

# VALUE OF VOLUNTEERING

Does it really help in career development?  
Or is it just a waste of time?

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**Y**ou've heard it a thousand times — the best way to add Canadian experience to your resumé is to volunteer.

"What? Give my experience and labour away for free when I'm struggling financially and professionally to settle into Canada?"

That's a question that many newcomers will ask when they receive this common piece of career advice. While some newcomers have no issues with the idea of volunteering for Canadian work experience, many question how working for free can help them get ahead.

Stories of employers taking advantage of volunteers' generosity, and highly trained professionals spending hours performing tedious administrative tasks well below their skill level are enough to deter many from seeking out such positions. But employment professionals say finding volunteer opportunities that suit both personal and professional needs can result in hands-on training, which can lead to a paid position, as well as a network of contacts, soft skills development and integration into the Canadian society at large (a society that highly values volunteerism).

"But not all volunteering helps," says Silvia Di Blasio, an employment counsellor with Skills Connect for Immigrants program at the Immigrant Services Society of B.C. Di Blasio advises clients to pursue strategic volunteering opportunities.

"Strategic volunteering is volunteering with a goal in mind," explains Di Blasio. Whether your goal is to improve your English, practise your trade, earn local references or understand Canadian workplace culture, clarifying why you want to volunteer is the first step toward having a successful and positive volunteer experience.

## For cultural integration

At its simplest, volunteering can provide newcomers with the opportunity to improve language skills, learn about Canadian culture and meet new friends. Yuliana Jaw emigrated from Indonesia in 2009 and began volunteering at Gilmore Community School in Burnaby, where her son is now a Grade 2 student. "I did whatever my son's teacher asked me to do such as sharpening the pencils, cutting artwork paper, refilling painting ink, cleaning brushes and helping on field trips," says Jaw.

Her volunteer position not only allowed her to learn about the Canadian education system and keep an eye on her son's academic progress, the once-a-week classroom experience helped her to improve her English and grow as a new Canadian. "The teacher is not only my son's teacher, but she has also become my teacher," says Jaw.

The opportunity to meet other parents and volunteers also broadened Jaw's social circle and made her feel more connected to her new country. "Having new friends made me forget about



missing friends from my country [and made me] less lonely. I feel my life is now colourful," she says.

## For work experience

Jaw's experience was a positive one for her, but the likelihood that such community-based volunteering would help an immigrant in his or her career search is questionable. In her work as an employment counsellor, Di

Blasio meets many newcomers who reject volunteering as a job search strategy entirely, arguing that giving away labour for free is a backward formula for getting ahead.

While Di Blasio admits she too, had these feelings when she first emigrated from Venezuela she has become an advocate of volunteering as a strategic step in a newcomer's resumé building

agenda. But she advises that volunteering with the goal of attaining work experience only works if the experience is related to the field in which the individual wants to work.

For example, an individual looking to work in the pharmaceutical industry might seek out a volunteer position in a hospital or a long-term care home that could provide related experience in dealing

You can also look at how you can get involved on an organization's board of directors (coveted volunteer positions for any Canadian). All of this can be then added to your resumé as valid experience.

#### For training and development

With a master's degree in environmental management, Linda Bakker immigrated to Canada from the Netherlands in 2006.

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with patients and medical professionals. “Even when the volunteering may not be exactly in the same field, it can still be strategic if the jobseeker focuses on transferrable skills,” says Di Blasio. The key to finding a strategic volunteer position is to research and consider how the position will impact long-term career goals.

In another example, you could offer up your expert services to a not-for-profit organization you believe in. Canada has a large not-for-profit sector, with organizations ranging in themes from the environment to community services. Many of these organizations would be happy to receive help in everything from marketing to technology to accounting. If you're a marketing specialist, offer to handle their social media or e-newsletter on a volunteer, freelance basis. A web designer? Offer to revamp the organization's website. Such experience could even lead to some paid freelance work, further adding to your Canadian experience.

She immediately began researching organizations where she could gain useful experience to help in her career pursuits. She began working as an animal care volunteer with the Wildlife Rescue Association. While cleaning cages, doing laundry and food preparation may not have been her dream job, Bakker felt the experience could translate into bigger things down the road — and she was right. “I never asked to do more than the dirty work, but they saw my potential and trained me in different areas,” says Bakker.

An oil spill in Burnaby opened the door for Bakker to contribute more. “When I got more experience, I was trained to feed nestling and fledging birds in the summer,” she says, and was later trained to do medical tasks including daily checkups and administering medication.

After two years, Bakker received her permanent residence status and was hired the very next day as a full-time wildlife rehabilitator. “Now, I am the team leader of Wildlife Rehabilitation. I never thought I would be in

## COMMON VOLUNTEER COMPLAINTS

While some volunteer experiences can lead to success stories, such as Linda Bakker's, not all volunteers experience such positive rewards for their work. Here's a look at some common complaints about volunteerism and how to avoid them.

### “They asked too much of me.”

Lily Rodina thought she was being strategic when she volunteered her time at a neighbourhood yoga studio. “I thought volunteering and maybe later receiving a paid position at the studio would help me get certified one day,” says Rodina. Her experience didn't turn out as she'd hoped, thanks to demanding staff members who asked more of her than she had agreed to. Rodina quit after four shifts.

Employment counsellor Silvia Di Blasio says negative experiences such as Rodina's are not uncommon, but the best way to avoid them is to do your research and making sure you, your supervisor and other staff members understand your role as a volunteer. “Most of these negative volunteer experiences come about as a result of not being clear on expectations,” says Di Blasio.

### “Volunteering is a waste of my time.”

Di Blasio admits she once felt companies who employed volunteers were taking advantage of free labour without giving much back in return; however, she came to recognize that her own cultural biases were preventing her from seeing the benefits volunteering could provide.

“When you come from a country where volunteering is rare, you don't understand the concept. You think it's suspicious that you're being asked to provide your time and skills without getting anything in return. Accepting that volunteering is a way of building community for many Canadians is part of the process of integrating into this wonderful country,” she says. One way to feel valued as a volunteer is to ask for small tokens of compensation, such as bus tickets or a paid lunch, if you're working a long shift.

### “I volunteered and didn't even receive a reference.”

Most newcomers seek out volunteer opportunities with the hopes of receiving a reference letter, which can then be used to apply for paid work. “Many organizations have a minimum of time and expectations set in order to provide references, so it is important to clarify this from the beginning to avoid surprises and prevent abuse,” says Di Blasio, who made this mistake herself, leaving a volunteer position after four months and being denied a reference letter because the minimum time commitment was six months. “It upset me at that time, but later I understood that it was actually my fault,” she says.

Finding the right volunteer position can be as challenging as searching for a job, but taking the time to clarify your goals and find the right opportunity can yield positive results.

this position when I started volunteering,” she says.

Bakker advises others to make the most of volunteer opportunities by showing off their strengths as a potential employee and treating the position as though it were a paying job.

“Being committed and reliable is very important. You want them to know they can depend on you,” she says. While starting at the bottom of the ladder may not seem an appealing prospect for many, Bakker says she is an example that it can pay off.

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