



**ATTRACTING THE NEXT GENERATION OF VOLUNTARY SECTOR LEADERS:  
LEARNING FROM THE CEI EXPERIENCE**

CEI Alumni Weekend Workshop  
October 17-18, 2003  
Montreal, QC

Recrutement de la prochaine génération de dirigeants du secteur bénévole  
Developing Human Resources in the Voluntary Sector (HRVS)

**An Initiative of:**

Community Foundations of Canada  
United Way of Canada – Centraide Canada  
The Coalition of National Voluntary Organizations

## Introduction

Community Experience Initiative (CEI) is an internship program that places management students in paid summer positions throughout Canada's voluntary sector. Since its inception in 2000, it has placed a total of 26 undergraduate and graduate students from universities across the country. On October 18, 2003, CEI partnered with the Developing Human Resources in the Voluntary Sector project (HRVS) to hold an all-day reflection workshop for CEI alumni. Of the 26 alumni, 18 were able to attend. The purpose of the workshop was to provide a forum for these alumni to speak openly and honestly about their internship experiences and their views of the voluntary sector in general. This report is a summary of the experiences, perspectives and insights that were expressed during the workshop. It is our hope that policy makers and voluntary sector leaders will use it to inform their decisions regarding the recruitment and retention of young professionals.

## Overview

The contents of this report are laid out in the same order in which they were addressed in the workshop. The following is an overview of the workshop design and the themes that were covered. In order to facilitate an open and honest dialogue, participants were assured anonymity, which is why no names or organizations are mentioned in the body of the document.

### Part I. Defining the voluntary sector

To set the context, participants began the day by working in small groups to define and describe the importance of the voluntary sector.

### Part II. The CEI internship experience

Participants were then provided with art supplies and asked to create a visual representation of their most memorable experience as a CEI intern. Once they were finished, they were asked to share their stories with the larger group and to talk a bit about the role that CEI played in their relationship with the voluntary sector.

The story-telling activity was followed by a series of large-group discussions. The first discussion focused on the challenges participants faced in their internships. The second focused on the ways that their education benefited the organizations they interned for. And the third focused on the degree of supervision they experienced in their internships.

### Part III. Recruiting & retaining young professionals

Participants were asked to take a few minutes to think on their own about the key characteristics of their ideal job and to then pair up with one other person to share their thoughts. Upon finishing, they came back together as a large group to list the attributes they had generated and to determine how easy it would be to find each attribute in the voluntary sector.

The last part of the day was spent in small groups thinking strategically about how the voluntary sector can do a better job at recruiting and retaining young professionals, with a particular focus on management graduates. The workshop closed with participants sharing how, if at all, they viewed themselves participating in the voluntary sector in the future.

## I. Defining the voluntary sector

"The government of Canada has a great social safety net compared to a lot of countries, but there is still plenty of poverty and there is still environmental damage. So with people taking grassroots action- looking around and saying 'this still needs to be done and I want to do something about it so I'm going to create this non-profit,' we can meet the needs faster."

### What is the voluntary sector?

Because of the wide range of organizations that make up the voluntary sector, participants found it rather difficult to come up with a concise definition. They struggled to identify characteristics common to all voluntary organizations. As one participant put it, "as soon as we thought of one definition, we thought of organizations that don't do that or do something diametrically opposed to that." What participants were able to agree on is that the image of the voluntary sector is fragmented and in desperate need of a unifying theme that the general public can relate to. This said, certain characteristics were singled out as important in defining the sector:

- Its primary goal is to have a social impact.
- It exists to benefit a wide range of community interests.
- As one of the three pillars of society, it meets the social needs not met by the public or private sectors.
- It is inspired and motivated by basic human values.
- It capitalizes on human talents to achieve its goals.
- It is better defined by what it is not than by what it is and by how it is structured than by what it does: It is not motivated by profit, it is not fully government controlled and there are no shareholders.
- It is comprised of organizations that rise from the grassroots to meet pressing needs; it involves people taking responsibility for what has to get done.
- Many of its member organizations are relatively small in size and don't require a high degree of formal structure or process to function effectively.

### Why is the voluntary sector important to society?

"The voluntary sector redistributes social wealth and gives attention to communities that won't be given the attention or resources [they need]."

Participants described the importance of the voluntary sector in several ways. First, they stressed that the very existence of a sector with the primary mandate of affecting social change is vitally important; it has allowed society to begin to develop the expertise, perspective and leadership needed to tackle complex social issues. As put by one participant, "The corporate sector may have some impact on society, but it's different because it's not its core competency or its main goal." Because the private and public sectors tend to overlook the basic human needs and rights of some citizens, the core competency of redistributing social wealth is viewed as essential for a healthy society.

Participants also emphasized the importance of the voluntary sector's focus on basic human values, such as health and happiness, rather than on wealth. They were impressed by the degree to which individual workers in the voluntary sector are committed to these values. As described by one participant, "People are usually

engaged by heart to the organization. They are not there because they are going to get money, but because they really feel it." The general consensus of the group was that the voluntary sector plays an essential role in balancing society's economic goals with its goals for social and environmental prosperity.

Another valuable aspect of the voluntary sector identified by participants is its flexibility, especially when compared to the public sector. Because of the small size of many voluntary organizations and their close physical proximity to the communities they work with, they are able to respond quickly to pressing social issues and to adapt more easily to changes in the environment. It should be noted, however, that participants who worked for larger, more bureaucratic organizations did not experience such a high degree of flexibility.

Lastly, the voluntary sector's capacity to stimulate social solidarity and to connect people to something larger than themselves was viewed as extremely valuable to society. It does this by encouraging and supporting people to volunteer in a variety of ways. The more people doing something that benefits others, the stronger society becomes. Participants viewed this role of the voluntary sector as key to nurturing a strong democracy.

## II. The CEI Internship experience

### Most memorable internship experiences

Participants were asked to think back to their most memorable experience in their internship and to express it visually in a drawing, collage or skit (see Appendix 1 for examples). Five common themes surfaced from this exercise: 1) seeing the impact of the work they do, 2) working with people who care about their well-being, 3) working with people who inspire them, 4) working with diverse groups of people and 5) expanding their knowledge and skills and putting them to good use.

### Seeing the impact of the work we do

Participants' stories and drawings illustrated the importance of being able to see or directly experience the positive impact of their work. Knowing first-hand that what they do has meaning inspires them to continue:

"At my internship I watched a small film on how experts in the field did their work. I saw that one of the experts had a very strong impact on her environment. That really had an affect on me."

"Seeing the impact was my most memorable experience. Seeing the project come to fruition and have a positive impact on its end users and...on my [own family] was powerful."

"My most memorable experience was a moment when I was working at my desk and I looked up from my work to see a developmentally delayed boy folding pamphlets, [an elderly neighbor] sitting on the couch and a number of people who worked there, who were from different parts of the community, getting their chance at work experience. [The organization] affects so much of the community, that I really felt like I was making a large impact and affecting many people."

**Working with people who care about our well-being**

A number of participants had a difficult time thinking back to a particular memorable experience because for them it was the qualities of the people they worked with that made their internship so rewarding:

“The most important experience for me was the interaction with other people in the organization. One of the directors who I worked with was always interested in what I was feeling and how I was doing. In my mind, that sticks out- that level of human awareness was a huge part of my nonprofit experience. I really had a larger sense of well-being and empowerment.”

“When I first began there, I was freezing in some corner and our vice president noticed and said, ‘why don’t you work in my office. I’ll try to find space.’ That’s unbelievable! Also, when it was time for me to go back to school, they threw a party for me and gave me gifts. That was totally unexpected. They really respect people. They put them in their hearts.”

**Working with people who inspire us**

Several participants highlighted the fact that they were working with or had the opportunity to meet people that inspired them and that this was an incredible reward in itself.

“It was motivating and inspiring to meet all the people who have been imprisoned for standing up for human rights around the world. It made me realize that we are lucky to be here in Canada where we are supported and where we can at least act freely. We should take that opportunity to change society.”

“The people I worked with were motivated and happy. To see the smiles on their faces all the time was my most memorable experience.”

**Working with diverse groups of people**

Another theme that surfaced through the story telling activity was the importance of working with diverse groups of people, to be exposed to a wide range of cultures, experiences and perspectives:

“My most memorable experience was trying to satisfy a basic human need. I found myself surrounded by very different people- there were camera men, local farmers, volunteers and program staff. We all worked together to accomplish the goal.”

“I was responsible for bringing people together from a wide range of cultures. I tried to find things they had in common. Their cultures were extremely different. As a Canadian, this was something I felt very proud of and would like to see continued by other nonprofit organizations.”

**Expanding our knowledge and skills and putting them to good use**

Many of the stories that were told illustrate the importance of being exposed to new ways of looking and thinking about the world and of having the opportunity to continually apply all that is learned in the field and in the classroom:

“My internship opened my eyes to what’s really going on in [my city].”

“It was only in the nonprofit sector that I was exposed to and actually used new theories of strategic planning, as opposed to very traditional, conformist, formulaic

approaches...in the traditional approach, the goals of the organization are determined by the head, but when it actually comes time to get there, people become more emotional and personal... at the [nonprofit organization I interned for] people decided what they wanted and where they wanted to go from their heart and soul and then used their heads to get there. It was a much easier and happier process."

"One of the things that I learned was this buzz word going around called social entrepreneurship. When I think of entrepreneurship, I think of someone creating a new business to benefit his own pocketbook, so the idea of putting 'social' and 'entrepreneurship' together was an interesting new idea for me."

"My most memorable experience was in the interview. There were moments when the people who told me, 'non-profits won't appreciate your skills,' would have swallowed their words -- when my interviewer and I talked about complexity theory and a new program that the organization was initiating. I walked out of the interview thinking, 'they're applying this stuff in their work! They're really innovative.'"

### **The role of CEI in our relationship with the voluntary sector**

Participants were quite enthusiastic about the role that CEI played in connecting them to the voluntary sector. For most participants, the CEI internship was the first time they had ever worked in the sector, and for some, the experience represented a major shift in the way they thought about their future careers. In their own words:

"CEI definitely benefited me because I now know how the nonprofit sector works."

"I wouldn't have known the first thing about getting involved in a non-profit organization if it wasn't for CEI making it both obvious and easy."

"I would never have thought about working in an environmental NGO if it weren't for my CEI experience. It gave me a chance to try something different, and it turns out that this is what I was meant to do!"

"The greatest thing about CEI for me was seeing that I am not the only one and that there is a whole group of people who think like me."

### **Biggest internship challenges**

CEI participants experienced three major challenges in their internships. One of the most common challenges they faced was an underlying prejudice against anything to do with management or business. They found that many of their colleagues in the voluntary sector, particularly those who were young and less experienced, were turned off by the business mentality and were scared that a management approach would "rob the organization of its vitality or its purpose." A similar challenge, expressed by some participants, was the pressure they felt to conform to prevailing political perspectives, especially when it came to environmental and social justice issues.

A second major challenge was a lack of sufficient organization and structure in the way that projects were run and managed. Participants were impressed with the ideas generated by their colleagues, but frustrated with their inability to develop effective methods to realize their goals. Their coordination strategies tended to be

disorganized and lack synergy, which made it difficult for participants to apply their knowledge and skills to their fullest. As one participant put it, “the organization didn’t have much organization.” Related to this is the idea of succession planning. One participant said that it was common in her organization for a program to fall by the wayside when the person in charge left the position.

A third major challenge identified by participants was a lack of sufficient attention and oversight relating to their specific projects. Although many participants found the independence refreshing and rewarding because they were able to approach things in their own way, they often had no one to go to when a question arose or when they needed advice or direction. One participant said that he was often quite frustrated when he was given free reign on a project, only to be told that the final product was not what was expected. In general, the problem was not that their managers didn’t care about their work, but that they simply had no time to spare. This said, a few people did observe that management related projects seemed to be given last priority because they were long-term in nature and not directly related to day-to-day programming.

### **How our education helped us benefit the organizations**

Although a few participants applied concrete management skills, like marketing and accounting, to their internship positions, most participants agreed that it was the general aspects of their management training that benefited their organization the most, such as:

- Taking a structured approach to managing projects, both in terms of planning and developing tools to help things run effectively and efficiently (e.g., creating a payroll tracking system using spreadsheets);
- Adopting a broad way of thinking about issues- considering a wide range of variables at once and understanding how they are interrelated; and
- Taking initiative so that things get done- in organizations where everyone is overworked, it is important to take a leadership role on the projects that you feel are most important to the organization.

### **III. Recruiting & retaining young professionals what the voluntary sector can offer us**

Participants were asked to picture themselves in their ideal job and then describe what their ideal job would look and feel like. Of the 29 ideal job attributes generated (see boxes below), participants agreed that 16 are commonly found in the voluntary sector, 5 are rarely found and 7 are sometimes found. It is interesting to note that benefits, salary, job security and job promotion were not mentioned until halfway through the discussion. It is possible that participants felt less comfortable listing them as priorities in the company of voluntary sector representatives.

Ideal job attributes that are commonly found in the voluntary sector:

- Challenging
- Supports continuous learning on the job
- Fosters a spirit of innovation and creativity among employees at all levels
- Provides opportunities for promotion
- Provides meaningful work that has a positive impact on society
- Provides opportunities to be mentored and to mentor
- Allows employees to see the impact they’re making
- Involves a high level of organizational transparency in external relations

- Involves a variety of work
- Has organizational values that align with personal values
- Involves being recognized by the organization for work well done
- Personally satisfying
- Allows for peer management
- Provides visionary leadership
- Provides a flexible schedule, emphasizing productivity, rather than hours worked
- Involves working with diverse groups of people

Ideal job attributes that are rarely found in the voluntary sector:

- Pays well
- Provides continuous formal learning opportunities and the chance to apply that learning
- Offers an array of good benefits to choose from
- Fosters an entrepreneurial spirit among employees at all levels
- Provides decent job security

Ideal job attributes that are sometimes found in the voluntary sector:

- Allows for a balance between personal and professional life
- Is valued by society
- Offers adequate resources
- Facilitates good communication- up, down and sideways
- Offers healthy, comfortable working conditions
- Involves a high degree of organizational transparency in internal relations
- Has a healthy organizational culture- respectful, supportive, intelligent, dedicated, etc.

### **What the voluntary sector needs to know about us**

According to participants, there are a number of factors that the sector needs to take into consideration if it is going to successfully recruit and retain young management professionals. To begin with, some people are not aware that the voluntary sector exists. And those who are aware that the sector exists often harbor misconceptions. Two of the biggest misconceptions are that 1) people working in the voluntary sector don't get paid and 2) only "tree hugging, sandal wearing, granola eating activists" work in the voluntary sector. It is critical for these false images to be dismantled and for the sector to develop a representative and unified image that it can begin communicating to the world at large.

Secondly, the sector should be familiar with the desires that management graduates are often looking to fulfill, such as:

- To find a job in a relatively short time after graduating;
- To be able to move freely from one sector to another- they don't want to be limited to the voluntary sector
- To know their knowledge and skills are needed
- To feel fulfilled
- To get paid a decent salary (students often graduate with large student debts)
- To have opportunities to be promoted
- To be able to connect their work to tangible results (if not profit, then what?).

## Steps the voluntary sector should take to successfully recruit young professionals

Participants were asked to develop a four-prong strategy for recruiting young professionals to the voluntary sector. In addition to directly targeting young professionals, they were asked to generate ideas for increasing the public's awareness and understanding of the voluntary sector, educating voluntary organizations about the value of hiring management graduates and convincing corporate funders that they should fund internship initiatives such as CEI. The following ideas were generated:

### Ideas for increasing the general public's awareness and understanding of the voluntary sector

- Launch a campaign using celebrity and political endorsements (e.g., Oprah).
- Air commercials that show how the voluntary sector affects all of our lives in so many ways (ex. a scene where whoever you bump into in your neighborhood, at work or at the gym is connected in some way to the voluntary sector).
- Distribute educational pamphlets that dispel the misconceptions of the voluntary sector- "The voluntary sector: myth vs. truth."
- Ask the federal government to create an official Not-for-Profit Day.
- Target young audiences in elementary through high school (lunch, in-class presentations, after-school clubs, etc.). Focus on the 14-16 age range. This is the age when brand loyalty is developed. In the same vein, target adults who work closely with children, such as teachers and guidance counselors.
- Lobby Canadian blockbuster movie directors to increase the number of protagonists working in the voluntary sector.
- Create a clear, unifying title for the sector. "Voluntary," "non-profit," "not-for-profit" and "non-governmental" all have unappealing connotations in a capitalistic society.
- Create a CBC News weekly profile on organizations in Canada's voluntary sector.

### Ideas for recruiting young professionals into the voluntary sector

- The sector should try to influence the curriculum of business schools so that more attention is given to voluntary organizations. The public, private and voluntary sectors should be given equal representation in class lectures and course material, especially case studies.
- Students should be told how each field of study in management relates to the voluntary sector so that they are clear that there are a lot of opportunities for them to apply and develop their skills.
- Recruiting material should present an honest picture of the sector- "the pay and benefits might not be the greatest, but you will have an impact and feel fulfilled!" Get quotes of testimonials from students who have stayed in the sector and who enjoy it: "I got an MBA and have been with X organization for 10 years!"
- Let graduates know that it is much easier to get into a position with a significant amount of responsibility in the voluntary sector, and if you demonstrate performance excellence, you will likely be given more responsibility in a short period of time.
- There are a lot of people working in jobs they don't like. The sector should capitalize on dissatisfaction in the general workforce.

- Create a sector-wide pool of funds so that a higher salary and flexible benefit plan can be offered to employees in the sector (don't raise salaries too high if you want to continue to attract graduates who are motivated by mission, not money!).
- Inform graduates that their involvement in the voluntary sector can take many forms. They could work part-time for a voluntary organization and part-time for a public or private organization, start their own business serving voluntary organizations and/or sit on the Board of Directors of a voluntary organization.
- The recruiting strategy should be tailored to open-minded, intelligent and motivated students/graduates without career certainty who have the specific skill sets that the sector needs.
- Ideological rhetoric should be avoided when targeting management graduates. Organizations need to develop a more professional demeanor.
- Use personnel recruiters to get the names of top students from university and college professors.
- Partner with university and college career centres and guidance counselors to promote the voluntary sector and to advertise positions.
- Create more organizations like CEI to help students get their foot in the door. The voluntary sector is very incestuous- you have to know someone who knows someone to get a job.
- Lobby the government to create a loan forgiveness program for graduates working in the voluntary sector.
- Instead of holding separate job fairs for the voluntary sector, organize job fairs that combine public, private and voluntary organizations so that the voluntary sector is seen as a legitimate career choice, equal to any other sector.
- Place advertisements in career, general interest and youth magazines. Ideas for educating the voluntary sector about the value of hiring management graduates "Get where you need to go: hire a business student!"
- Clearly communicate the specific skills management graduates can offer: raising and managing funds, marketing the organization to potential clients and volunteers, etc. Actively counter negative stereotypes of management graduates.
- Target umbrella organizations, such as Community Foundations of Canada and United Way of Canada-Centraide Canada to help spread the word.
- Encourage organizations to participate in internship programs.
- Send lobbyists or student representatives into the sector to promote the idea in person. This will help to dismantle common stereotypes of management graduates.
- Use websites, videos and direct mailing to publicize successful stories of management graduates making a difference in the voluntary sector.
- Seek out networking opportunities.
- Stay away from business lingo.

**Ideas for educating corporate funders on the value of funding initiatives such as CEI:**

- Match corporations with voluntary organizations with the idea of building long-term partnerships. Focus on developing meaningful relationships between people, not institutions.
- Create a partnership development program to match and facilitate exchanges based on needs and values. This could be a joint venture between Corporate Knights and the Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI).

- Create a partnership kit to help support the development of strong corporate/voluntary partnerships (a joint project between public, private and voluntary sectors).
- Make the real needs of voluntary organizations and the communities they serve “sexy” to corporate partners.
- Create an internship program where corporations pay for voluntary sector internships for their employees.
- Create a matching benefits program and show corporate partners the tangible difference their money and support is making.
- Individual voluntary organizations need to communicate what differentiates them from other organizations-why would a corporation want to invest?
- Create opportunities for voluntary organizations and their corporate partners to exchange knowledge and skills.
- Create courses in management schools in inter-sector partnership development so that management students come with the capacity to build strong partnerships.
- Promote long-term partnerships with voluntary organizations as an integral and necessary part of corporate life- it’s not something that can be dropped as soon as the financial winds take a turn for the worse. At the societal level, develop campaigns that help to shift attitudes about the roles and responsibilities of the corporate sector.
- Develop legitimate measurements for corporate giving in the voluntary sector and encourage corporate partners to include volunteerism as an employee performance indicator.
- Identify champions in the private, voluntary and public sectors to lead the effort (ex. Imagine).

## Conclusion

At the end of a long day of intense thinking and reflection, participants were asked to forecast their own involvement in the voluntary sector. Most of those who spoke up responded with an emphatic “yes”. However for many, this “yes” was quickly followed by a “but” of some sort. Concerns were raised about the number of positions available in the sector; the kinds of skills, knowledge and experience required and the financial burden of student debt. It is these “yes, but...” responses that voluntary sector leaders and policy makers should seriously consider as they develop strategies to recruit and retain young professionals. It makes much more sense for the sector to focus its efforts on graduates who show a strong interest in the sector than to try to convince graduates who are preoccupied with other endeavors to switch gears.

## Appendix 1

These images are the result of participants being asked to share, in an expressive medium, what the most memorable impression about their CEI Internship was for them.

## Appendix 2