reasons.

Volunteering helps build skills and experience, which are important for career development.

Volunteering is an outlet for personal interests.

Young people must be empowered to take leadership roles.

There is an important element of socializing that happens with many types of volunteer work.

Getting involved in a relevant cause or group leads to self-discovery for many young people.

The altruistic nature of volunteering can be appealing to young people.

Young people can avail of training opportunities through their volunteer work.

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Starting out can be a challenge

For voluntary organizations that have never tried to engage young people previously, there are challenges and even an element of risk. It is obvious by now that the benefits surely outweigh the risks when it comes to youth engagement, but as organizations start to grow and adapt challenges can arise.

Young people can sometimes lack experience and may require a mentor to lead them.

Voluntary organizations may need to change things once considered fundamental to the organization (an example might be to eliminate the traditional Roberts Rules of Order at meetings).

Young people volunteer for causes they deem relevant. This can be a challenge for organizations whose relevance may be in question.

Flexibility is important but may be a challenge for organizations who are very stringent in appearance and process.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, out-migration and an increasingly migrant workforce are significant challenges. There are fewer numbers of potential young adults to draw upon and those that are left are often heading lone-parent families as spouses leave for seasonal work.

As a culture, young people are often viewed as incapable children who need supervision.

Some voluntary organizations need a significant overhaul of their public image in order to be appealing to youth.

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Principles of Youth Engagement

1. Set out clear expectations and limitations
2. Encourage creativity and difference
3. Make connections between generations
4. Provide mentorship and support
5. Communicate openly

Young people's perception of some organizations is not always accurate – transparency helps youth understand what you do.

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20 ways to the meaningful participation of young people

1. **Give young people ownership.** Don't just assign a task from your to-do list, ask youth to come up with their own ideas and projects; the results may inspire you.
2. **Trust young people to get the job done.** Too much "supervising" can make a young person feel untrustworthy.
3. **Take the time to build a relationship.** Get to know young volunteers and allow opportunities for them to get to know others in the organization.
4. **Volunteering doesn't just happen.** Volunteer coordination is important to effectively recruit and retain any volunteer. If possible, engage a Volunteer Coordinator as a paid staff person or volunteer.
5. **Don't limit youth participation.** Don't assume that young people are interested only in "youth" issues. Engage them in all aspects of the organization.
6. **Learn from others.** Ask organizations who have successfully integrated youth for advice.

7. **Create an incentive that appeals to youth.** Offer professional development opportunities if possible, this may appeal to young people looking for career development.
8. **Be flexible.** Look closely at the organization and ask whether it is really accommodating to young adults. Is the office open when young people are likely to call or drop by? Are meetings held in out-of-the way places?
9. **Collaborate with other organizations.** Collaborate with other organizations wherever and whenever possible. Working with other organizations on common initiatives can save resources and result in a larger pool of volunteers to draw upon.
10. **Be yourself.** Trying to impress young people by being ‘cool’ will come across as insincere.
11. **Incorporate technology.** Many young adults grew up with computers and the Internet. They may be more comfortable expressing their feelings online rather than speaking up at a meeting.
12. **Consider your public image.** Is your website, logo and messaging appealing to young people? Maybe it is time for an organizational makeover.
13. **Be positive and enthusiastic.** A positive attitude is contagious. Show young people why they should be passionate and energetic about the organization.
14. **Mentor young people.** Consider having a mentor work with young people to help them increase their leadership abilities.
15. **Youth-friendly equals people-friendly.** Organizations that are flexible, respectful and accommodating in nature will attract young people – and others!
16. **Look back.** Look at your organization with a critical eye. Is it appealing to young people? Try to review the last three sets of minutes from your board meetings. How much was accomplished? Are items moving forward? Would your board meetings be attractive to a young person?
17. **Allow opportunities for socializing.** Allow time for board members or other volunteers to get to know each other; the camaraderie will resurface during meetings and projects. It may help prevent miscommunication and preconceived notions about each other.
18. **Communicate effectively.** Try not to “talk down” to young people and avoid acronyms and other unfamiliar jargon.
19. **Don’t ask the busiest person.** It is important not to put too much pressure on the young people who are currently involved. Ask a new person to help.
20. **Be transparent.** It is important that young people know about your organization and how it works. Young people will be reluctant to join an organization that appears secretive and unwelcoming.

First impressions are important

Committee and board meetings are often a young person's first experience with leadership roles in a voluntary organization. It is important that meetings are run in a manner that is not only accommodating to youth but attractive as well.

- Provide as much information as you can before the meeting (i.e. agenda, notes, previous minutes, etc.)
- Start on time and end on time
- Stay on topic
- Use humour whenever possible or appropriate
- Have food available that appeals to young people
- Make sure the physical set up is comfortable and inclusive
- Set a realistic time for each agenda item
- Be flexible about board meeting times and locations
- Keep meetings as short as possible
- Consider transportation issues such as carpooling, parking, public transit, etc.
- Think about having a rotating chair at each meeting (note that this works best in groups that make decisions by consensus)
- Follow up after meetings

Are you having fun yet? If you aren't enjoying yourself at board meetings, how will a young person feel?

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Other Resources

Apathy is Boring

www.apathyisboring.com

Youth-Friendly Guide

enVision Resource Bulletin

www.envision.ca/pdf/envision_bulletin_final.pdf

Making Room for Young People

Attracting Young Volunteers in Newfoundland and Labrador

Look What's Growing – Information Bulletin on Youth Volunteering

www.kdc-kdc.ca/attachments/Bulletin_Youth_KDC.pdf

Growing From Within: Internal Practices to Build Your Volunteer Program

www.envision.ca/cvi/docs/SelfAssessmentEng.pdf

Giving and Volunteering – Key statistics on charitable giving and participating

www.givingandvolunteering.ca

enVision.ca – virtual resource centre for voluntary organizations

www.envision.ca

VoluntaryGateway.ca – helping voluntary organizations in Canada build stronger communities

www.voluntarygateway.ca

Participants

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Denise	Cole	Community Education Network	Kippens
Pam	Corrigan	Community Services Council	St. John's
Sheila	Downer	Smart Labrador	Forteau
Michael	Fenwick	50+ Project	Cape St. George
Catherine	French	Community Services Council	St. John's
Kelly	Heisz	St. John's Clean and Beautiful	St. John's
Glenda	Janes	St. John Ambulance	St. John's
Roseanne	Leonard	NL Association of CBDCs	Conception Bay South
Eddie	Locke	Community Centre Alliance	St. John's
Jay	McGrath	FINALY	St. John's
Corey	Parsons	NRYN / CBS Soccer	Conception Bay South
Eileen	Pitcher	VON	Pasadena
Dana	Pittman		Rocky Harbour
Anna	Power	Canadian Red Cross	Placentia
Penelope	Rowe	Community Services Council	St. John's
Erika	Stockley	Labrador North Chamber of Commerce	Happy Valley-Goose Bay
Charles	Taylor	Kiwanis	Conception Bay South
Rhonda	Tulk Lane	FINALY	St. John's
Jamie	Warren	NF Trailways	St. Anthony
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