

Engaging Youth Volunteers

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Volunteering is the backbone of sport in Canada. Without the generous contributions of volunteers at all levels many sport opportunities would not be available to our communities. In the past our older generation has been the stalwart contributors of their time and energy and while this trend continues, we should also be looking to our younger generations to help support their desire to give back to communities and encourage their engagement as members of the volunteer community.

According to the 2010 Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating Opens in a new window, 58% of Canadians aged 15-24 are involved in volunteering. And in 2013 12.7 million Canadians contributed close to 2 billion hours (General Social Survey – Giving, Volunteering and Participating, 2013 Opens in a new window) with youth (15 to 19 years) being more engaged with 66% volunteering an average of 110 hours per year. So how can we make sure that we are keeping our youth engaged in volunteering within sport? Keeping in mind some of the following questions and answers can help organizations match volunteer opportunities to a great source of energy and creativity, and a new generation of people looking to contribute.



Why do youth volunteer?

The youth population in Canada contribute their time and energy to volunteering for a variety of reasons and knowing what these reasons are will help organizations develop opportunities that are attractive to them.

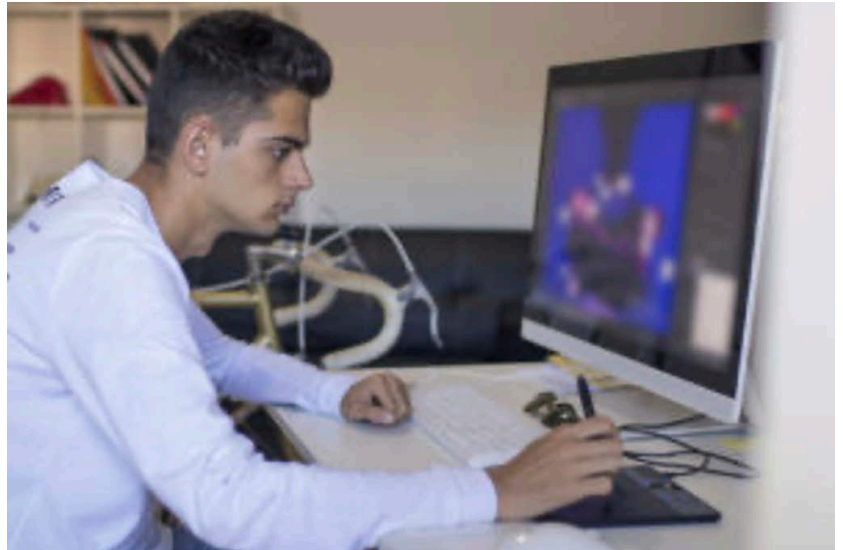
- Some provinces require secondary school students to complete community service hours as part of their credits towards graduation
- Volunteering provides opportunities to be with friends

- Opportunity to try something new
- Many youth are passionate about their community and want to give back, making a difference for causes that they believe in.
- They see volunteer positions as a way to grow and develop skills to secure future employment
- Many already have skills and knowledge that they want to be able to use in meaningful ways and that challenge them to use their creative and critical thinking skills
- Volunteer opportunities can provide youth with mentorship and opportunities to connect with people in communities that interest them

What benefits does volunteering bring to young people?

Many of these benefits are mirrored in the above reasons why youth volunteer. Volunteering provides you people with the opportunity to:

- Directly impact the community, creating a better place for others
- Promote a cause
- Meet new people, make friends and build contacts. Become part of a team working on a common goal
- Learn new skills
- Advance your career
- Promote mental and physical health
- Discover new skills, talents and interests
- Build self-esteem and self-confidence through hands-on experience
- Job skill development: learn team-building, leadership and problem-solving
- Be a part of the “working world” and see how an organization works from the inside
- Networking opportunities that could open doors to possible future employment and professional references



What are the benefits of youth volunteers to Organizations?

- Young volunteers bring hope, energy and excitement.
- This is a population with enthusiasm, creativity and energy.
- Drawing on a creative and tech-savvy generation who are tapped into the new ways of communicating and building awareness.
- Many youth are more open-minded and bring a new perspective on diversity that organizations should be willing to embrace.
- With mandatory community involvement hours, organizations have a guaranteed and re-populating pool of volunteers to access
- Once a youth has volunteered, they are much more likely to continue volunteering, building a sustainable supply of future volunteers.

What are the barriers to volunteering for young people?

While there is an acknowledged need and desire by today's youth to volunteer, there are also perceived barriers that they see to contributing their time. Organizations who acknowledge these barriers and can provide flexibility will go a long way to making volunteerism more appealing.

- Lack of time. With commitments to school, family, friends, part-time jobs, and/or extracurricular clubs and groups, finding time for volunteering can be tricky.
- Inability to make a long-term commitment.
- Not being asked. Not knowing opportunities exist.
- Being unsure how to become involved. They may see or know of a need, but not know who to approach or how they can contribute.
- Feeling that their knowledge or opinions are not respected, valued or acknowledged.
- Some organizations do not see the contributions that youth have to offer, but rather see them as only being the recipients of services.
- Some youth feel that their maturity and skill set are not recognized, and they are not treated as valued members of the team. Or are afraid they won't be trained on skill sets that they lack.
- Alternately some youth are concerned that they are given more responsibility than they can handle and find themselves in over their heads.



How can youth get the most out of volunteering?

Organizations do not hold the full responsibility in ensuring positive volunteer experiences for youth, the volunteers themselves can and should contribute to making the most out of their opportunities. Volunteer Ottawa Opens in a new window shares the following suggestions for youth on making the most out of volunteering:

- **Ask questions.** You want to make sure that the experience is right for your skills, your goals, and the time you want to spend. If you have any questions, be sure to speak up. Sample questions to your volunteer coordinator might address your time commitment, if there's any training involved, who you will be working with, and what to do if you have questions during your experience.
- **Make sure you know what's expected.** Before starting, make sure you are comfortable with the organization, know what is expected, and understand the time commitment. Consider starting small so that you don't over commit yourself at first. Give yourself some flexibility to change your focus if needed.
- **Don't be afraid to make a change.** Speak up if your experience isn't what you expected. Don't force yourself into a bad fit. Talk to the organization about changing your focus or consider looking for another match.
- **Enjoy yourself.** Most importantly, make sure you're having fun! The best volunteer experiences benefit both the volunteer and the organization. If you're not enjoying yourself, ask yourself why. Is it the tasks you're performing? The people you're working with? Or are you uncomfortable simply because the situation is new and unfamiliar? Pinpointing what's bothering you can help you decide how to proceed.

How Organizations Can Support Good Volunteer Experience?

Research and anecdotal evidence from interview youth volunteers has provided us with a number of suggestions that organizations can take into consideration when building and planning for successful youth volunteer opportunities.

- Be flexible to different working schedules or time commitments. Recognize that young volunteers are balancing a lot of responsibilities of their own.
- Make sure that roles, expectations and responsibilities are clear.
- Provide the bigger picture as to what their contributions mean to their team, the organization and the community they are contributing to.
- Provide opportunities for skill development and/or certification if it's available.
- If youth can volunteer in a peer group, this often makes the position more attractive.
- Build meaningful relationships between volunteers, and between volunteers and staff. Create mentoring and networking opportunities where possible.
- Be respectful in the tasks and roles assigned to volunteers remember that youth have a lot to offer and may have as much to teach as you do.
- Create an environment of open communication. Make sure the lines of communication run both ways so that questions and feedback can build a constructive working relationship.
- Make tasks and timelines realistic and recognize that unforeseen demands on time and resources may require flexibility.
- Recognize that the organizational jargon used may not be familiar to all, so make sure acronyms and other "in-house" language are explained and clarified.
- Offer benefits or incentives to volunteers. Whether it is swag, inclusion in office lunches or team-building events, or entrance/tickets to events, a little recognition goes a long way.
- Don't forget to thank, celebrate, and recognize your volunteers. Acknowledging efforts and contributions ensures that volunteers feel valued and respected.



Additional Resources

Volunteer Canada[Opens in a new window](#) – Volunteer Canada is the national voice for volunteerism in Canada. Since 1977, we have been committed to increasing and supporting volunteerism and civic participation. We collaborate closely with volunteer centres, local organizations and national corporations to promote and broaden volunteering. Our programs, research, training, tools, resources and national initiatives provide leadership on issues and trends in Canada's volunteer landscape.

Volunteer Ottawa[Opens in a new window](#) – Since the 1999-2000 school year, students entering secondary school must complete a minimum of 40hrs of community involvement activities as part of the requirements for an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD). To some students achieving 40 hours are difficult to obtain and can be a barrier to graduation. Volunteer Ottawa helps students achieve these volunteering goals by identifying opportunities and connecting students to organizations that value youth volunteers as a resource.

Volunteer Manitoba[Opens in a new window](#) – Volunteer Manitoba is the leader and catalyst for engaging all Manitobans in volunteerism. Our vital contributions to the community include connecting people with volunteer opportunities, promoting volunteerism, and providing leadership and counsel in the voluntary sector. Volunteer Manitoba is committed to promoting community engagement to young Manitobans.