

Introduction

In an effort to learn more about what can be done to attract, support, and keep young professionals in Canada's voluntary sector, the Developing Human Resources in the Voluntary Sector (HRVS) project decided to organize a series of reflection sessions with young adults throughout the country who are working or had recently worked in the sector. These sessions were designed to encourage open and honest dialogue regarding participants' experiences and views of the sector in general.

Two sessions have been held to date. The first session, which took place in Montreal on October 18, 2003, brought together 18 young adults who had completed paid summer internships at voluntary sector organizations throughout the country¹. The second session, which is the focus of this report, was held in Halifax, Nova Scotia on March 26, 2004 and brought together 10 young adults working in the voluntary sector in the greater Halifax area. The recruitment effort, undertaken by the United Way of Halifax Region, targeted individuals who:

- Were between the ages of 22 – 30;
- Were currently employed full-time in a non-profit organization;
- Had some amount of post-secondary education;
- Had worked in the sector for at least a few months; and
- Were identified by their organizations as exemplary employees.

This report captures the experiences, perspectives, and insights expressed by these individuals regarding what organizations in the voluntary sector are getting right and what they need to do better in order to become "employers of choice" for young adults.

Overview

The contents of this report are laid out in the same order in which they were addressed in the session. The following is an overview of the session 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. General background

Participants were first asked to share a bit about themselves- what brought them to the voluntary sector, whether or not it was a conscious choice, and what kind of work they had done.

Part II. 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 III. The ups and downs of working in the voluntary sector

Participants were then provided with art supplies and asked to create a visual representation of their most memorable experience working in the voluntary sector. Once they were finished, they were asked to share their stories with the larger group and to talk a bit about what it was about the organization and general environment that made their experience possible.

The story-telling activity was followed by two large-group discussions. The first discussion focused on the challenges participants faced working in the voluntary sector. The second discussion focused on how they were able to apply the knowledge and skills that they had acquired in their academic training.

Part IV. Supporting, retaining, and recruiting young professionals

Participants were asked to envision themselves in their future careers and lives as professionals and to identify the elements that made this picture ideal. They were then asked to pair up with another person to develop a list of these key elements and to determine the likelihood that each could be found in the voluntary sector. Upon finishing, each pair shared their conclusions with the larger group.

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 young professionals.

Part I. General background

As participants introduced themselves, it became clear that for most of them, entering into the voluntary sector was a conscious decision and one that they did not regret. Their motivation was expressed in a variety of ways. For some, it was an enjoyable volunteer or internship experience that inspired them to stay and seek employment. Many emphasized their desire to contribute to social change and their perception that they would have a stronger and more visible impact working in the voluntary sector than in government or business. A few spoke of witnessing the hardships of poverty in their own communities and seeing the difference that voluntary sector organizations were making. And others were more motivated by a desire to learn and exercise their skills and knowledge. As one participant put it, "I wanted to get the most experience that I could. I knew that I wouldn't be sitting behind a desk answering a phone all day- that I would be doing real things." The few who entered the sector by accident did so out of interest in a particular job opportunity that they felt would challenge them in a different way.

Some participants were quite new to the sector, with as little as three months of work experience, while others had as many as six years of experience. The type of work they had been involved in, as well as the issues they were able to address through their work varied quite a bit:

Type of Work	Issues Addressed
Special event planning	Cancer
Resource development	Homelessness
Administrative support	Food security
Finance	Arthritis
Human resources	Land mines
Non-profit management	Prisoner rehabilitation
Public relations	Women's issues
Project management	The sex trade
Youth education	At-risk-youth
Communications and research	New immigrants
Transportation coordination	Teaching ESL

Finally, participants represented a wide range of academic backgrounds, from technical training to Masters degrees. Areas of study included business, office

information technology, social environmental studies, public relations, women's studies, international development, early childhood education, and public administration.

Part II. Defining the voluntary sector

What is the voluntary sector?

Participants' attempt to define the voluntary sector began with an effort to re-name it. In their opinion, the terms "voluntary," "non-profit," "not-for-profit," and "NGO" all have slightly different connotations. They preferred the term "not-for-profit" for two reasons. First, they felt that the term describes the one thing that all of their organizations have in common- that they are not "in it for the money." In fact, it was pointed out that for those organizations created to address a specific problem, employees should actually be trying to work themselves out of a job. Second, it was suggested that the term "voluntary" should only be used to refer to not-for-profit organizations that have a large volunteer base, are self-governed, and are minimally influenced by government. In the end, everyone seemed to agree on two points: One, that the voluntary sector is a sub-sector of the not-for-profit sector and, two, that the lack of a universal term to describe the sector is problematic.

In an effort to determine what sets the voluntary sector apart from the public and private sectors, participants came up with four defining characteristics:

- Capacity building for individuals (clients, staff, and volunteers) and communities is one of the primary outcomes of the work done in the sector.
- Employees are motivated by passion and a desire to give and are therefore willing to work for less money.
- People are attracted to the sector who are willing to work for no money at all (i.e., volunteers).
- There is an abundance of organizations that are small, that de-emphasize hierarchy and bureaucracy, and that support a decentralized and collective model of management.

Why is the voluntary sector important to society?

"The government thinks that it is doing enough so that there is nobody living on the street, but we all know that's not true, so nonprofits have to pick up the slack."

Participants agreed that the most important role that the voluntary sector plays in society is to recognize and meet the societal needs not recognized or met by the public or private sectors. More specifically, the sector exists to address needs that cannot be addressed with money alone. As one participant put it, "It's one thing to throw money, but you need human interaction in order to work towards social change." Participants also stressed that the sector's emphasis on meaningful human interaction is vital because it is sometimes hard to come by in the public and private sectors. Other roles that were identified as critical to society include:

- Serving as a trusted advocate and mediator for citizens as they attempt to understand and navigate the complicated and often intimidating worlds of government and business;
- Being able to do more with less money due to a higher degree of organizational flexibility, creativity, and nimbleness;
- Modeling a collaborative approach to social change and fostering cross-sectoral collaboration;
- Raising community awareness of important social issues and services;

- Holding the government accountable to its citizens by lobbying for changes in policy; and
- Keeping the long-term vision of a sustainable society in the forefront of people's minds, which balances out the often short-term, politically driven goals of government and profit-driven goals of business.

Part III. The ups and downs of working in the voluntary sector

Most memorable experiences

Participants were asked to think back to their most memorable experience working in the voluntary sector and to express it visually in a drawing or collage (See Appendix 1 for examples). Three common themes surfaced through their stories: 1) Seeing the impact that their organization is making, 2) Being able to directly help people in need, and 3) Experiencing and facilitating human connection across differences. Thus, if nonprofits really want to hold on to young people, they need to look at ways of incorporating these elements into organizational life.

Seeing the impact that their organization is making

Quite a few participants held positions that involved supporting, rather than implementing, the mission of their organization. As a result, they do not get to see the difference their work is making on a daily basis. However, for many of these individuals, their most memorable experience focused on a time when they were able to do just that.

"When I first started working at the organization, I wasn't too sure what was going on until I actually saw the unveiling of the numbers- showing what the campaign had raised for the agencies. It almost made me cry...I was amazed, so amazed at what they could do."

"My first summer at the organization, I went to visit our camp, a camp for children who have had cancer or who are undergoing treatment...when I stepped into the cafeteria and saw all the children, I was very moved. It made me realize the value of my work in society."

"I spent a day working in a food bank as part of my orientation. I was able to provide assistance and outreach to clients- by distributing food. It was a very happy, yet disconcerting experience for me...it set the foundation for why I'm doing what I'm doing...that how I go about doing my job has a direct impact on the people I'm seeing in the line-ups."

"It was my first experience working in the nonprofit sector. You go in, you do your work. You don't really understand everything. You don't get to see and meet the people. But then I had to do an interview for a newsletter with a couple that was training for the marathon. I started to talk to them and during that discussion it just hit me...to see this lady crossing the finish line and maybe finding that cure and helping her through her life, with her husband there by her side to support her...that is why I'm working so many hours and that is why I do what I do."

Being able to directly help people in need

For two participants, their most memorable experience involved a time when they felt they were having a direct impact on people's lives through their work.

“The prenatal group that I facilitate turned out to be all teen parents this time around and we had a teenager who was living with her mother and who had no electricity for three months...who was so depressed that she wouldn't get out of bed and felt like giving up...but through her involvement with the program- meeting other parents and getting to trust us enough...she was able to get social assistance, move out of the house and have a stable place for her baby. Realizing that she was able to take those steps and take care of herself really empowered her...it was a great experience to see her grow into a real adult woman who is now caring for a young baby.”

“I was on a war torn part of the island working for a women's NGO where a lot of women had been used as weapons of war...I was there as more of a researcher, but what I enjoyed most was doing focus groups and working with a group of cultural activists who used art and performance art as a tool for conflict resolution and outreach on gender issues and who established action teams in all of the communities. This was true grassroots development. We would knock on women's doors and gather them and then go from neighborhood to neighborhood.”

Experiencing and facilitating human connection across differences

Another theme that surfaced through the stories was the importance of connecting people across age, language, and cultural differences, as well as bridging organizational divides by providing opportunities for clients, staff, and board members to work together. Such experiences seemed to touch people at their core.

“I ran a volunteer program for at-risk youth who wanted to teach seniors how to use computers...there was one girl who came from China and who barely spoke any English. I wasn't sure if she would be able to communicate with the seniors, but we went ahead with it anyway and it was so successful. Not only was she able to teach the seniors computers, but one of the seniors taught her all about Canada and invited her out for coffee. They formed a relationship and she, in turn, taught the senior about her country.”

“It was a cold Saturday in January and everybody was under the same roof...staff, board of directors and youth. We were rewriting the vision and mission statements for the organization. It was just so great to have all the different youth working with the board of directors and staff...the intergenerational connections that happened that day were really powerful- to see how well the youth were able to talk with big old business men!”

“I've worked at nonprofits before where they have a board and it is hierarchical...but at this organization everybody sits at the same table. We were at a meeting and some of the most brilliant ideas that I've heard in a long time came from a program user who I'll call Miss G. She had a great idea to come up with a memorial for women who had become the victims of violence, which is something that we are now actively pursuing.”

“The most memorable experience for me was when I took a team of nine students to Peru...they were very happy and excited to represent the team. They were willing to go to other places, to share with and learn from other cultures, and to bring what they learned back home.”

When asked what organizations could learn from their stories, participants had the following insights:

- To remain flexible and open to what may emerge organically. The more you try to control the outcomes, the less room there is for things to unfold naturally.
- To agree on a set of shared values that should permeate everything an organization does. For example, one local organization makes a conscious effort to incorporate fun, adventurous learning, and peer support into all of its activities.
- To make sure that employees are using the skills they have and that they feel challenged. Providing opportunities for growth and learning is extremely important, especially in the case of those who could easily find a higher paying job in another sector.
- Provide opportunities for staff, clients, members, and volunteers to reflect on the work of the organization together.

Biggest challenges

Although passionate about their work, participants identified countless challenges that, taken together, cause many of them to think twice about staying in the voluntary sector. Interestingly enough, the majority relate to their desire to be successful in their work, rather than to their personal life or career interests.

Challenges Relating to their Ability to Work Effectively and Efficiently

- Lack of adequate infrastructure- Rarely having adequate equipment or supplies is extremely frustrating, especially for the younger generation of workers who have lived in a technology-driven world all of their lives.
- Lack of adequate human resources- Organizations are permanently understaffed, which means that staff members are always stretched to the limit- trying to keep up with their own responsibilities while making sure that the other parts of the organization are running smoothly.
- Limited funding for research and program development- A negative consequence of not having access to core funding is that staff members are limited in the paid hours they can spend on research and program development.
- Burdensome funding requirements- Catering to funders' reporting requirements and interests, which may not be aligned with those of the organization or community, adds to an already unreasonable workload. In addition, the new federal privacy legislation requires a lot of administration, which organizations do not have the time and staff to do (and because they are donor-run, they can't direct too much money towards administration).
- Increasing competition between organizations- Organizations are competing for funding, volunteers, and media attention, which means that the staff has to work that much harder to maintain a competitive edge.
- Ageism- Young people, especially those in management positions, have experienced problems gaining legitimacy and respect. What makes being in this position even more difficult is that they tend to have few or no peers their age that they can turn to for moral support.
- Micro-management by Boards of Directors- Sometimes boards are unclear about their role and, as a result, begin to micro-manage the staff. This can be particularly trying when the Board is also out of touch with funding issues.
- Relationship to Management- Even though the open management structures of organizations result in a higher degree of trust and collaboration between staff and managers, it can also create a "chaotic" work environment. This is especially true for organizations that have a lot of volunteers coming and going. Another consequence of a more democratic work place is that decisions

- often take a long time. A related issue is that in small organizations the executive director, who is responsible for making a lot of the decisions, is seldom around, making it difficult to move ahead on projects.
- Organizational narrow-mindedness- Some organizations, although well-intentioned, fail to take a holistic approach in dealing with employees and community members.
 - Society's tendency to undervalue paid work in the sector- Because of the number of volunteers working in the voluntary sector, people often assume that organizations should be able to run without paid staff. They forget that volunteers are free to come and go as they please and should not be expected to keep an organization running.

Challenges relating to the ability to balance work and home life

- Lack of long-term job stability- Due to the short-term, project-based funding that so many organizations rely on, employees are never sure how long they will be employed. Participants agree that an ability to change jobs fairly often is a requirement for working in the voluntary sector. This said, however, most participants admitted that they preferred not to stay at one organization for more than 5 years, unless the job was extremely stimulating and well paid. One participant worried that others would think that she lacked motivation if she stayed at one organization for longer than 5 years.
- High-paced work environment- The pressure to get everything done that needs to get done, whether or not it is in your job description, is a big contributor to burnout.
- Long Work Hours- Participants estimated that they work between 35-60 hours a week, depending on what needs to get done.
- Bringing work home- Coping with your organizational "family" on top of your own family can be emotionally draining. This challenge is magnified if you are also living in the community you are working in.

Challenges relating to career development

- Limited upward mobility- Most job changes occur laterally, not vertically, which means that opportunities to increase one's salary or develop as a leader are limited.
- Few opportunities for professional development- Most organizations don't have money to invest in extra training or membership in professional associations for their staff and the low salaries make it difficult to finance going back to school.
- Lack of mentoring opportunities- Due to limited funding and overworked staff, mentoring is not something that most organizations think about. In considering the above challenges, one participant expressed the view that the public sector has many of the same issues as the voluntary sector. However, in his opinion, the voluntary sector is more prepared to address these issues in a timely manner because it is less bogged down with administrative bureaucracy.

Connection between academic training and work

Two patterns emerged as participants discussed the degree to which their academic training prepared them to work in the voluntary sector. The first pattern related to participants' field of study. Interestingly enough, participants educated in fields such as business, public relations, and public administration seemed more content with their ability to apply what they had learned in school (e.g., writing business plans, managing budgets, working with statistics, fundraising, and giving presentations)

than those with degrees relating more to the mission of nonprofits (women's studies, international development, social environmental studies, etc.). One participant, who majored in international studies, found no connection between her academic experience and her work experience, even though both were in the same field. In her words, "There is no academic experience that can truly prepare you for the non-profit industry. In a non-profit organization, you're doing everything – chief cook and bottle washer." The only aspect of her degree that she identified as helpful was learning how to work under deadlines.

The second pattern that surfaced related to the type of educational institution that participants attended. Quite a few people expressed the opinion that community colleges are better able to prepare students to work in the voluntary sector. They are viewed as being more hands-on, offering more opportunities to practice in the field and courses that are directly related to their work (e.g., a national certificate of fundraising offered by Nova Scotia Community College and a nonprofit skills course offered by Henson College). Even a few of the university graduates stated that, in retrospect, they would have been better served by a community college education. One of the biggest criticisms of universities is that although they are good at teaching the very useful skill of critical analysis, they don't make as much effort to directly link theory to practice. It was suggested that "participatory action research" methods be incorporated into university curriculum.

Lastly, participants stated that non-academic skills and knowledge are also highly valued in the voluntary sector, more so than in any other sector. The general perception seemed to be that organizations in the voluntary sector hire more on the basis of attitude, personality, and general capacities, than on the basis of education. On the other hand, one participant felt as though she was often looked down upon for having a Master's degree because her colleagues had not reached the same level of education. In her words: "I became very shy about discussing my education. I never wanted to tell people that I had a degree. I wasn't proud of it any more. People kept telling me that it wasn't good."

Part IV: Supporting, retaining & recruiting young professionals what the voluntary sector can offer

Participants were asked to picture themselves in their ideal job 10 or 15 years down the road and to describe what this ideal job looks and feels like. Of the 20 ideal job attributes generated (see boxes below), participants agreed that 6 are commonly found in the voluntary sector, 7 are sometimes found, and 7 are rarely found. It was noted that much depends on the size of the organization.

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

- Encourages employees to play a major role in program & policy decisions
- Has a mission and approach that aligns with personal values
- Allows for flexible scheduling
- Encourages employees to exercise their creativity
- Encourages and supports team work
- Values diversity, both in terms of kinds of people and working style

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

- Allows for a healthy work/life balance (organizations have good intentions, but often lack the funds and support staff)

- Provides a decent salary (generally, not enough to support a family)
- Supports women who want to have children and a career
- Helps to connect employees to professional communities of practice (depends on the field of expertise)
- Pays for or offers professional development (depends on the cost)
- Offers a benefit & retirement package (a lot of positions are contractual)

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

- Offers rewards for high performance in the form of bonuses or professional development (going above and beyond is simply what is expected)
- Offers job security (for a period of at least 3 years)
- Provides opportunities for inter-organizational employee exchanges
- Offers opportunities for promotion
- Allows employees to try out different positions within the organization (this happens a lot, but is driven by organizational need, not employee choice)
- Facilitates the development of formal mentoring relationships (informal mentoring can sometimes be found)
- Provides a gender-balanced workplace

Steps the voluntary sector can take to successfully recruit young professionals

Participants identified a wide range of recruiting strategies for the sector to choose from, emphasizing the need for a multi-pronged approach. The following are their suggestions; the first nine relate to outreach, and the last five relate to human resources management:

Outreach

- Create more internship, volunteer, and job shadowing opportunities for young people so that they can experience the sector first-hand, before they make up their minds about a career path. Such individuals often make excellent job candidates because they already understand the inner workings of the organization and have been able to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and commitment over time.
- Go to young people directly instead of waiting for them to come to you. For example, hold job fairs at universities for recent graduates.
- Hire public relations professionals to ensure that recruiting campaigns are as effective as possible.
- Develop a campaign that targets high school students:
 - Develop relationships with high school guidance counselors. Provide them with a list of organizations that are looking for volunteers. Target high schools that have a mandatory volunteer policy.
 - Offer work and internship opportunities.
 - Find ways that students can serve as ambassadors once they have had experience in the sector.
 - Develop partnerships with youth leadership programs in the area.
 - Visit high schools to emphasize the importance of community involvement and to promote the voluntary sector as an employer of choice.
 - Provide teachers with educational materials that they can use in the classroom, like the informational videos distributed by United Way to show in health classes.

- Focus on recruiting young people who want to make a change- show them the impact they could have if they worked in the voluntary sector. Don't waste time trying to convince those who are primarily motivated by making money.
- Word job postings in a way that encourages young professionals to apply. If a job posting states that the organization is looking for someone with 5-8 years of experience in the field, many young people will be too intimidated to apply.
- Adopt a strategy similar to that used by the army- sell a lifestyle. Focus on job flexibility, the excitement of making a difference in peoples lives, the freedom to be creative, the ability to apply one's skills, high mobility between jobs, and the opportunity for lifelong learning and personal development.
- Sell the sector as a great way to begin developing one's career. Emphasize that the skills learned are broad enough to apply to almost any career.
- Develop a recruitment toolkit that can be used by organizations of all shapes and sizes, and ask umbrella organizations, such as the United Way, to help smaller organizations with their recruiting strategies.

Human resources management

- Offer benefit packages that focus not on salary, but on perks that appeal to young professionals, such as parking, good coffee, gym membership, travel, professional development, a comfortable work environment, holidays and vacations, and help with student loan debt. Of course, traditional benefits, such as pension and health plans, should also be included.
- Create internal opportunities for professional growth. For example, provide opportunities for job switching between employees.
- Make sure the hiring process is not too intimidating. Promote the job as a partnership between the organization and employee.
- Identify what can be done to reduce high turnover rates- It is hard to attract a potential applicant to a job that has a history of high turnover.
- Provide new employees with a comprehensive job orientation and make sure that what is asked of them is consistent with what they were hired to do.

Conclusion

The stories and reflections shared throughout the day strongly conveyed participants' struggle between two opposing emotions: passion and frustration. They are passionate about being a part of the change they want to see in the world, yet tired of feeling that, despite their hard work, they are unable to achieve what they envision possible for themselves and their organizations. Thus, it seems that what leaders in the voluntary sector need to focus on first is not recruiting more young people, but understanding and responding to the needs of the young people already working in the sector. The sector needs to learn how to better nurture their strengths and provide them with the time, space, and resources they need to be successful.

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Appendix 1

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Participants' Most Memorable Experience

Participants were asked to think back to their most memorable experience working in the voluntary sector and to express it visually in a drawing or collage.