

The World of Volunteering in 2017 and Beyond

Notes and Results from the Study Overview

Volunteer Canada, together with Ipsos Public Affairs and Investors Group, has issued a research report on Canadian's perceptions and attitudes on volunteering. [Recognizing Volunteering in 2017](#) reveals that there is a shift in the kinds of activities people consider to be volunteering and a move towards a broader view of community engagement. The definition of volunteering is expanding to include informal volunteering, social action, organic movements and individual social responsibility.

Summary of the Round Table Discussions by the Governor General of Canada

What does volunteering look like in 2017 and beyond?

The following seven themes emerged from the online and in-person discussions:

1. Broadening the definition / understanding of volunteering
2. Technology as a tool for volunteer engagement
3. Infrastructure and organizational capacity for volunteer engagement
4. Creating a more welcoming, diverse, and inclusive voluntary sector
5. The role of volunteering in social, health, and community development
6. Public policy to strengthen volunteering
7. Focussed volunteer engagement of youth, baby boomers, and new Canadians

RECOGNIZING VOLUNTEERING IN 2017: SUMMARY REPORT

Recognizing volunteers continues to be an important dimension of volunteer engagement as we find meaningful ways to show appreciation for the efforts of volunteers and to raise public awareness about the contributions volunteers make to communities.

The *2013 Volunteer Recognition Study* illuminated a gap between how volunteers want to be recognized and the volunteer recognition activities in organizations.

From this study, we developed the **Volunteer Recognition Tool** to help organizations better match their volunteer recognition strategies to the preferences of volunteers.

When asked “**What Do You Want the World of Volunteering to Look Like in 2017?**” participants called upon us to broaden the definition of volunteering, to include informal volunteering and the emerging organic movements. Some suggested that we find a new word altogether, such as citizen engagement or community involvement, however, the consensus was that we must direct our energies toward better understanding and promoting a broader spectrum of volunteer engagement.

Introduction

When Statistics Canada released the findings of the *General Social Survey*:

Giving, volunteering and participating (2013), alarm bells sounded in some quarters as we witnessed a drop from 47% of Canadians aged 15 and over volunteering in 2010 to 44% in 2013. Was this a minor blip or the beginning of a concerning downward trend? Have Canadians become less giving or are we simply giving time in new and different ways?

While the drop in the volunteer rate can be partially explained by an aging population (volunteer rate decreases with age), or by increased family caregiving demands due to significant cuts in home support services, there is also a growing sense that there is a fundamental shift happening in the volunteer landscape. Could a decrease in formal volunteering indicate an increase in informal volunteering?

This shift signals that as the nature of volunteering and engaging in community is evolving and expanding, our conceptualization and recognition of the term must adapt. The notion of Individual Social Responsibility, or ISR, presents a broad and clear lens through which to conceptualize all forms of volunteering and engagement in an inclusive and robust way.

GLOBAL TRENDS IN DEFINING VOLUNTEERING AND GIVING

The question of how we define volunteering and the growing recognition of the widening spectrum of citizen engagement and organization is prominent on the international scene.

In the UK, the yearly *Community Life Survey* explores the following four dimensions¹⁰:

- **(Regular) formal volunteering:** Giving unpaid help (at least once a month) through groups, clubs or organizations to benefit other people or the environment
- **(Regular) informal volunteering:** Giving unpaid help (at least once a month) as an individual to people who are not relatives
- **Social action:** Giving unpaid help to support a community event, campaign or project
- **Charitable donation:** Donating money to charitable causes

According to the *Community Life Survey*, informal volunteering has increased over time, and is actually more prevalent than formal volunteering, “with over a third of people (36%) regularly helping out neighbours and friends on a more casual basis.”¹¹ In the Netherlands, there has been a significant research around the changing nature of volunteering and community life. Several studies have examined the patterns of those who are active as individuals, those who are involved through their schools, youth groups, service clubs, businesses, or political parties, as well as those who contribute in less formal ways. Dr. Cees van den Bos of the Volunteer Center Arnhem (the Netherlands) outlines the myriad ways that different cultures conceptualize

volunteering and points out Wuthnow's claim that in the United States, civic participation has shifted, and "that traditional, long-term memberships in hierarchical organizations are being replaced by experiments with 'looser, more sporadic, ad hoc connections.

This phenomenon is also observable in the Netherlands, and Dr. Van Den Bos points out the new vocabulary and manifestations of the shifting understanding of volunteering, including terms such as voluntary worker, volunteer, active citizenship, civic engagement, social inclusion, social service, community service, informal volunteering and corporate social responsibility. He began to focus his research on the interplay between formal, or what he dubs the "systems world", and informal volunteering, or the "life world."

These distinct concepts are outlined in Figure 1.

The systems world refers to the formal structures within non-profit organizations and public institutions that engage volunteers formally (such as a literacy organization that recruits volunteer tutors to work with students). The life world refers to those circumstances that inspire people to help one another or to self-organize to take action (such as a group of neighbours who take turns cooking for someone recovering from surgery). His research asks whether the volunteer management infrastructure (the systems world) that we have created can be used to support civil society at-large (the life world).

Figure 1: The Systems World vs the Life World¹³

SYSTEM WORLD	LIFE WORLD
Instrumental	Expressive
Formal/ <i>top down</i>	Informal/ <i>bottom up</i>
Outcome: predictable	Outcome: unpredictable
Doing for (altruism)	Doing with (reciprocity, campaigning)
Specific	General
Searching for volunteers for jobs	Searching for jobs for volunteers
Professionals select volunteers	Volunteers select professionals
Ownership: organization/board	Ownership: members/citizens/residents
Exclusive	Inclusive
Competencies	Assets/common interests/proximity
Bridging capital	Bonding capital
Professional: recruits/coordinates	Professional: empowers/facilitates

In 2016, Canada ranked number 6 on the Index. The highest ranked countries (in order) are Myanmar, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Sri Lanka. Figure 2 illustrates changes in ranks over the past 4 years.

Figure 2: World Giving Index, 2013-2016¹⁴

Country	2016 rank	2015 rank	2014 rank	2013 rank
Myanmar	1	1	1	2
United States	2	2	1	1
New Zealand	4	3	5	2
Canada	6	4	3	2
Australia	3	5	6	7
United Kingdom	8	6	7	6
Netherlands	13	7	12	8
Sri Lanka	5	8	9	10

While wide-reaching and diverse, these global conceptions of volunteering, giving, and civic engagement are perfectly aligned with the broader concept of ISR.

HOW CANADIANS SEE THEMSELVES

Despite considerable angst about the economy and the state of key social programs like healthcare, few Canadians consider themselves to be pessimists (over a third claim to be optimists while over half claim to be neither).

A small number of Canadians (7%) say they volunteer often and for many causes and organizations, with a higher number (32%) saying they volunteer quite a bit but only for one or two organizations or volunteer infrequently.

Almost half say they do a lot to help in the community or do their part in school-related or recreational activities that their family participates in but do not consider it volunteering.

17% of Canadians say they do not do any volunteering.

It is evident that Canadians help in many ways, but there is a widespread consensus that informal engagement such as shoveling or cleaning a neighbour's walk, bringing something to school or to the office for a food drive, or sharing content is not volunteering. For example, of the 75% of Canadians who have donated used clothing to a used clothing store, just under half would consider that volunteering. Furthermore, many of the activities that very few Canadians do are viewed as volunteering, such as reading to patients in a hospice, hospital or care facility (only 6% do, while 60% see it as volunteering) or serving on the board of directors of a nonprofit organization (10% do, 47% consider volunteering).

In terms of motivations, 75% of Canadians are very willing to volunteer in times of crisis, even if they do not volunteer on a regular basis, and 68% would be more motivated to choose an employer with a strong volunteer culture.

A worrying trend is that most Canadians agree that they are increasingly being forced to volunteer as part of registering their children for community and sports activities. This trend merits close monitoring as it goes against the very nature of volunteering, which at its core connotes giving freely and willingly of time and/or resources, and could thus erode Canadians' willingness to volunteer.

Overall, Canadians want strong communities and want to be involved in their community. 82% believe that all Canadians have something to offer others, and 72% agree that communities thrive when people know each other.

Most Canadians feel they have a personal responsibility to offer assistance to those who need help, and over half say they want to have a voice in shaping the community where they live.

Despite this recognition of the role of communities in citizen engagement and connection, 71% think people are less connected to communities now than they were in previous generations.

BARRIERS AND ENCOURAGEMENT

Perhaps the disconnect mentioned above can be attributed to the fact that many Canadians cite a lack of physical or social opportunities (e.g. a lack of time and resources or family and friends not volunteering) as the main barrier to increased volunteering.

26% of Canadians cite the lack of physical or psychological capability (such as a lack of skills or knowledge of a worthwhile cause).

It is important to note that only 18% of Canadians cited a lack of motivation as a barrier to increased volunteering.

Organizations can employ various strategies to help potential volunteers overcome these barriers, however the research shows that most Canadians do not have any ideas or suggestions to encourage volunteering, with two in ten citing advertising or asking for volunteers and 4% citing more free time or time off work or school as potential ways facilitate volunteering.

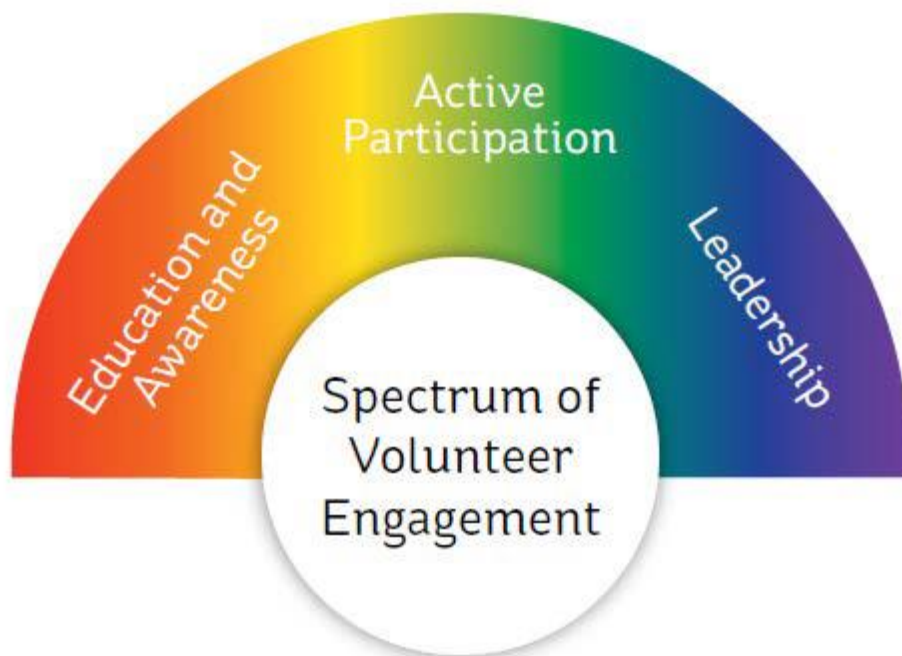
When it comes to volunteering and the workplace specifically, 60% of Canadians agree that people would volunteer more if it was organized by their employer.

When it comes to the barrier of a lack of friends or family volunteering, 68% of Canadians agreed that people would volunteer more if they could do it as a family. Volunteer Canada has created tools and resources for families and organizations to facilitate family volunteering. According to Volunteer Canada's *Family Volunteering: A Discussion Paper*, "new and innovative positions and projects will need to be developed, as always meeting the needs of the organization and community while at the same time appealing to the unique characteristics of family volunteers."²⁰ Organizations can also engage groups of close friends or employees in order to overcome the barrier of a lack of social opportunity.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND NEXT STEPS

There is momentum building globally to expand the definition of volunteering to include informal volunteering, organic movements, and the many ways that people put their values into action. Canadians continue to perceive volunteering as a vital part of communities, and while they engage in community in diverse ways, they do not necessarily consider informal activities to be volunteering. Canadians prioritize helping their family and friends, random acts of kindness, doing their part in activities and services that involve or benefit their family, and making a positive contribution in their community above volunteering, yet these activities all constitute “helping out,” which is a term that 41% of Canadians associate with volunteering.

Figure 3: The Spectrum of Engagement



The adoption of the concept of ISR builds on this spectrum, presenting an all-encompassing, global term with a flexible and inclusive framework through which we can understand civic contributions in infinite settings.

Its flexibility lies in its inclusion of the diverse forms of volunteering – both formal and informal – and in its recognition of their essential contributions to building strong and connected communities.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS AT A GLANCE:

1. The definition of volunteering is expanding around the globe to include informal volunteering and organic movements.
2. Researchers are including informal volunteering in studies about volunteering (Statistics Canada plans to develop an informal volunteering module for the 2018 *General Social Survey: Giving, volunteering and participating*).
3. Informal volunteering appears to be increasing and may partly explain why formal volunteering rates have dropped.
4. Canadians identify a wide range of activities and decisions through which they express their values and contribute to community which include formal volunteering, informal volunteering, and ISR.
5. There may be opportunities to provide tools and other support to promote informal volunteering and ISR.
6. Volunteer recognition ought to include expressing appreciation and raising awareness about the contributions Canadians made through informal volunteering and ISR more broadly.