

ABSTRACT

“Embracing the New Wave of Skills-Based Volunteers”

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**Building Communities: Exploring the Contributions of Nonprofits
and the Social Economy**

Submitted to:

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and
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“Embracing the New Wave of Skills-Based Volunteers”

Frontier College has been working with volunteer tutors to run its community-based programs for over 100 years. We work with children, teens, adults and families who need help to improve their literacy skills. We deliver volunteer-run, community based programs across Canada in partnership with a variety of organizations. Through volunteer mobilization, leadership development, and community capacity building, we enable communities to reach their literacy and learning goals.

Last fall, we were invited to join a group of other representatives from capacity builders and local organizations on a pilot project called: “The Changing Culture of Volunteering: A Skills-Based Approach to Volunteer Involvement” organized by Volunteer Canada and funded by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. The goal of the project is to increase capacity to respond to skills-based volunteers and help them develop tools to help organizations align themselves with current trends in volunteerism.

Volunteer Canada had contracted Carleton University’s Centre for Voluntary Sector Research and Development to develop a discussion paper as a first phase of the pilot project. This document lays the framework for the project participants to embrace this new wave of volunteers who often exhibit these six common characteristics: highly-

educated with professional backgrounds, goal-oriented, sense of mobility / transient, technologically skilled, individualistic / autonomous, and multiple interests and identities.

If a skilled volunteer (e.g., a lawyer, a website designer, a museum curator) walked through your organization's door today, would you know what to do? Now, what if you really wanted one of these highly-skilled people to help with a specific task or project, how would you go about getting them on board? Whether skills-based volunteers are identified through a passive approach (first example above) or active approach (second example above), they can complete a wide variety of tasks for your organization: developing a fund-raising campaign, advising on a technology purchase, painting a mural, performing at a special event, organizing your archives, etc. It is very important to embrace and successfully manage these invaluable volunteers.

It is easy to see that there are many benefits associated with having one of these skills-based volunteers on board as they increase organizational capacity, provide specialized skills, improve long-term sustainability, expand your volunteer base, and enhance your organization's profile.

However, whenever you bring in new volunteers into the organization, there are also some challenges and considerations related to roles and expectations to consider including staff resources, financial impacts, orientation and training, integration, and circumventing regular volunteer integration systems.

Taking on a volunteer may seem like an easy process, but for it to be successful and fulfilling for both the organization and the volunteer, it is important to develop a skills-based volunteer strategy. The discussion paper spells out the following six steps:

Assessment:

- Assess organizational readiness to engage highly skilled and pro bono volunteers.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities for volunteer management – consider accountability issues that may arise.
- Define organizational goals and needs using your organization's strategic plan and/or other planning documents.
- Proactively identify potential projects or tasks that could be completed and define time commitments.
- Develop a system for responding to highly skilled and pro bono volunteers who want to offer their time and talent to your organization.

Planning phase:

- Obtain commitment from staff to collaborate.
- Develop draft documents describing projects or tasks.
- Develop a draft contract describing the roles and responsibilities of the both the volunteer and the organization.
- Develop or review screening and interview tools; modify tools as necessary related to the specific parameters of the project or task.
- Develop a marketing or outreach plan designed to attract specifically professionally-skilled or pro bono volunteers.

Engagement:

- Review or develop and implement “onboarding” protocols that orient volunteers to the organization.
- Define parameters of the relationship based on project definitions.
- Clarify communication/reporting channels, including direct supervision and accountability.
- Complete the screening process as per organizational policy.

Implementation:

- Engage the volunteer in a sharing experience with appropriate members of the senior management team.

Reporting and evaluation:

- Develop a tracking system to record and monitor the contributions of volunteers.
- Develop a reporting mechanism to track outcomes/deliverables and hours of volunteer service.
- Draft an exit interview for use at the closure of specific volunteer projects.

Recognition:

- Develop a recognition plan that identifies the contributions that volunteers make to the organization.
- Develop a plan for maintaining a relationship with highly skilled volunteers (e.g. invite them to work on another project or become a committee lead or director on our board).

With the discussion paper in hand, the second phase of the project involved matching capacity-builders and local organizations to participate together in the process of developing strategies for skills-based volunteer engagement in their own organizations. This step ensures knowledge and know-how are gained from the direct experiences of a

local organization, while preparing the capacity-building organization to provide authentic leadership.

Participants first met at a peer-learning circle in Ottawa to learn more about the project and start thinking about where each one wanted to take this project. Back in their respective sites, participants examined how volunteerism fits in their organization's mandate and developed a job description, as well as recruitment, screening, and training strategies, if these were not already set up within the organization. Participants will also have to deal with the further considerations of supervision, recognition, record management and evaluation that emerge once the volunteers are on board. At this point in time, most of the participants have already identified and hired their skills-based volunteers.

This project is ongoing, but early results are promising. Lessons learned will be made available through Volunteer Canada and project participants.