

# Board Volunteers in Canada

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Volunteer board members are vital to the operation of nonprofit and voluntary organizations. Drawing on their diverse backgrounds and experiences, these volunteers come together to develop a vision of where their organization is headed and how it will get there. Their efforts help to shape the nonprofit and voluntary sector, which in turn helps to shape our communities. Unfortunately, however, more than half (56%) of Canada's 161,000 registered charities and incorporated nonprofit organizations report difficulties obtaining board members (Hall et al., 2005).

To learn more about the unique characteristics, values, and attitudes of board volunteers, Imagine Canada conducted in-depth interviews with 33 board volunteers from across Canada. Our primary goal in conducting this research was to provide nonprofit and voluntary organizations with information that would assist them in recruiting, retaining, and supporting board volunteers.<sup>1</sup>

We learned that board volunteers are motivated primarily by a desire to give back to their communities, to affect the direction of the organization, and to support the organization and its cause. Their major challenges are managing their time and managing conflict. Complaints about ineffective meetings were also common. In this fact sheet, we discuss the most common motivations and challenges reported by board volunteers and provide suggestions for recruiting and retaining them.

## Motivations for Becoming a Board Volunteer

Almost all the board volunteers we interviewed reported that they were motivated by a desire to give back to their communities.

*"I like to give back to the community, to be involved in the community. I think it's very important that we give our time to community events, to assist, to help."*

*"I've been so fortunate in life and I just want to pay back the community and the people. If there's anything I can do in that area, I'm tickled to death to do it."*

The opportunity to affect the direction of an organization and contribute to its success motivated some board volunteers to take on a leadership role.

*"I guess the idea of being on a board is that you really feel good that you can affect the direction of the organization, that you can perhaps make suggestions about how things should be done."*

*"I saw the need for a strong board because, without that, you don't really get a sense of direction and you don't really have oversight or overview of what the organization is doing."*

Finally, some board volunteers were motivated primarily by their desire to support the organization and its cause.

*"It's an organization that I think contributes to making a huge difference to people's lives and I wanted to be a part of that."*

*"I'm fully committed to the organization. I am committed to what the organization stands for and I believe that it's a good organization."*

<sup>1</sup> The full results of the study can be found in E. Ridley & C. Barr. (2006). *Board volunteers in Canada: Their motivations and challenges*. Toronto: Knowledge Development Centre.

## Challenges Faced by Board Volunteers

One of main challenges faced by board volunteers is juggling their time among paid work, family, and volunteer responsibilities.

*“I think the biggest issue is the time challenge and time management and making sure that I’ve got enough time in both my business and personal life to be able to devote myself to it in a manner that is acceptable to being on the board.”*

*“It’s trying to make sure I don’t have too much on my plate, when you add work and family responsibilities on top of the volunteer commitments. If you don’t manage it well, it can add to the stress level so you can just get burned out from having too many things.”*

Coping with personality conflicts and differences of opinion was also reported to be a challenge by a number of board volunteers.

*“Sometimes it can be very tiresome when you have people who are controlling or power-mongers or that type of thing or driven by ego and want a lot of status and prestige. I find that wears you down after a while.”*

*“From time to time one does encounter members of boards whose personal agenda or personal profile is more important to them than the work. There can be people whose role on the board seems somewhat self-interested and I think that can be difficult.”*

A few board volunteers also told us that poorly run meetings were a challenge because they wasted time that might be better spent elsewhere.

*“I don’t have a lot of time to give. When I want to give it, I want to make sure it’s used efficiently and I find that I have very little patience for*

*wasting time in meetings. I have no patience for it at all, actually.”*

*“I find that many board meetings are not well designed. They’re pedantic, they’re not stimulating, they’re not exciting, they’re not innovating. They’re just a lot of process stuff that, frankly, I find can be done over email just as easily and effectively, and a lot faster. They could just use that time much better.”*

## Suggestions for Recruiting and Retaining Board Volunteers

The results of our interviews suggest that, to recruit board volunteers successfully, organizations need to communicate their vision and mission clearly. They also need to explain how the board and its individual members will contribute to the success of the organization. Organizations seeking new board members should consider current donors and non-board volunteers. These people have already shown that they believe in the organization and they already have a stake in its success.

To improve retention, organizations should be honest with prospective board members about the time commitment involved in being on the board. They should also strive to use the time of board members as efficiently and effectively as possible. Finally, organizations should consider providing training in conflict management to board members and/or the staff who work with them.

## References

- Hall, M. H., de Wit, M. L., Lasby, D., McIver, D., Evers, T., & Johnson, C. et al. (2005). *Cornerstones of community: Highlights of the National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations*. (Catalogue No. 61–533–XPE, Rev. ed.). Ottawa: Statistics Canada.