

# Case Study:

# Maintaining Community

## Decision-Making Process for Change

### Harnessing Experienced Volunteers to Maintain Community Connection

Harbourfront Centre (HC), located on Toronto's waterfront, is an innovative non-profit cultural organization that creates events and activities to enliven, educate, and entertain a diverse public.

In 2019, 310 volunteers actively participated in various roles, including front of house at live events, fundraising, marketing, and school program support, contributing a total of 13,053 hours. Before the pandemic, HC Manager of Volunteer Resources, Saskia Rinkoff, saw a new peak of individuals engaged with 480 active volunteers—then in March 2020, all HC services were effectively shutdown. It became necessary to think of new ways to keep her pool of diverse and skilled volunteers connected.

Saskia's first step was surveying her volunteer list, with dedicated phone calls, to assess needs and skills. Like many organizations HC has a segment of older volunteers, many reported they missed the social aspects of volunteering. HC also learned volunteers living in nearby lake front condos missed their community.

### More than 190 volunteers have been re-engaged or reconnected with through new remote programs

By harnessing the power of more experienced volunteers, Saskia was able to develop new outreach programs to address the social isolation volunteers felt. Like many organizations, HC has a core group of experienced volunteers, who wanted to help in any way they could.



*"I thought, why don't I get my trusted volunteers to help me with reaching out? We've had a really good response – people love it because there's an element of surprise, you never know which volunteer will be contacting you or hosting the next themed Zoom meeting."*

— Saskia Rinkoff, Manager, Volunteer Resources at Harbourfront Centre



Conduct surveys with volunteers and staff teams to assess needs, capture skillsets, and get buy in



Assess survey responses for program opportunities and learn from other success stories:  
[info.volunteertoronto.ca/LearningLibrary](https://info.volunteertoronto.ca/LearningLibrary)



Develop a remote engagement framework that meets community needs—have staff and leadership teams review the plan



Audit safety and inclusion policies and procedures, update them accordingly



Develop new volunteer role descriptions, screening, and training for staff teams and supervisors to approve



Communicate ongoing expectations for new or revised roles and hold volunteers and staff accountable

## Meeting Different Needs

Through her original surveying, Saskia realized she could ask experienced and skilled volunteers to help with two different volunteer engagement programs:

### Building Community to Help During COVID-19 Response

To address the isolation many HC community members felt, Saskia created a series of 'check-in' shifts, available over three times slots where experienced volunteer assistants would reach out through email, phone, or Zoom calls to isolated volunteers based on their preferred method. It's important that both mentors and recipients receive email reminders before each appointment. Saskia also provides assistants with a list of conversation starter questions and follow-up support in case of any issues.

### Testing Engagement Strategies to Share Your Mission

Saskia began to think of other programs to engage volunteers missing the cultural exposure volunteering with HC has always provided. She decided to host themed Zoom meetings, featuring in-house staff or volunteer expertise. One example was the 'Blind Contour Portraits Workshop'. A staff person who taught art projects to school-groups, was enlisted to guide volunteers through creating a self-portrait. Participants were provided with a list of supplies and the instructor's bio in advance.

Other themed events include workshops on natural dyes, creative writing, dance, and even a book club collaboration between Toronto International Festival of Authors staff and volunteers. Excited with the responses from the virtual events, Saskia knows that volunteers want to continue to engage with HC as an important community in their lives.



*Blind Contour Portrait from themed Zoom meeting to engage volunteers*

### Essential Technologies

- ▶ Password-protected [Zoom](#) technology (free account)

### Reflections on HC's Pandemic Volunteer Response

Looking back, Saskia can see that a survey asking staff about their volunteer needs, just as the pandemic began, was too soon. But now that staff are seeking programing alternatives, the conversation is opening up, and staff are interested in trying their program ideas on willing volunteers. Read below for Saskia's thoughts on the development of HC programs for 2020-2021:

*"I want to get thinking about alternatives, and not just about the volunteer program. We don't know what the winter months will bring and volunteers are a great way to test out new program ideas while keeping them connected to your organization."*

## Quick Reference: Lessons Learned

- ▶ Remember to think about both the organization's and volunteer's needs for the short and long-term
- ▶ Remember that not everyone feels comfortable using Zoom or technology, try to include alternative communications options with new programs
- ▶ Offering IT tutorials to volunteers can improve remote engagement and program options
- ▶ Give volunteers opportunities to build their skills
- ▶ Develop roles that could be continued post-pandemic to supplement regular on-site activities

### Exploring Partnerships for Community Engagement

In reflecting on HC's volunteer program, the needs of volunteers and their skills, Saskia also began to look beyond her own organization for meaningful solutions.

HC has leveraged their partnership with CultureLink, a settlement and immigration organization in Toronto, to arrange remote conversation circles with Canadian newcomers. Saskia recognizes that sometimes two organizations can combine forces and accomplish more together to meet the needs of both their clients and volunteers alike.

**Thank you Saskia and the HC volunteer community  
for being there for each other!**

**Volunteer  
toronto**