



# Volunteer Toronto

Intermediate

# Volunteer Retention & Recognition

## Resource Guide & Workbook

Compiled by the Engaging Organizations Department

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## **Using this Resource Guide & Workbook**

The Volunteer Retention & Recognition resource guide & workbook has been compiled by Volunteer Toronto to help community groups, non-profits and charitable organizations with the basic tools to effectively maintain and value their volunteers. Each resource has been selected to give you an idea of the straightforward needs of each step of the process.

It is important to remember that these are guidelines informed by best practices; you can adapt them to your situation as needed.

### Volunteer Retention & Recognition

Your organization may have just a handful of volunteers or hundreds – one of the most important elements of volunteer management is retention. Retaining volunteers is necessary to ensure consistent program delivery, but that does not necessarily mean your program should never lose volunteers. **Volunteer Retention** goes beyond numbers and has a lot of other factors – including how to motivate volunteers, avoid burnout and be good coaches via traditional and alternative routes.

**Volunteer Recognition** is also an integral aspect of volunteer retention. Recognition can encourage and motivate volunteers to excel in their roles and move into leadership positions in your organization. Contrary to common sector beliefs, recognition can be inexpensive and personal without being time intensive and costly; this workbook will discuss tools and ideas for volunteer recognition.

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#### **YOUR MISSION**

Whenever your organization is engaging volunteers, it's important to remember your organization's mission. It's your goal as a volunteer coordinator, manager, or supervisor to ensure that your volunteers contribute to the mission and goals of your organization in whatever role or capacity they hold. This will make it easier to justify further volunteer involvement and recruitment and to increase their impact across your organization.

## Reframing Retention

### Why do we compare retention and attrition rates?

- A. Maintaining volunteers is easier than recruiting new ones
- B. We can improve retention by hiring only volunteers who can agree to longer commitments
- C. Attrition is a bad number – we need to repeat or grow volunteers
- D. Losing volunteers means our programs are not successful
- E. None of the above

Volunteers leaving your organization does not mean your program is not successful. Remember that volunteer commitment timeframes and retention mean different things to each organization. Instead of focusing on the numbers and worrying about the gaps, measure the impact of their involvement and benefit from the outcomes.

Complete this assessment chart to determine how you currently see volunteer retention in your organization:

Retention Assessment Chart		
Assessment Metric	Example	Response
Average volunteer commitment	<i>Days? Weeks? Months?</i>	
Average rate of return	<i>1 in 3? 1 in 10?</i>	
Most common return reason	<i>Event? Project?</i>	
What information do you report?	<i>Number of volunteers? Volunteer Hours?</i>	
How often do you report?	<i>Quarterly? Annually?</i>	

This doesn't give the clearest picture of what your volunteers actually do and how they impact your organization. Use the information you supplied to think about how you could instead communicate the impact of the volunteers you do have while they are there, instead of focusing on keeping attrition down or ensuring retention.

## Reframing Retention

*Communicating the impact of your volunteers will make it easier to assess and report your retention needs.*

### Some tips and techniques to think about:

- Retention isn't just about keeping volunteers – it's about growing your volunteer program.
- Focus on the successes, outcomes and impacts of volunteers to assess roles and commitments – make sure the positions of your volunteers actually make sense.
- Acknowledge and work with risks by planning for succession of volunteers.
- Encourage volunteer leaders to take on new responsibilities and support other volunteers.
- Look at volunteer outcomes and impact first before length of commitment and/or hours.
- Establish mission-based roles and position descriptions to recruit and develop long-lasting, high-skilled volunteers.
- Minimize conflict by opening flexible growth and transition pathways in your organization.
- Encourage senior management to establish new metrics for reporting, focusing on impact and the stories of volunteers and clients.



### RETENTION VS. ATTRITION

One of the most basic numbers often used to judge volunteer program success is how many volunteers did you keep vs. how many did you lose. It's important to consider that volunteers aren't numbers – they're people who make meaningful contributions to your organizations!

## Motivation and Retention

Understanding volunteer motivation is the first step in recruiting and retaining great volunteers. According to the 2010 Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating, the most common reason that people want to volunteer is to give back to their community. However, there are lots of other reasons that people might want to volunteer, like having the opportunity to gain new skills, get work experience, or make new friends. By thinking about why volunteers want to work with your organization, you can learn a lot about how to keep your volunteers happy and engaged. Here are a few questions to get you started:

*What do volunteers who come to your program say was their initial motivation to volunteer?*

*What factors might be un-motivating to volunteers in your organization?*

*What do you currently do in your program to keep your volunteers motivated?*

## Ten Tips for Preventing Volunteer Burnout

When volunteers have to do stressful, demanding, or emotionally draining work, they run the risk of becoming burnt out. Volunteers who are burnt out might start showing up late or missing shifts, they might become disillusioned with their work or with the organization, and they might become emotionally detached from the clients they serve. Ultimately, burnout can lead to the loss of great volunteers.

### To help your volunteers avoid burn out, follow these ten tips:

1. Provide enough training for your volunteers, including information about how to cope with stressful or emotionally demanding work.
2. Have regular team meetings or debriefing sessions if volunteers are working alone, so that they don't feel isolated or unsupported.
3. Avoid asking the same volunteers to take on new projects again and again. It can be tempting to ask your most reliable and enthusiastic volunteers to take on more work, but you might be encouraging them to over-commit themselves.
4. Encourage your volunteers to take vacations.
5. Check in regularly about your volunteers' workload, and how much time and energy they need to commit to the role to get the work done.
6. Have projects for your volunteers to work on that have an end date, so that they can feel like they are reaching goals instead of feeling like their work is never-ending.
7. Have a policy about taking a leave of absence, so that volunteers who need an extended break can come back to your organization once they've had some time off.
8. Uncertainty and ambiguity can be very stressful. Avoid them by providing a clear position description and by giving your volunteers regular feedback on how they're doing.
9. Ask your volunteers for feedback so that you know what kind of support they need and so they feel like their opinions are valued.
10. Involve your volunteers in making the decisions that affect their work. This will give them some control over what they do in your organization, and help them feel like important and valued members of your team.

## Providing Meaningful Work

There are a few key factors in providing meaningful work to volunteers. By providing meaningful work, volunteers feel more fulfilled and connected to the role and the organization, thus encouraging retention and more successful outcomes. This chart will show you how to provide a meaningful volunteer experience.

<b>Factor: Mission-Based Volunteer Roles</b>	
<i>Why's it important?</i>	<i>What can you do?</i>
Volunteers want to contribute to your cause	Identify link to mission in position description
Volunteers will effectively serve your organization	Communicate the link explicitly
Volunteer roles will be meaningful	Reiterate the importance of roles
<b>Factor: Communicate Impact</b>	
<i>Why's it important?</i>	<i>What can you do?</i>
Helps volunteers understand the importance of their work	Tell the story of your volunteer program
Helps volunteers see the bigger picture	Share results of program evaluations
	Allow volunteers to contribute their ideas
<b>Factor: Volunteer Goals</b>	
<i>Why's it important?</i>	<i>What can you do?</i>
Makes roles personally meaningful	Find the right fit
Increases satisfaction with role	Track progress
	Provide opportunities for advancement



## Applying this to your organization:

Mission-Based Volunteer Roles	
What is my organizations mission?	
Where can I state the volunteer position's link to the mission?	
What does the volunteer do that impacts our work?	
Communicate Impact	
What is the story of my volunteer program?	
What is the bigger picture of our work?	
How can I facilitate volunteers sharing their ideas?	
Volunteer Goals	
How can I collect and track volunteer goals?	
How might the position help them meet their goals?	
What systems do I need in place to track progress and offer advancement opportunities?	

## Adapted Programming

### Volunteer-Led Projects

- High-skilled volunteers might approach your organization with their own ideas for projects
- High-impact, short-term projects that must relate to your organization's mission

### Time-Limited Role

- Ask volunteers for a time commitment of a couple of weeks to a couple of months
- The role can last through program completion; after the volunteer is done, they can always commit to another project!

Having time-limited, high-impact and sometimes volunteer-led roles allow you to have flexible volunteer opportunities that cater to different volunteer needs. High-skilled or professional volunteers often want these kinds of opportunities (and may even suggest them to your organization) since they can still work toward your cause but on a less restrictive timeframe. **Short-term, high-impact projects may affect your retention “bottom-line” but the outcomes outweigh the perceived loss in volunteer engagement.**

When working with high-skilled volunteers throughout the organization, you can anticipate attrition by measuring and diminishing any reliance on these volunteers, especially if they are very time limited and can be unreliable. Establish how much of yours or any other staff person's attention would be required for volunteer-led projects and determine if it's worth it. Also establish a back-up plan for high-impact projects; if the volunteer leaves, will the project continue? This should be part of your succession planning.

### EXAMPLES

Volunteers might suggest fundraising projects that are self-contained, community-engaging art projects within a specific space or timeframe or even outreach projects separate from your standard communications or marketing approach. Embrace these ideas and let your volunteer's energy flow—as long as the projects fit with the mission of your organization.

## Volunteer Succession Planning Tool

Succession planning can be a great way to make sure that your volunteer program is never left without any experienced volunteers who can fill roles that require special expertise and leadership skills. Identify newer volunteers who might one day be a good fit for a more demanding role, and make sure that those volunteers are being trained or mentored to be able to take on more responsibility. That way, you can ensure that you'll always have people ready to step up when one of your volunteers needs to move on.

What are your succession planning strategies? Does anything keep you from being able to use succession planning? Fill out the table below to start to think about how you can increase succession planning in your volunteer program.

What we do currently to ensure retention and succession	Barriers to succession currently in our program	What we can do to lessen barriers
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.

## Providing & Understanding Effective Recognition

### Why recognize volunteers?

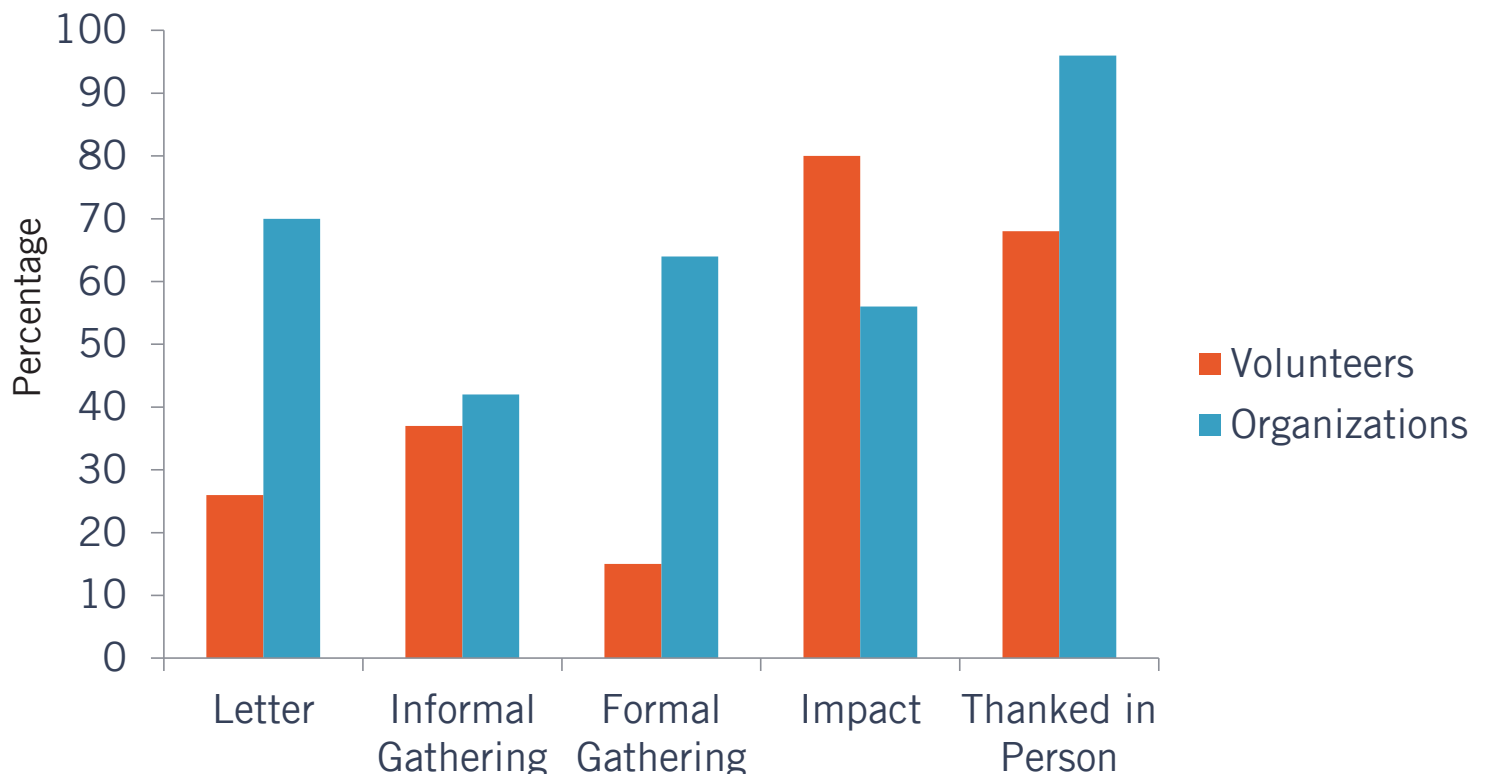
Recognizing the contributions of your volunteers is one of the most important things you can do to increase retention in your volunteer program. Volunteers who feel underappreciated or unnoticed are more likely to move on from your organization. If the staff members who supervise volunteers don't seem to value their work, it suggests that their contribution to your organization isn't meaningful. This can lead to a lack of commitment and low motivation, and eventually to the loss of good volunteers.

By regularly recognizing volunteer contributions in a meaningful way, you're showing your volunteers that they're valued, that the time and effort they contribute to your organization is appreciated, and that they're considered integral members of your team.

**Recognition should be meaningful to the volunteer, honest and sincere and delivered in a timely way.**

### What kind of recognition do volunteers want?

In Volunteer Canada's 2013 Volunteer Recognition Study, recognition practices of organizations do not currently align with the recognition preferences of volunteers.



## How do you Recognize? Audit Tool

Use this tool to get an idea of how you're currently recognizing your volunteers and if there are ways you can expand your recognition – and ensure volunteers are satisfied in their roles.

### Part 1 - How do you recognize volunteers?

Events		
Volunteer Appreciation Gala/Dinner/Banquet	Yes	No
Award Ceremony	Yes	No
Annual Meeting/Conference	Yes	No
Informal Activity	Yes	No
Formal		
Letters	Yes	No
Cards/Notes	Yes	No
Certificate/Pin/Award	Yes	No
Informal		
Saying thank you in person	Yes	No
Telling volunteers about impact	Yes	No
Emails/calls/texts saying thanks	Yes	No
Anything else?		

### Part 2 - How do you assess recognition success/satisfaction?

Do you assess volunteer satisfaction?
Do you assess the success of your recognition?
How do you obtain feedback from volunteers about recognition practices?
How do you communicate changes to recognition practices to volunteers?

### Part 3 - Expanding Recognition

*Now take a look at what you currently do to recognize volunteers, and the feedback your volunteers give you about recognition.*

Are there any gaps in what you do vs. what your volunteers want?

*TIP: Try to shrink that gap by offering the most popular type of recognition that isn't already in your repertoire.*

What type of recognition do your volunteers find most meaningful?

*TIP: Focus most of your energy (and budget) on that.*

Do your volunteers find any of your current recognition practices to be less meaningful or rewarding than others?

*TIP: If so, consider replacing them with something new.*

Is communicating impact already a regular part of your recognition?

*TIP: If not, try integrating it into other forms of recognition, like including impact statements in your yearly thank-you cards or talking about your program's impact at your volunteer banquet.*



### RETHINKING RETENTION

Rethinking recognition can help breathe new life into your volunteer program and encourage greater retention AND new volunteers to join your organization. Don't be afraid of new ideas, especially when it comes to appreciating volunteers.

## Volunteer Recognition Worksheet

### Formal Recognition

Choose one way that you will formally recognize volunteer contributions this year. Describe it briefly below:

What could you do to include an impact statement in this type of recognition?

Choose a second way that you will formally recognize volunteer contributions this year. Describe it briefly below:

What could you do to include an impact statement in this type of recognition?

**What types of volunteer motivation do these recognition activities target?**

- Making a contribution to the community (93% of volunteers)
- Using skills and experience (78% of volunteers)
- Personally affected by the cause (59% of volunteers)
- Exploring personal strengths (48% of volunteers)
- Because friends volunteer (48% of volunteers)
- Networking with others (46% of volunteers)
- Improving job opportunities (22% of volunteers)
- Fulfilling religious beliefs (21% of volunteers)
- Other:

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## Volunteer Recognition Worksheet

### Informal Recognition

Choose one way that you will informally recognize volunteer contributions this year. Describe it briefly below:

What could you do to include an impact statement in this type of recognition?

Choose a second way that you will informally recognize volunteer contributions this year. Describe it briefly below:

What could you do to include an impact statement in this type of recognition?

**What types of volunteer motivation do these recognition activities target?**

- Making a contribution to the community (93% of volunteers)
- Using skills and experience (78% of volunteers)
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- Networking with others (46% of volunteers)
- Improving job opportunities (22% of volunteers)
- Fulfilling religious beliefs (21% of volunteers)
- Other:

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## Recognition Ideas

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Formal Events</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awards event</li> <li>• End-of-year party</li> <li>• Banquet/gala</li> <li>• Community presentation</li> <li>• Annual meeting</li> <li>• Volunteer spotlight event</li> <li>• Service hours/months/years recognition</li> <li>• Volunteer recognition week</li> <li>• Press conference featuring political figures</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Informal Events</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Casual meal – barbecue, potluck</li> <li>• Entertainment – movie, bowling, sports</li> <li>• Monthly get-togethers</li> <li>• Game night, coffee night</li> <li>• Impact event – with community</li> <li>• Every week is volunteer recognition week!</li> <li>• Lunch with volunteers</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Giveaways</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marketing collateral</li> <li>• Cards/letters/notes</li> <li>• Messages of support (bottle, jar, envelopes)</li> <li>• Small awards</li> <li>• Exclusive coupons/promotions</li> <li>• Gift cards/financial gifts</li> <li>• Charitable donations</li> <li>• Organization-relevant gifts (bookmarks, seed packet, journals, tote bags)</li> <li>• Voucher for spa</li> <li>• Scrapbook</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Contribution/Community Projects</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital art project (Prezi, Conceptboard)</li> <li>• Physical art project (chart paper, decorating)/ Mural</li> <li>• Word cloud/sound cloud</li> <li>• Weekly mail-out/e-mail out</li> <li>• Impact-driven projects (explore and share volunteer impact)</li> <li>• eCard pay-it-forward</li> <li>• Volunteer t-shirt design contest</li> </ul>

## MAKING RECOGNITION MEANINGFUL

No matter how you recognize your volunteers, make sure it's anything but generic! Link your recognition to your mission, your work and the volunteers themselves – get to know them and find out what would make them happy.



# Volunteer Toronto

## Volunteer Retention & Recognition

### Resource Guide & Workbook

## Next Steps

To continue your volunteer management journey, there are a number of other workbooks created by Volunteer Toronto to assist you every step of the way:

### Basic

- Planning, Recruiting & Selecting
- Training, Supervising & Supporting
- Evaluating, Retaining & Developing
- Engaging Group Volunteers
- Professional Development for Managers of Volunteers

### Intermediate

- Planning for Volunteer Involvement
- Volunteer Recruitment
- Volunteer Selection
- Training & Orientation

### Advanced

- Giving Volunteers Feedback
- Accessibility and the AODA

Check out our **Online Learning Centre** for a variety of courses to further enhance your learning and improve your practice - go to [volunteertoronto.ca/?page=OnlineLearning](http://volunteertoronto.ca/?page=OnlineLearning)

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