



Canadian Olympic School Program **Case Study**



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# VOLUNTEERISM and the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games

Careers, Personal Planning, Leadership, Health and Physical Education



[www.olympicschool.ca](http://www.olympicschool.ca)

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Operating a successful Olympic Winter Games requires an army of people. With hundreds of thousands of spectators, and thousands of athletes, coaches and media arriving at the Vancouver 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, it was obvious very early on that much of the required workforce would need to be volunteers.

“The Olympic Games wouldn’t happen if not for the volunteers,” emphasizes Donna Wilson, the Executive Vice President of Human Resources at the Vancouver Olympic Organizing Committee (VANOC). “Volunteers run the event. They are absolutely integral to the success of the Games. There was simply no way that VANOC could have afforded to have a completely paid workforce.”

In fact, VANOC had over 22,000 volunteers helping to stage the Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games. But becoming a volunteer wasn’t a case of just saying you could help out. Selection to be a volunteer was quite rigorous, and most

who applied did not meet the criteria. Over 80,000 people from around the world applied to volunteer at the Games, and before you were selected you had to undergo an interview and orientation session.

“Our values were team, trust, creativity, sustainability and excellence, and we wanted to make sure that our volunteers shared these values,” explains Wilson. “We decided very early on to give our volunteers authority to manage and make decisions. So we needed to make sure that the volunteer was a good fit.”

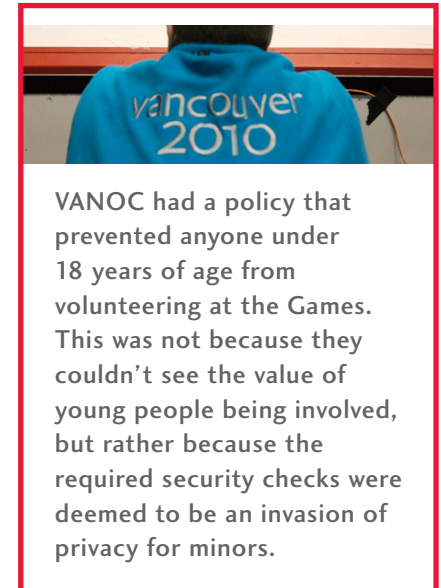
Not all Olympic Organizing Committees or countries entrust their volunteers with such a level of responsibility. However, Canada has had great success with this approach during past hosting experiences at Olympic Games, Pan American Games and other international sporting events.

“We were attracting quality people across the board,” states Allen Vansen, the Vice President of Workforce Operations. “This

came down to the vision that we put out there, and the fact that we were looking for people with passion and commitment. Most of the positions were not requiring specific knowledge or skills, but just good solid people. We attracted people who we could trust.”

Volunteers were given hours of pre-event training. Everyone was given a four and a half hour general orientation that provided an overview of the Olympic Movement and VANOC’s values. An additional five hours of service excellence training was then provided. Those in supervising positions were also required to take a specific leadership module.

“We wanted to make sure that all of the volunteers knew that their number one job was to help our customers,” says Wilson. “I think that this is one of the reasons that the ‘blue coats’ (the name given to the volunteers that referred to their blue uniforms) were renowned for being so helpful.”





Some jobs required specific training in languages, diplomatic skills or other special abilities, and this could add up to more than 100 hours of training. Many of the volunteers either took their holidays to volunteer or arranged with their employers to take a leave without pay. The demands were heavy, as volunteers had to commit to working full time for the whole duration of the Games.

“Some of our volunteers had to be bussed up to Whistler every morning. They had to get up at 3 am in order to be loaded onto their bus for the two hour drive to their venues,” recalls Wilson. “They were more valuable to us than paid staff as they weren’t required to be there. They were doing this because they wanted to help us host a successful Games.”

VANOC went out of its way to treat these volunteers well. They were given special recognition pins, a free breakfast every morning, videos, and snacks for the bus. Like all of the volunteers, they were provided with a complete uniform, and were eligible for special recognition

incentives like tickets to the Opening Ceremony rehearsals and celebrations.

Most of all, the volunteers had the opportunity to learn technical and interpersonal skills, network with other volunteers, and make lasting friendships. One of the greatest benefits of volunteering is that they got a chance to develop skills that they might not normally get to learn. For those looking to advance their professional careers, these skills could be highlighted on their resume.

Not all of VANOC’s volunteers worked out. Vansen recalls that there were a few volunteers who had to be let go because they couldn’t work well with their supervisors or fellow volunteers.

“Some couldn’t handle the frustrations of repeated security checks and took it out on others.”

Being a good volunteer meant being adaptable to the sometimes stressful demands of the Games environment. However, problems with volunteers were

rare. Most were genuinely interested in helping host a successful Winter Games, and were caught up in the magic of the experience. They retained a positive outlook and demeanour with the public and with their team. In fact, the VANOC “blue coats” were appreciated by both local and international visitors for their friendly and welcoming approach.

“I visited a number of venues during the Games and the loudest spectator applause always came when the announcers asked the spectators to thank the volunteers. It was quite something to see,” recalls Vansen.

However the final words of thanks came at the very end of the Games. In his closing speech, International Olympic Committee President, Jacques Rogge, extended a special word of appreciation.

“Thank you to the thousands of marvelous volunteers. Your competency, your kindness and your smiles are worthy of a gold medal!”

Indeed, it was this army of volunteers who made the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games a resounding success.

Using the VANOC Values Assessment, determine if your values match their organizational values. Go to [www.olympschool.ca/library](http://www.olympschool.ca/library) under Volunteerism in the Research Centre to find the VANOC Values Assessment.





## Case Questions

1. Explain why you believe that VANOC placed their focus on the values of their volunteers as opposed to the applicant's skills.
2. Visit London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games website ([www.London2012.com](http://www.London2012.com)) and find a volunteer job that would interest you. Create a cover letter for this job.
3. What are five things that you can do to maximize the benefits you can gain from volunteering.



### JUST BE YOURSELF

"Just be yourself," advised Vansen.

"Be confident in your preparation. There will be some things you are asked to do that aren't very flashy, but hold yourself to your commitment and keep a good attitude."

Remember that you are a key part of the team, so enjoy the success of the event and remember to have some fun. Take every opportunity available to step beyond your comfort zone and try out a new skill.

Maximize the benefits of your volunteer experience by making as many friends as possible and keeping in touch with people afterwards through social networking. You never know if your volunteer experience will lead to a paid position.





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## Case Extensions

Consider extending the case study by including a research component.

1. Research some of the best practices for recruiting volunteers. Draft a two page volunteer recruitment plan for the Toronto 2015 Pan/Parapan American Games.
2. How do the numbers of volunteers for Vancouver 2010 compare with the numbers of volunteers at the past four Olympic and Olympic Winter Games? How do they compare with the number of volunteers from the recent FIFA World Cup? Why do you think there is such a variation?

Incorporate writing skills by having the students write a persuasive paragraph that argues for or against these statements.

1. Volunteer experience can be more helpful to starting your career than paid employment.
2. In terms of advancing your career, volunteering is only as effective as you decide to make it.

## Case Projects

The following case projects are more lengthy, but will allow your students to examine the topic in more depth.

1. You have been hired by the Toronto 2015 Pan American Games to write a volunteer recruitment brochure. Produce a brochure that emphasizes the benefits of volunteering, while communicating what type of volunteers the Games are looking to hire.
2. Draft a 3 page volunteer manual for the Toronto 2015 Pan/Parapan American Games. Be sure to explain what is expected of volunteers and emphasize what they should do to maximize their volunteer experience

## SUPPORT RESOURCES

Visit [www.olympschool.ca/library](http://www.olympschool.ca/library) under Volunteerism in the Research Centre for the following resources:

1. London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games
2. VANOC Values Assessment
3. Volunteering- How to find the best fit
4. Volunteer work and your career
5. The changing face of volunteerism
6. Readiness Quiz





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