

# Knowledge Philanthropy: defining the future of volunteering

A letter to the leaders of BC's 24,000 not-for-profit organizations

*By Colleen Kelly*

Dear Executive Director, CEO & Board Chair,

## First, a pop quiz: true or false?

1. We will never have enough money to accomplish our organizational goals.
2. There simply aren't enough volunteers to go around.
3. Strategic People Engagement is the role of the Executive Director/CEO.

1. True. 2. False. 3. True.

**True: We will never have enough money.** Let's address the money issue off the top. There will always be the perception there are insufficient dollars for us to achieve our organizational goals. (*Yet, how many examples can we cite where throwing money at something didn't necessarily make it better?*) It is always very important—current economic climate aside—for organizations to have a strong financial base. That said, let's adopt the premise that if we were to line up all our goals in environment, arts, health, education, recreation and so on...against the funds available, there will always be an imbalance.

**False: There simply aren't enough volunteers.** According to the most recent National Survey on Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations (2004), voluntary organizations in Canada are unable to successfully a) recruit the types of volunteers they require and b) attract board members. According to the Vancouver Foundation's Vital Signs Report (2007), organizations in BC are unable to a) retain a competent and skilled Boards of Directors b) succeed in the competition for volunteers and c) adapt to the shift in volunteerism.

The notion that there is a shortage of volunteers is a myth, and the results of these studies are misleading. The reality is there are many people: people who want to be involved in community and people who are passionate about causes. But these people look quite different from the volunteers of yesteryear. They are not interested in work that is repetitive and deemed unimportant, and they not interested in receiving a 5-year pin from your organization. Today's volunteers bring particular skill sets that can further our organizational missions. In most cases, we (leaders of not-for-profit organizations)

haven't done enough strategic thinking about how best to involve these people in moving our organizations forward.

If volunteer recruitment is a challenge, we must ask ourselves, are we recruiting for the right positions? It's about taking a hard look at the supply-demand equation. Supply is not the issue; it's the demand - we have not been creating enough interesting, meaningful opportunities for our target market.

**True: Strategic People Engagement is the role of the Executive Director/CEO.** This is really about a new way for CEOs and Executive Directors to lead. The opportunity to employ specifically-skilled people—for free—is the competitive advantage of the not-for-profit sector. This means organizational leaders must be intentional and strategic about involving people and their talents. It requires a new definition for volunteering. We need to build and grow an organizational structure that engages a new kind of workforce. We must deliberately determine which people have the skill sets and talents our organizations require to deliver our missions.

It means ensuring this people-first philosophy is an important part of our boardroom discussions. It is time to rethink our workforces as a whole. Like so many leadership issues, how we frame the issue can mean the difference between success and failure. If we view our workforce as only those we employ for money (like the private sector), then it will be normal to focus on staff-only deliverables. If we rethink the nature of our organizations, and believe we exist for the community we serve, then the community becomes our workforce—because they need our organizations to succeed. Implementing this philosophy means our organizations can strive to have a ratio of volunteer to staff contributions of at least 2:1 , meaning the strategic engagement of volunteers could easily double our existing workforce.

This requires organizational leaders (paid and unpaid) to dream big about our missions and definitions of success. What goals could we accomplish...what products or services could we offer the community if we were to access a giant pool of highly-skilled, responsible, passionate, free talent?

It is the role of the Executive Director/CEO to focus on ALL the people available to deliver the organization's mission. There are some we pay with money and some we pay in other important, often intangible, ways. It is about finding the right payment and it is about understanding that "volunteer" is merely a pay designation (not a department or position description).

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Have you ever heard the phrase "just a volunteer"? It does nothing for the image. People want to make a difference. Outstanding organizations enable them to do so. All volunteering is valuable—be it taking tickets at a fundraiser, preparing the field for a sporting event, mentoring youth, or lending strategic knowledge to an organization trying to save their little piece of the world.

According to the latest National Survey on Giving, Volunteering & Participating (2004) we know more people than ever are engaged in their community. However, the traditional volunteer structures that rely on incredibly involved volunteers are struggling. Whether it is a lack of people willing to serve on boards or a shortage of people willing to make sandwiches for a soup kitchen every week, we have a challenge.

We must recognize volunteering for what it is—something that is critical to our communities. To ensure that this happens, not-for-profit organizations must first respond to the looming trends and changing demographics of volunteers and then commit to creating meaningful, short-term projects that truly challenge and address the individual skills of the next generation of people knocking on our doors.

Who is the next generation, and how are they different?

Well, let's first take a look at community engagement as a whole. Community Engagement refers to the involvement of citizens in the betterment of their communities and support for others in their neighbourhoods, cities, provinces, country and across the world. There are four main categories:

1. Citizenship:
  - a. Ad hoc, citizen; personally driven efforts that improve the communities in which one lives, most often at a local community level
  - b. Example: helping your neighbour with errands, planting flowers in your cul-de-sac, shoveling snow
2. Organized Volunteering
  - a. Volunteering of time and energy to organizations with mandates focused in areas in which one cares either locally, provincially, nationally or globally
  - b. Examples: coaching the local soccer team, distributing blankets at a local shelter, giving time to the local food bank to stock shelves, participating in a local run for charity, etc.
3. Knowledge Philanthropy
  - a. The donation of one's knowledge, skill and experience to organized community building efforts to multiply the value creation towards their mandate either locally, provincially, nationally or globally
  - b. Examples: building a marketing program and web strategy; designing the financial governance and accountability processes, creating the governance and legal framework, sitting on a board, advising the executive director and board on strategic planning, etc.
4. Financial Philanthropy
  - a. Financial donations made to causes which one believes in, either one-time, ongoing or through endowments

The next generation of volunteers—be it the newly retired 60 year old or the recently graduated 20-something—are Knowledge Philanthropists. They want to lead projects, develop strategies and solve complex problems. They are not categorized by age; only by the vast array of skills and professional experience they bring to our organizations. They are young professionals looking to balance their lives with meaningful work. They are baby boomers looking for their next challenge. They are teachers, lawyers, accountants,

writers, database architects and website gurus. They are the same only in that they are people with talent, compelled by the mission of not-for-profit organizations, and they want to lend their skills and expertise to causes. They want to connect and they want to be aware of the difference they are making. They seek project-based, time-specific roles, and they are attracted to strong organizations offering meaningful opportunities. A few examples: Legal Beagle, Technology Wizard, Viral Marketing Specialist, Policy Expert, Money Maverick.

The short answer: pay someone to stuff your envelopes. Involve knowledgeable philanthropists to truly move your organization forward. Every person who has a positive experience with an organization becomes a “raving fan”. This is an opportunity to not only hire the community’s best talent for free, but also to build a very powerful word-of-mouth marketing campaign.

*Colleen Kelly is the Executive Director of Vantage Point. Vantage Point’s programs and services make it easy for other not-for-profit organizations to lead, plan, govern and engage people. This BIG IDEA is a compilation of thoughts from some of Vantage Point’s leaders: Chilwin Cheng, Barney Ellis-Perry, Brad Herbert, Omar Ladak and Tracy Logan (all paid with opportunities to learn and connect to a mission) and Colleen Kelly (paid with money).*