

Sorry, But Who Cares?

Blog
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In June, Stats Canada released the [Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating](#) (CSGVP). *Side note: as a reformed American, I just love the name of this federal office, like it's "all stats on all subjects all the time". A smorgasbord of information - love it! I don't know if the US has one, but they should.*

This report assesses volunteerism across Canada and also breaks those stats down into provincial overviews. And I have to note that the statistics we're discussing are based on data collected in 2007. Not sure what that time lag is about in this age of real-time information, but I digress. Overall, the numbers are neither exciting nor revolutionary (sorry). 12.5 million Canadians volunteer - 46% of us. That's up from 45% in the 2004 study. If you count informal volunteering, that percentage increases to 84% - so great work raking your neighbour's leaves and carrying grocery bags for Mrs. Headley, too. Hours volunteered didn't change much, either. The average volunteer gives 166 hours per year (versus 168 in 2004). Then we get to provincial stats. Reader's Digest version for BC? The "bad news" is the decrease in overall hours contributed by volunteers - from 199 in 2004 to 172 in 2007. Otherwise, the report is largely uninteresting in its lack of change. *Another side note: There is a good bit of interesting data about demographics of volunteers, but that's not my focus here today.*

So now I'm going to get down to it and question what this survey is all about.

First, let's talk about volunteer hours. Who cares?!? Who cares how long we did it for - as long as we got the job done? If I'm a board chair, and cut down our monthly meetings to 1.5 hours from 2 by increasing the efficiency of our work and focusing only on issues relevant to board-level conversation - I say GREAT.

Measuring hours is like comparing how quickly I can fix a computer to how quickly someone who actually knows how to fix computers does it. **It tells us absolutely NOTHING about what work was done.** And in the case of *me* fixing a computer, how much work then needed to be redone unnecessarily. Someone could volunteer 1,000 hours and accomplish nothing - except that the stats would look good. It's hard for me to get excited about that. So instead of measuring how many hours your volunteers work with you, why don't you measure what impact they had on your organization, your clients and your mission?

Now let's talk about number of volunteers. I do think this is important. I'm a personal believer that we all owe each other something, and contributing to civil society through informal or formal volunteering is important. So let's encourage everyone to volunteer and get excited when that number is high.

But I don't think we can stop there. 30 volunteers sitting around re-painting one fence **says absolutely NOTHING about what work was done.** And we've all been at those team volunteering events, right? I'm reminded of "how many _____ does it take to screw in a light bulb" jokes. Let's talk about impact and not just numbers. I'd rather have one volunteer with an incredible impact on my organization than 50 with almost no impact. It might mess up the stats, but if it gets me closer to delivering mission, that's where I want to be. Isn't that where we all want to be?

So I'm officially starting my list of what Stats Can could be measuring. And until they do it, perhaps we can measure these things ourselves at our organizations:

- Will you volunteer again at all?
- Will you volunteer again with the same organization?
- Will you volunteer again in the same volunteer role?
- Will you encourage your children to volunteer?
- Did you tell your friends, family or coworkers about your volunteer role/s?
- Have you become an informal advocate on behalf of the organization for which you volunteered?
- Have you become an informal advocate on behalf of the cause for which you volunteered?
- How did your volunteer work contribute to the mission of the organization?
- And for the organizations - what did volunteers contribute to your mission?

Our volunteers should be putting their personal passion and individual expertise to use for fulfilling our missions. How long that takes them, or how many of them it takes, just isn't my biggest concern. If volunteers are engaged well, getting something out of their experience, and willing to come back again - then we've succeeded. Period.

How do you think we could measure successful volunteer engagement?