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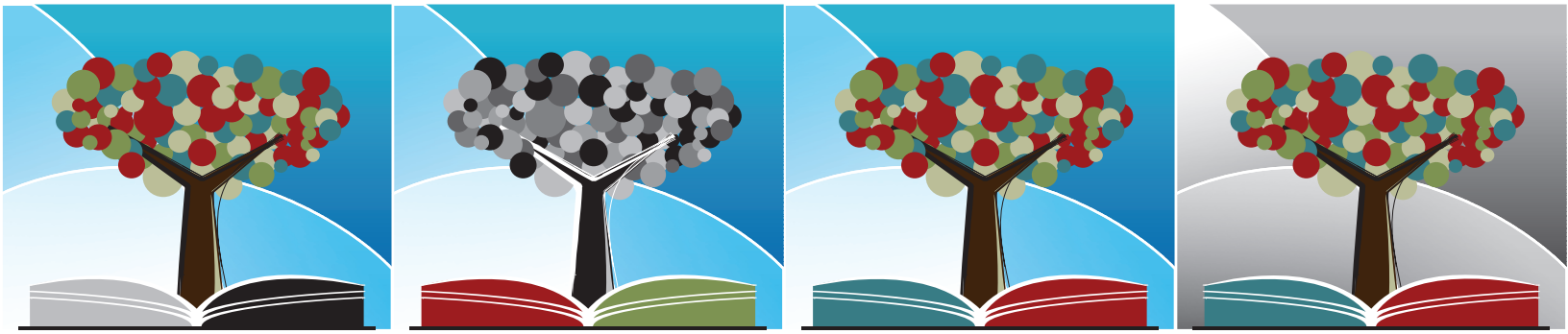

Board Volunteers in Canada: Their Motivations and Challenges

A Research Report

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Imagine Canada

Knowledge Development
Canada Volunteerism Initiative
Développement des connaissances
Initiative canadienne sur le bénévolat

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Canada

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Board Volunteers in Canada: Their Motivations and Challenges

1. Introduction

Virtually all nonprofit and voluntary organizations in Canada are governed by volunteer boards of directors. Board volunteers are a diverse group of people in terms of age, occupation, and volunteer activity, but they share a desire to give back to their communities and to help organizations they care about achieve their missions. Despite facing many challenges, board volunteers are driven to accomplish both personal and organizational goals, while building effective leadership teams and strengthening their respective organizations.

This report presents the results of interviews with 33 board volunteers from across Canada. The purpose of the interviews was to learn more about the motivations, expectations, and goals of board volunteers, and to gain insight into the challenges and barriers faced by this particular group. Why did they join a board? What do they like about their experiences as board members? What do they dislike? What kind of training and support do they receive to fulfill their roles? Our objective in undertaking this research was to provide nonprofit and voluntary organizations with information that would help them recruit, retain, and support board volunteers.

We begin with a brief overview of the existing research on the governance of nonprofit and voluntary organizations. This section provides context and justification for our study of individual board volunteers. Next, we present a profile of leadership volunteers based on the results of the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP). We then describe the methodology we used for our interviews, profile our interviewees, and discuss the results of our interviews. Recommendations for how organizations can use the research results are presented in the concluding section.

2. Previous Research on Boards and Volunteers

Our review of the literature found that researchers have previously explored a variety of issues relating to both boards and volunteers, but that there has been little research to date on board members *as volunteers*.

Aspects of nonprofit boards that have been studied and discussed in the literature include: the structure, function, performance, and efficacy of boards (Bradshaw, Murray, & Wolpin, 1992; Green & Griesinger, 1996; Jackson & Holland, 1998); patterns of power related to boards (Murray, Bradshaw, & Wolpin, 1992); board composition and how it reflects on organizations (Abzug & Galaskiewicz, 2001); relations between boards and staff (Fletcher, 1992; Golensky, 1993; Herman & Heimovics, 1990; Kearns, 1995; Kramer, 1985); roles of the board (Harris, 1993; Inglis, Alexander, & Weaver, 1999); and board development (Brudney & Murray, 1998; Holland, Leslie, & Holzhalb, 1993). Some attention has also been given to liability issues as they relate to board members (Johnston, 1995) and to the importance of ensuring that board members know what is expected of them (Board Development Program of Alberta Community Development, 1997). Resources have also been developed to help nonprofit and voluntary organizations recruit board members (Board Development Program of Alberta Community Development, 1999). These resources, however, do not appear to be based on any systematic study of board members.

There has also been considerable research on volunteers, most of it based on the results of the 1997 and 2000 NSGVP. According to the 2000 NSGVP, 27% of Canadians volunteer and the average volunteer contributes 162 hours a year (Hall, McKeown, & Roberts, 2001). Some volunteers contribute much more time than others, however. In fact, 73% of all volunteer hours are contributed by only 25% of volunteers. Canadians with higher levels of education and household income are most likely to volunteer, as are those who attend religious services weekly. The most common motivations for volunteering are a belief in the organization's cause (95%) and a desire to use skills and experience (81%). The most frequent reason given for not volunteering or not volunteering more is lack of time (76% of volunteers; 69% of non-volunteers). In 2000, 41% of all volunteers reported serving on a board or committee. In the next section, we present a profile of these volunteers.

A better understanding of individual board volunteers will be a useful addition to the body of literature on boards of nonprofit and voluntary organizations. By examining the characteristics, motivations, goals, barriers, and challenges of board members, we can learn what makes this group of volunteers unique. This information will be useful to nonprofit and voluntary organizations interested in improving their recruitment, support, and retention of board volunteers.

3. A Profile of Leadership Volunteers in Canada

To develop a profile of leadership volunteers in Canada, we examined the results of the 2000 NSGVP, which asked 14,724 Canadians aged 15 and over about their behaviour in the 12 months preceding the survey. One of the questions asked was: *"In the past 12 months, as an unpaid volunteer for an organization, did you serve as an unpaid member of a board or committee?"* We defined those who answered "yes" to this question as leadership volunteers.[1] Those who answered "no" to this question but engaged in other volunteering were defined as non-leadership volunteers. As noted above, 41% of all volunteers reported serving on a board or committee in 2000. On average, leadership volunteers spent 224 hours a year on volunteer activities (compared to an average of 118 hours for non-leadership volunteers).

Our analysis indicates that women make up the majority of leadership volunteers in Canada. Leadership volunteers tend to be older than volunteers who do not hold leadership positions, and to have more formal education and higher household incomes. They are more likely to say that they volunteer to use their skills and experience or because they or someone that they know is personally affected by the cause the organization supports. They are less likely than non-leadership volunteers to cite most of the barriers to volunteering more. Below we describe our findings in more detail.

Gender

Women make up slightly more than half (53%) of leadership volunteers (see Figure 1, p.4). Women account for a similar proportion of non-leadership volunteers (54%).

Age

Not surprisingly, leadership volunteers are slightly older than non-leadership volunteers (see Figure 2, p.4). Forty percent (40%) of non-leadership volunteers are between the ages of 15 and 34 and another 40% are between the ages of 35 and 54. In comparison, only 25% of leadership volunteers are aged 15 to 34 and more than half (51%) are aged 35 to 54. Twenty-one percent (21%) of non-leadership volunteers are over 54, compared to 25% of leadership volunteers.

Education

Leadership volunteers tend to have higher levels of formal education than volunteers who do not hold leadership positions (see Figure 3, p.5). Almost one third (32%) of leadership volunteers have university degrees and almost two thirds (63%) completed post-secondary education of some type. In comparison, only 18% of non-leadership volunteers have university degrees and fewer than half (46%) completed post-secondary education of any type.

Household Income

Figure 4 (p.5) shows that leadership volunteers, as a group, have slightly higher household incomes than non-leadership volunteers. More than half (53%) of leadership volunteers have household incomes of $60,000 or more, compared to 45% of non-leadership volunteers.

1 These volunteers may also volunteer in non-leadership roles.

Figure 1: Gender of Leadership and Non-Leadership Volunteers

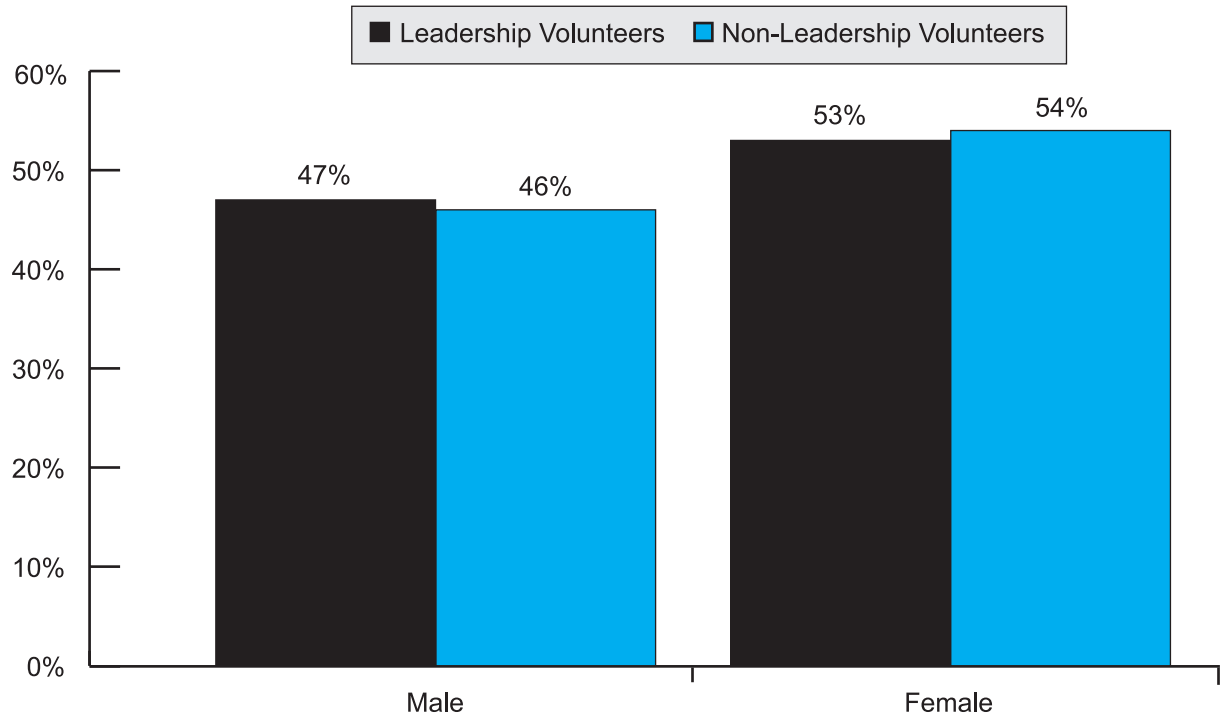


Figure 2: Age of Leadership and Non-Leadership Volunteers

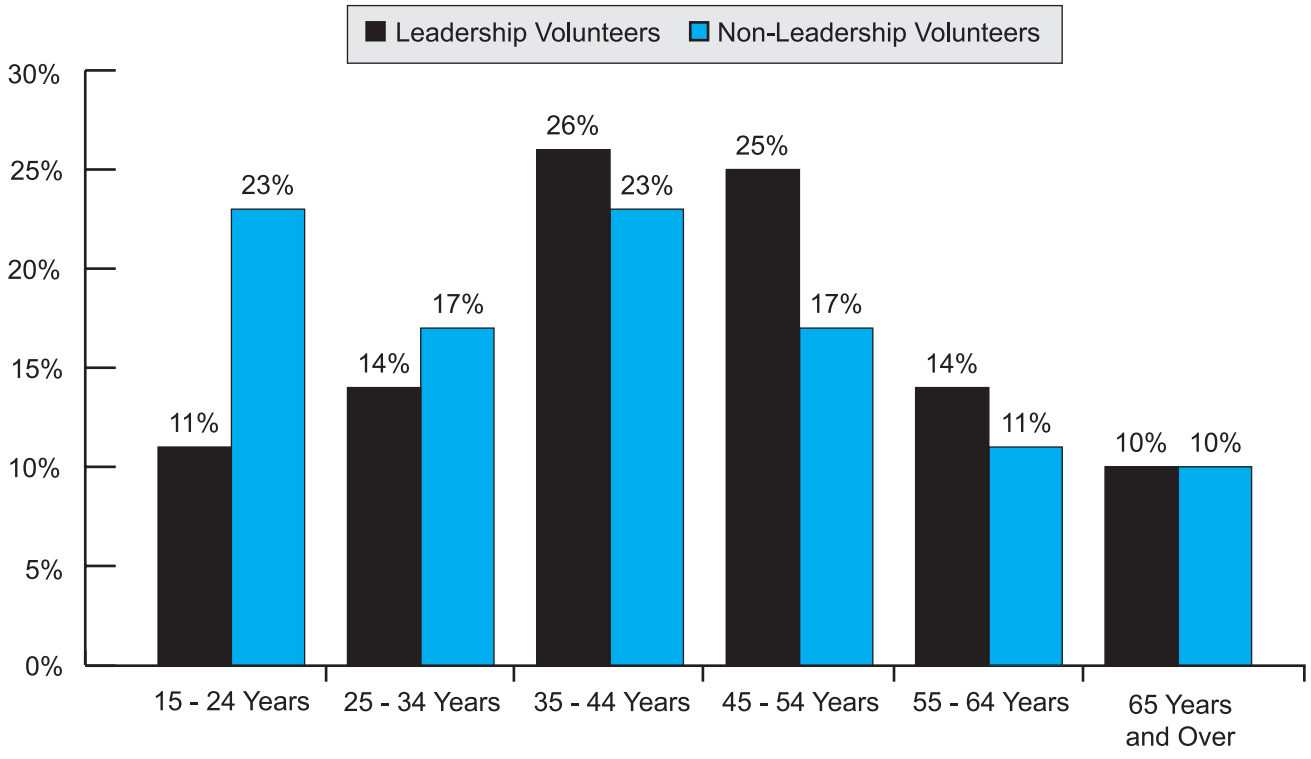


Figure 3: Education of Leadership and Non-Leadership Volunteers

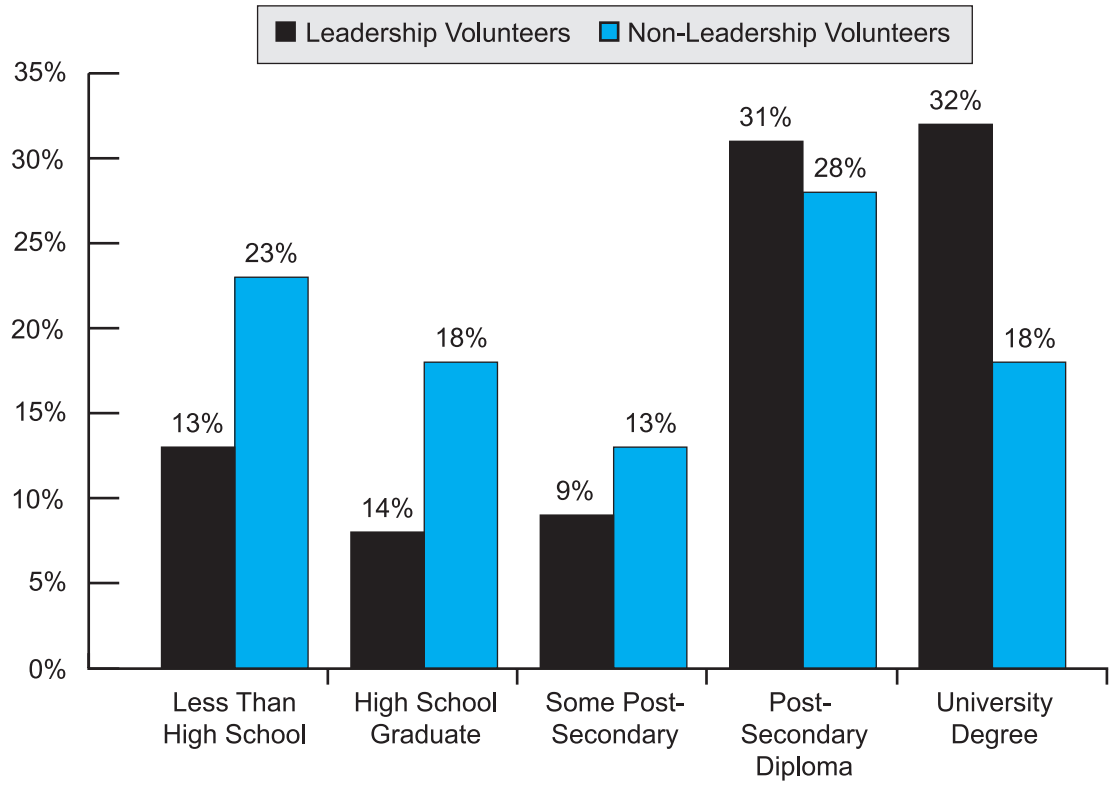
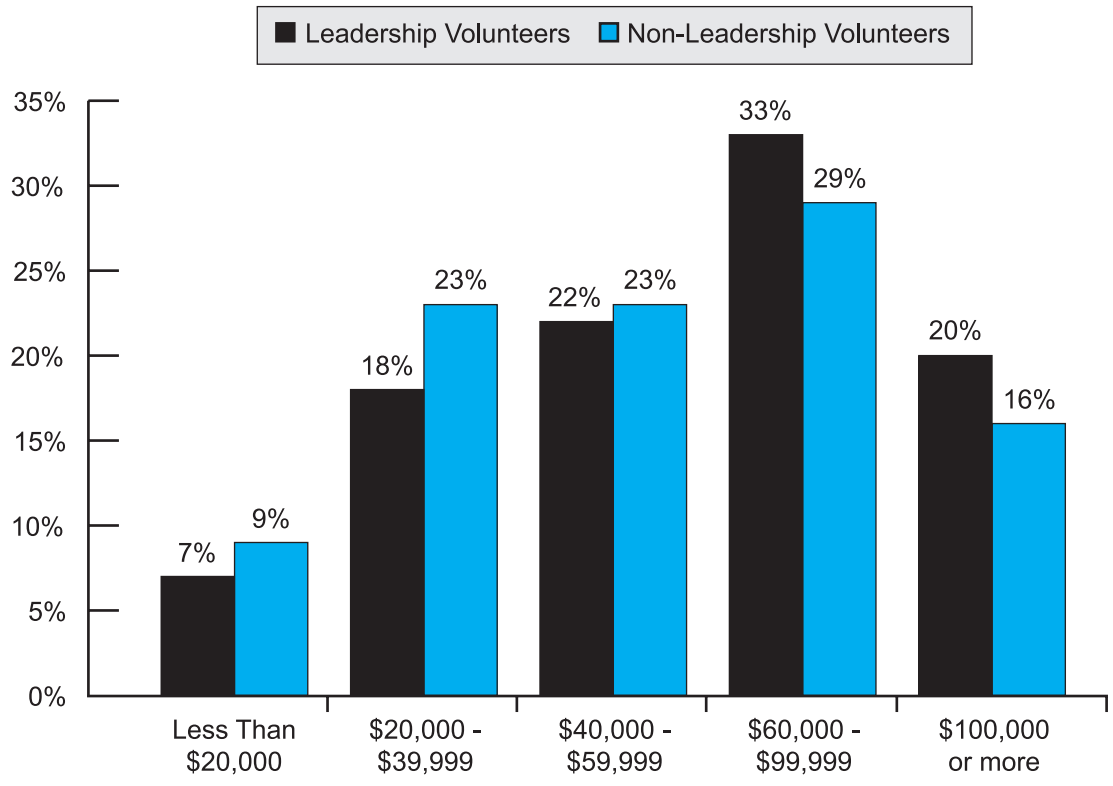


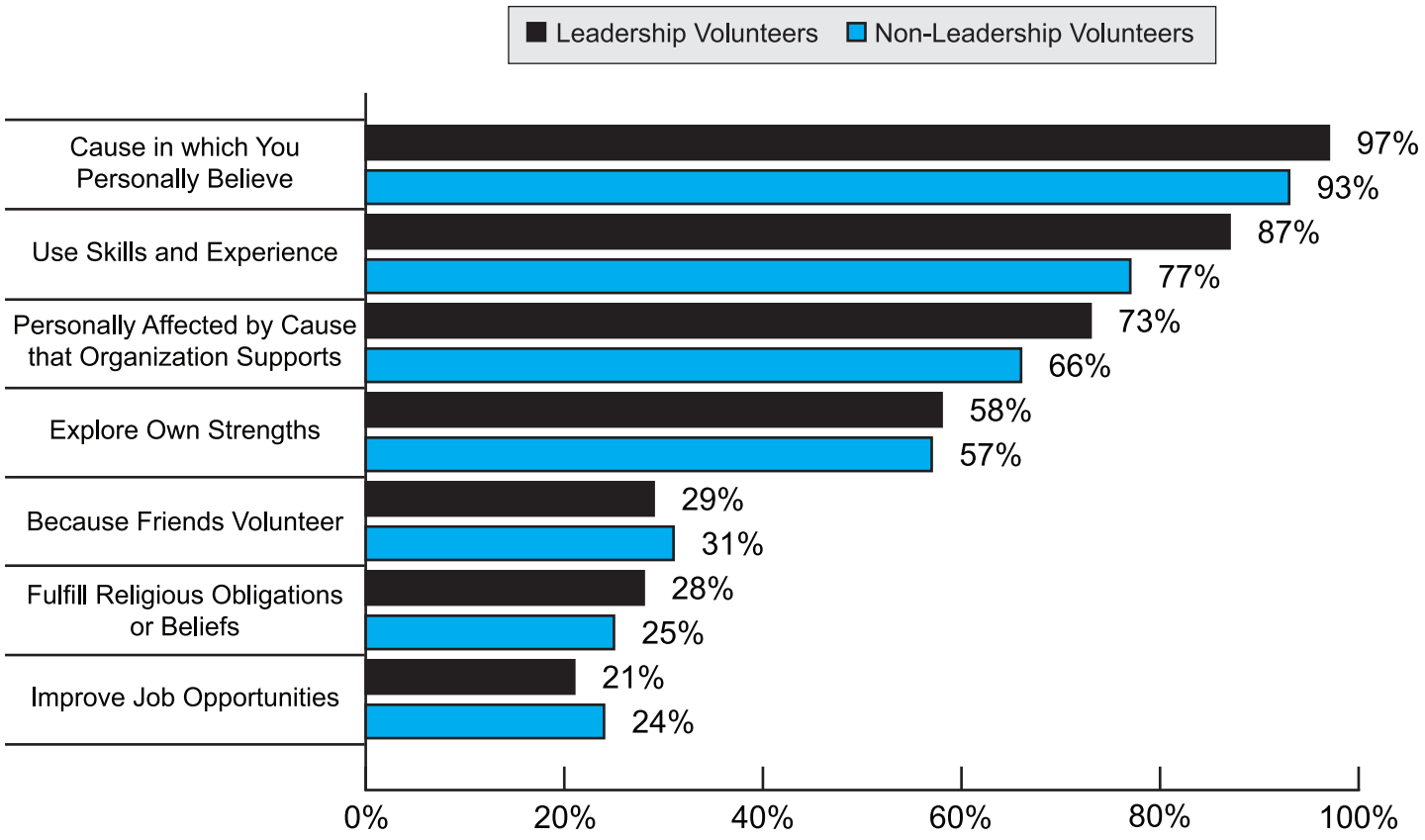
Figure 4: Household Income of Leadership and Non-Leadership Volunteers



Motivations

Leadership volunteers are more likely than non-leadership volunteers to say that they volunteer to use their skills or experience (87%, compared to 77% of non-leadership volunteers; see Figure 5). They are also more likely to volunteer because they or someone that they know is personally affected by the cause the organization supports (73%, compared to 66% of non-leadership volunteers). Leadership volunteers are less likely than non-leadership volunteers to volunteer to improve their job opportunities (21% vs. 24%) or because their friends volunteer (29% vs. 31%).

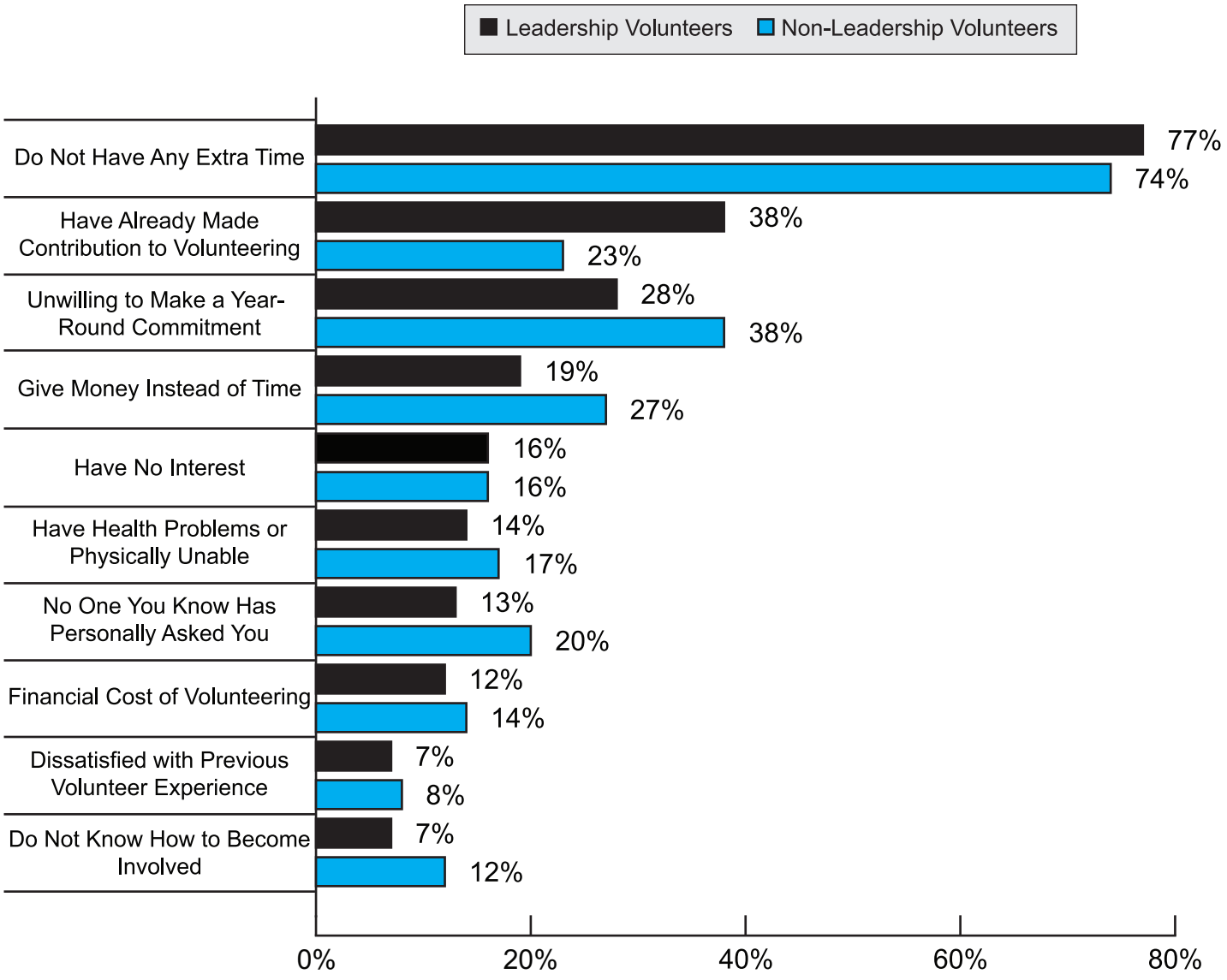
Figure 5: Motivations of Leadership and Non-Leadership Volunteers



Barriers

According to the 2000 NSGVP, leadership volunteers are less likely than non-leadership volunteers to cite most barriers to volunteering more (see Figure 6). Non-leadership volunteers are more likely than leadership volunteers to say that they don't volunteer more because they are unwilling to make a year-round commitment (38% vs. 28% of leadership volunteers); that they prefer to give money instead of time (27% vs. 19%), and that they have not been personally asked (20% vs. 13%). Leadership volunteers, in comparison, are more likely than non-leadership volunteers to say that they don't volunteer more because they have already made a contribution to volunteering (38% vs. 23%) and because they do not have any extra time (77% vs. 74%).

Figure 6: Barriers to Volunteering More Among Leadership and Non-Leadership Volunteers



Summary

The typical Canadian leadership volunteer is female, 35 to 54 years old, with a university degree, and a household income of at least $60,000. She spends about 224 hours a year volunteering because she believes in the cause the organization supports, has been personally affected by this cause or knows someone who has, and wants to use her skills and experience. Her main reason for not volunteering more is that she doesn't feel she has any extra time.

4. Interview Methodology

The remainder of this report focuses on the results of semi-structured interviews with 33 volunteer board members from across Canada. A semi-structured interview allows the researcher to ask respondents open-ended questions on a chosen topic. Respondents can answer with as much or as little detail as they choose. This interview style also allows respondents to elaborate on issues that are of most concern or interest to them, and to use detailed examples and personal stories to convey their thoughts and feelings.

All interviews were carried out by telephone between June and October 2004. The shortest interview lasted 19 minutes and the longest lasted 65 minutes; the average length of the interviews was 42 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were entered into the NVivo qualitative data analysis software and coded for themes.

5. Profile of Interviewees

Thirty-two of the 33 individuals we interviewed were currently serving on the board of at least one Canadian nonprofit organization. One individual had just recently stepped down from a board position. Our interviewees were a very diverse group of people. In this section, we describe the organizations they served, their volunteer positions and activities, and their socio-demographic characteristics.

Organizations

We deliberately recruited interviewees from a wide variety of organizations. Sixteen interviewees sat on the board of a national organization and 17 sat on the board of an organization that was provincial or regional in scope. The organizations engaged in many different activities; the most common were social services, education and research, culture and recreation, and philanthropy and voluntarism promotion (see Table 1).[2] Approximately half the organizations had annual revenues of a $1 million or more and half had revenues below that amount (see Table 2).[3]

Table 1. Types of Organizations Interviewees Served

Social Services	5
Education and Research	5
Culture and Recreation	4
Philanthropy and Voluntarism Promotion	4
Health	3
Law, Advocacy & Politics	3
International	3
Religion	2
Development and Housing	2
Business and Professional Associations, and Unions	1
Environment	1
Total	**33**

Table 2. Annual Revenues of Organizations Interviewees Served

Less than $30,000	2
$30,000 to $99,999	4
$100,000 to $249,999	2
$250,000 to $499,999	5
$500,000 to $999,999	2
$1 million to $9.9 million	10
$10 million or more	7
Total	**32**

2 These categories are adapted from the International Classification of Nonprofit Organizations (Salamon & Anheier, 1997).

3 Revenue information was based on 2002, 2003, or 2004 data and was not available for one organization.

Positions and Activities

Interviewees held a variety of different board positions including chair, vice-chair, president, vice-president, treasurer, and member-at-large. They also reported performing a variety of functions for their organizations, including:

- general management (e.g., assigning work to other board members and staff);
- financial management (e.g., reviewing budgets and financial statements);
- strategic planning (e.g., succession planning, "visioning," policy development);
- communications (e.g., acting as spokesperson, liaising with other groups); and,
- fundraising.

Hours Volunteered

The amount of time that interviewees contributed to their positions as board members varied considerably (see Table 3). More than half spent between zero and five hours per week on activities relating to their position. However, seven individuals spent more than 15 hours per week on board activities.

Table 3. Average Number of Hours Interviewees Volunteered Per Week

0 to 5	19
6 to 10	5
11 to 15	2
16 to 20	3
21 or more	4
Total	**33**

Previous Volunteer Experience

Most of the board volunteers we interviewed had considerable experience as a volunteer. In fact, almost one third had been volunteering for over 20 years. Several others had volunteered for between 11 and 20 years. In the past, interviewees had given their time:

- as teachers or coaches;
- in heath care;
- to service clubs;
- to fundraising; and,
- to churches.

Not only did most of the interviewees have previous volunteer experience, but some of this experience was as a board member. Many of our interviewees had served on several boards over the course of their volunteer careers and a few were, at the time of the interview, on the boards of more than one organization. Many of these individuals had dedicated years of their lives to serving on boards.

Use and Acquisition of Skills

Many interviewees felt that they brought important skills to their volunteer positions. These skills were acquired through previous educational and professional experiences and were readily applicable to their roles as board volunteers. Interviewees were skilled in one or more of the following:

- leadership;
- conflict resolution;
- public relations;
- organizational development;
- negotiation, diplomacy, dealing with people;
- financial management;
- team building;

- administration;
- communication;
- organization; and
- policy development.

Some interviewees also mentioned that, through their board volunteering, they had acquired new skills or honed existing ones. Fundraising, financial management, and conflict management were most often mentioned in this regard. Several interviewees also said that they had developed a variety of personal skills (e.g., they had learned to be more assertive, more patient, or more aware of subtle messages).

Socio-demographic Characteristics

The individuals we interviewed were quite diverse in terms of their socio-demographic characteristics. They lived in every region of the country (see Table 4). Eighteen were male and 15 were female. They ranged in age from 27 to 81 years old, although more than half were over the age of 55. Interviewees had varying levels of education. Some had not completed high school; others had obtained a post-graduate degree. More than half of the interviewees were in the labour force either full-time or part-time. They worked in a wide variety of fields, including management, health care, education, manufacturing, government, small business, accounting, sales and marketing, advertising, and media and communications.

Summary

The board volunteers we interviewed served on the boards of large and small organizations, national and local organizations, and organizations working in many different areas. The group included men and women, young people and senior citizens, and individuals living in every region of the country. They held a variety of different board positions and carried out a variety of functions. Most were experienced volunteers.

Table 4. Region of Residence of Interviewees

Ontario	9
Manitoba, Saskatchewan, & Territories	7
Atlantic Canada	5
Alberta	5
Quebec	4
British Columbia	3
Total	**33**

6. Results of Interviews

The results of our interviews indicate that, although board volunteers are a very diverse group, they share many attitudes and values. Most of the people we interviewed became board volunteers because they wanted to give back to the community, affect the direction of the organization, or support the organization and its cause. Their goals are closely aligned with the goals of the organizations they serve and most of them feel that they have achieved – or are at least working towards achieving – these goals. Board volunteers face various challenges. Some challenges are personal (e.g., time management), some relate to the operation of the board (e.g., difficulty building consensus), and some are organizational (e.g., inadequate financial resources). Despite these challenges, most board volunteers are satisfied with their roles and feel appreciated for the work that they do. Below we present our major findings on the motivations, goals, challenges, and experiences of board volunteers.

Motivations of Board Volunteers

When asked *how* they got involved in volunteering as board members, most of the interviewees reported that they had been personally asked by someone to join the board. Sometimes this person was someone they knew from their previous involvement with the organization. At other times, it was a friend, colleague, or other community member. To understand *why* our interviewees agreed to join the boards of their respective organizations, we asked about their specific motivations for getting involved.

Why Join a Board?

The most common reasons that participants gave for joining a board were to give back to the community, to affect the direction of the organization, and to support the organization and its cause. Some also mentioned that volunteering was an important value in their family when they were growing up.

To give back to the community

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

"It occurred to me that I owed quite a lot to society and quite a lot too, in a sense of repaying the opportunities that I had. It was an opportunity to give back to society."

To affect the direction of the organization

"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."

"My initial motivations were that the organization was not going in the right direction, that there was work to be done, there was room for a lot of improvement."

"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."

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."

"This agency, for one. I think that it's doing an awful lot in the community so it's nice to be involved in an organization that's positive."

"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."

Upbringing

"I grew up in a family in which you were supposed to be involved in community work somehow, so historically that's it."

"I'm a person who likes to contribute to the community. It's part of my culture and part of my upbringing."

Other reasons

Board volunteers mentioned other reasons for joining the boards of their organizations, including:

- to use their expertise and skills;
- to develop their skills;
- to gain opportunities for networking;
- to help those less fortunate;
- for an interesting experience; and,
- because they were personally affected by the cause.

Why Stay on a Board?

Many interviewees reported that they continued to serve on the board for the same reasons they had initially joined it. For example, they continued to believe in the value of the organization and to feel that they were having a positive impact on their communities. Some reported that their initial motivations had strengthened.

"I don't think my motivations have changed. It's an appreciation for the service that the organization is offering and wanting to have a hand in making that available so that others can benefit from it."

"I can't say that my motivations have changed. My activities have been a little different but in terms of my motivations, no, not at all."

"I'd say that my motivations have strengthened. Because of the role that I've had, I've traveled overseas and I've seen and talked to people. It's been very moving, very powerful, and it changed things from being intellectual, which I think is where my motivations were initially. It's like from the brain to the heart. Seeing the things that one sees, it's impossible not to respond."

One interviewee stated that his motivations had changed because new issues had arisen.

"I'm able to see some further areas where I can contribute, areas that I wasn't aware of when I first joined. Well, to some degree they're areas that weren't identified then. It wasn't just that I didn't know about them, they've emerged."

Goals of Board Volunteers

People may be motivated to serve on a board by their personal goals. Examining these goals, therefore, may provide valuable insight into the reasons people join boards and continue to serve on them year after year. In fact, we found that there was considerable overlap between people's stated motivations for joining the board and the goals they had when they took on the position.

What are board volunteers' personal goals?

We asked interviewees about their personal goals when they joined the board. Most mentioned organizational goals such as effecting change, helping with transition and succession planning, and raising money.

"I'm pretty values-driven so if I had any personal goals it would be about maintaining or increasing the credibility of the organization through an ability to influence."

"I think you develop the goals when you get involved with the organization because once you get involved your goals become aligned with the organization's goals and how you become active and involved has a hand in shaping those goals."

"I was assisting with a transition and making sure that the organization dealt with the transition in a way that worked with the membership. From my personal perspective, I was looking forward to that challenge because it was going from one governance model that I was very familiar with to another governance model that was a bit of a challenge, given the kind of organization this is. That personally interested me."

Do board volunteers feel that they are achieving their goals?

Many of the board volunteers we interviewed felt that some of their personal goals had been achieved or that they were, at least, working towards achieving them.

"I feel that I'm doing reasonably well and most of my goals have been fulfilled."

"Yes, my goals have been fulfilled. I've been very impressed and encouraged by how we have been able to provide and expand our levels of service to the sector."

"Getting there, yes, I think so. I think it's something you work toward and then, as you're working toward it, you see if you're running into problems. Then you evaluate it and come up with another goal or revise it."

"It takes a long time to fulfill those goals and yes, it's slowly being fulfilled. I would have liked to see it happen a lot faster but, of course, things don't happen that quickly."

Some interviewees expressed the view that their goals were never likely to be achieved.

"It's ongoing. To fulfill a goal means that it's finished and completed. That will never finish as long as the foundation is going."

Do the goals of board volunteers change?

Several interviewees reported that their goals had not really changed since they joined the board.

"I think that my goals have stayed the same. They are almost an ongoing goal of the organization because they complement each other."

"I just see this as doing what we've been doing but doing it better, and streamlining and making sure that the money we spend on projects is being spent well."

Others reported that, over time, their personal goals had become more closely aligned with the goals of the organization they served and that their commitment to the organization had deepened.

"My goals have grown a bit in the sense that, as I've become familiar with the organization, I've had more of a hand in shaping its direction, so my personal goals have become organizational goals in some ways."

"I think my goals have probably changed. At the very least they deepened, and I think that it's not uncommon that, as you see what gets done, your level of commitment becomes much deeper, becomes passionate, in a sense, so there's no doubt that my commitment to the organization has considerably deepened."

Challenges

The challenges reported by the board members we interviewed can be divided into three categories: personal challenges, board challenges, and organizational challenges. Below, we discuss each type of challenge in turn.

Personal Challenges

The most common personal challenges were time management and conflict management.

Time Management

"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 get burned out from having too many things. Or things don't get done, and then you feel guilty because you didn't get done what you committed to get done."

"If you've got a finite number of hours, what do you do? Do you make sure that your paid job is done to the best that it can be, or do you make sure that your volunteer job is done to the best that it can be? Which one suffers? It's going to be the volunteer one every time."

Conflict Management

"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."

"Sometimes you get people on boards who want to move their own ideas forward and maybe it's not what the organization really wants, so you have to spend a lot of time tactfully dealing with these people."

Board Challenges

Challenges that related to the board and its operations included poorly run meetings, an unequal distribution of work among board members, and difficulty building consensus.

Poorly Run Meetings

"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 sometimes people use meetings as their social venue and there's a lot of chitty-chat and things that are not associated with the agenda. People are giving us their volunteer time and it needs to be respected."

"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."

Unequal Distribution of Work

"A lot of board members do not live up to their responsibilities equally."

"I can never understand why people volunteer to do things if they're not prepared to do the work. When you're working on a team, and I consider a board to be a team, it makes it very difficult when you have even one or two people that don't do what they're supposed to do."

Difficulty Building Consensus

"You've got four people saying, 'you're not consulting with us enough' and four people saying, 'just make a decision and show some leadership, don't bother consulting with us.' Where do you go with that? How do you build consensus?"

"Sometimes when you've got some people on the board who have been there for a long time and are not very progressive thinkers then, if you're always looking for full unanimous support in every endeavour, you're going to miss a lot of opportunities."

"You never have the same group of people sitting there for...well, it's rare that from one year to the next the mix would be the same. So what has gone before doesn't have the same sort of resonance and foundation for the new group because they're new."

Organizational Challenges

Many of the challenges reported by interviewees were really organizational challenges. This is interesting as it shows how closely many board volunteers identify with their organizations. The most common organizational challenges related to recruiting and retaining volunteers and obtaining funding. It is worth noting that these were also the most common challenges reported by the 13,000 nonprofit and voluntary organizations that participated in the National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations (Hall et al., 2005).

"One of my big concerns is the difficulties we are experiencing in recruiting and retaining folks to fill positions that people are finishing or choosing to leave."

"If you're not constantly paying attention to developing people within the membership to come onto the committees of the executives, you can really fall short. When you just leave it and think that everybody's going to stay on, they don't."

"One of the biggest challenges that we have is that we don't have the money to do what we'd like to do."

"Money is a big challenge. We don't get that much funding."

"The financial resources that are available to our organization seem to be dwindling and the expectations of the members are for the same level of service."

Impact of Challenges on Board Retention

Most interviewees did not feel that the challenges they faced affected their desire to continue serving on the boards of their organizations. In fact, these challenges motivated some of them to continue to work hard from within the organization to achieve their goals.

"You can't change things from the outside. Anybody can resign any time, but if you want to stay and bring about change then you compromise and eventually maybe you'll get what you're looking for."

"No, no, no. It makes me more determined to stay on the board to help overcome it."

"These challenges don't influence me at all. Where I go in the future will depend on what my personal life is at any given point in time."

On the other hand, some board members felt that the challenges they faced affected their ability or willingness to remain on the board.

"If we don't have the money to support our work, I don't think a lot of us will be able to stay on the board because we are all volunteers and we don't have the money to spend to go to meetings or do whatever needs to be done."

Feelings of Effectiveness

While board volunteers face a number of challenges, all of the interviewees felt that they were effective members of their boards. In general, they believed that their time was well spent and that they could see positive results from their activities.

"I think the time that I put into it is certainly well spent. I can see a positive return on what I'm doing."

"In all the giving of all those years, I was receiving. The feedback that you received made you that much more sure that what you were doing was right because sometimes in the first years you wondered whether you were doing the right thing or not."

Several interviewees explained that if they did not believe that their time was spent effectively, they would not continue to volunteer.

"If I felt that my time was not well spent than I wouldn't continue. I would come to the conclusion that there would perhaps be other places where I could make a more useful contribution."

"Most of the time I feel that my time is well spent. There are always those times that you don't think so, but most of the time I think it is well spent – otherwise I wouldn't do it."

Almost all the board volunteers we interviewed felt that, for the most part, their contributions were valued and appreciated by others in their organizations. They reported receiving formal and informal feedback in the form of awards and thank-yous.

"I do think that what I contribute is valued. I feel that people respect what I have to say because I put my money where my mouth is. And I have friends across the country as a result of this organization and I guess that makes me think that I've been valued."

"I get a little pat on the back every so often. I've been made Personality of the Year from one organization this year at the annual meeting. I have all kinds of things that have been named and given."

Changes That Would Increase Effectiveness

Despite their generally positive views of their effectiveness, more than half the board volunteers we interviewed said that they (or their boards) would be more effective if certain changes occurred. The most common changes mentioned were bringing in younger board members, getting support from paid staff and, interestingly, more frequent meetings.

Bring in younger members

"I'd like to get a couple of individuals who are younger, who represent different professional areas. That could bring some real interesting ideas to the board."

"I'd like to have more people, more young blood coming in. It's always the same people who give their time and I think we need to train the young people. That's true on a lot of boards. But younger people have young families and they have other priorities. They're happy to take a couple of hours a month and that's it; being on the board takes time."

Get support from paid staff

"If I had the money, I'd like to have a full-time executive director and a full-time administrative assistant to help with the work that we're doing right now."

"Even if it was only one day a week it would be nice to have some administrative support. Right now my own private office tries to absorb the extra work so my secretary does anything, even though it's not really in her job description. Because it's an activity that I do she ends up picking up the slack."

More frequent meetings

"I think the board could meet more frequently. At the present time the board meets on average three times a year and that means enough time goes by between each meeting that continuity and follow-through are a challenge."

"I think if we met a little bit more often it would be great. Just to get the exchange of ideas going a little bit more frequently for organizational purposes. But when there are twelve of us I know it's just hard to get more than one day a month where everyone can meet."

Accomplishments

When asked about their accomplishments as board members, interviewees pointed to a variety of achievements. The most common were recruiting good leaders, improving policies and operations, and strengthening the board.

Recruiting good leaders

"I think the calibre of leadership that the board has both provided and brought in, in terms of the management leadership, that it's got many first-rate people in the organization and that's something to be proud of."

Improving policies and operations

"I think I modernized things in some ways and progressed in terms of thinking about the financial support for volunteers because I think that's really important. I don't think we should keep thinking that everybody's going to pay for everything out of their own pocket."

"I restructured the committees and aligned them better to the strategic plan and I feel really good about that."

Strengthening the board

"I think I've really strengthened our board. I think we've now got a bigger board than we used to have and one that is much more qualified to carry out the various functions of the board. The board profile in the community has been raised and our ability to fundraise and to just ensure all around sound governance I think has been significantly improved."

"The board's self-assessment tools and the evolution of its governance role as the organization has grown – there's been obviously a need for the board to grow at the same time in terms of its understanding of governance and the calibre of governance and I think that's happened."

Training and Support

The majority of interviewees reported being involved in some training activities and receiving some support in their volunteer positions. Many felt that the training was effective, but they would benefit from more sessions.

"The organization does an orientation session which is pretty minimal in my view. Better than most organizations that I've worked with but nonetheless it's minimal. I think you come into a board really new and fresh and not knowing a lot. A lot gets thrown at you too quickly and not in the best of ways. I feel that virtually every board I work with can do a much better job of that. I've never seen it done well, not once."

"When we started this new board three years ago, one of the board member's wives had had a lot of experience on boards and she came and did a one-day in-service. I don't think it was enough, though."

About one-fifth of participants, however, reported that they had not received any training, either before or during their tenure on their current board.

"The answer is really none. The only training, and I don't even know that I would call it that, we've gone through a couple of one-day fundraising seminars, as an organization, with some consultants. Those were really targeted at board members but there was no training specifically for me in my role as president."

"There's really no funds to provide training or to send someone to a leadership course, or anything that would revolve around a counselling-type organization."

"I will confess, no formal training. I was employed by a board before I ever became a board member so I had experience with boards. I had a little bit of analysis that way. And then just me personally, I've done some research on different kinds of board structures and volunteers. But that hasn't been formal training either as a paid staff member of a board, or as a board member of any organization that I've worked with."

Summary

The key findings from our interviews with board volunteers are summarized below.

- Board volunteers are primarily motivated by a desire to give back to the community, affect the direction of the organization, and support the organization and its cause.

- Most board volunteers stay involved in their organizations for the same reasons they became involved in the first place.

- The goals of board volunteers are closely aligned with the goals of the organizations they serve and tend to become more closely aligned over time.

- Board members generally feel that they have achieved, or are at least working towards achieving, their goals.

- Many long-serving board volunteers report that their commitment to their organization has deepened over time.

- The most common challenges reported by board volunteers are difficulty managing their time and difficulty managing conflict with other board members.

- Poorly run meetings, an unequal distribution of work among board members, and difficulty building consensus on the board were also sources of frustration.

- Board volunteers are concerned about organizational challenges such as funding and the recruitment and retention of volunteers.

- For the most part, the challenges that board volunteers face do not affect their willingness to continue volunteering.

- Most board volunteers are satisfied with their effectiveness and feel that their contributions are appreciated.

- Although most board volunteers report receiving some training for their roles, many would like to have more training.

7. Discussion and Recommendations

We conducted this research because we wanted to provide nonprofit and voluntary organizations with information that would help them recruit, retain, and support board volunteers. Our findings indicate that board volunteers are older than other volunteers and often come to their roles with a great deal of previous volunteer experience. They agree to serve – and continue serving – as board volunteers because they want to give back to the community, affect the direction of the organization, and support the organization and its cause. For the most part, board volunteers feel satisfied with their accomplishments. However, they report a variety of challenges that affect their ability to accomplish their goals, and many feel that they would benefit from more training.

Below we discuss what we learned from our analysis of NSGVP data and interviews with board volunteers across the country and provide recommendations for organizations that wish to recruit, retain, and support volunteers more effectively.

1. *Finding:* Board volunteers are older than other volunteers and typically have a great deal of volunteer experience.

   Recommendation: Although there are clear advantages to having experienced volunteers on your board, organizations should also consider recruiting younger adults and people who are new to the voluntary sector. Many adults in their thirties who have focused on their careers and/or families to the exclusion of other activities could make excellent board members once these "first priorities" are well established. Those who are new to the sector are likely to bring new ideas and fresh perspectives. To recruit such individuals, however, organizations may need to look outside their usual networks. One way organizations can do this is by advertising the fact that they are seeking new board members (e.g., on the organization's Web site, in its newsletters, at local events, in local newspapers). Another way is to ask business and community leaders for recommendations.

2. *Finding:* Board volunteers are motivated by a desire to give back to the community, affect the direction of the organization, and support the organization and its cause.

   Recommendation: Organizations should communicate their vision and mission clearly so that prospective board members will understand what they do and why. It is also important to explain to prospective board members how both the board as a whole and its individual members contribute to the success of the organization. Organizations seeking dedicated 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. Organizations interested in recruiting board members from outside their usual networks should emphasize the opportunity that a board position presents to give back to the community and affect the direction of the organization.

3. *Finding:* The most common problem reported by board volunteers is difficulty juggling the demands of their jobs, families, and volunteer activities.

   Recommendation: To improve retention, organizations need to be honest with prospective board members about the time commitment involved in being on the board. Prospective board members should be encouraged to be equally honest about their ability to meet this commitment. There is little point in recruiting board members who can give one hour a week if you need them to give ten. Similarly, individuals who are already involved in many activities may not be able to give your organization sufficient attention no matter how much they might wish to do so.

4. *Finding:* Many board volunteers report that they are frustrated by poorly run meetings, an unequal distribution of work among board members, and the difficulty of building consensus among board members.

   Recommendation: To improve the effectiveness of board meetings, individual board members, and the board as a whole, organizations should take the time to conduct regular evaluations. Such evaluations can be self-assessments and/or assessments by third parties. *Board Building*, a manual developed by the Board Development Program of Alberta Community Development (1999), contains examples of tools for evaluating meetings, board members, and board teams.

5. *Finding:* Many board volunteers report receiving no training, and many who receive training say that it is inadequate.

   Recommendation: Organizations should strive to provide their board volunteers with the orientation and training they need to fulfill their roles effectively. All new board members should receive information about the organization's vision, mission, values, activities, finances, and people, as well as information on board structure and operations. This information can be presented in a manual and/or in individual or group orientation sessions. Experienced board members can benefit from in-house or external workshops or training sessions. Retreats can also be an effective form of board development.

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NOTES

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