Recent Immigrants as an "Alternate Civic Core"
How VCN Provides Internet Services and Canadian Experiences

Diane Dechief
Dept. of Communication Studies, Concordia University

October 2005

CRACIN Working Paper No. 8

www.cracin.ca
About CRACIN

The Canadian Research Alliance for Community Innovation and Networking (CRACIN) is a four-year partnership between community informatics researchers, community networking practitioners and federal government policy specialists, funded by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). CRACIN brings together researchers and practitioners from across Canada, and internationally, to undertake case studies and thematic research on the enabling uses of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) by communities, and to investigate Canada’s national programs and policies for promoting the development and public accessibility of digital networks, applications and services.

CRACIN Working Paper Series Editor: Graham Longford, Post-doctoral Research Fellow, Faculty of Information Studies, University of Toronto

Suggested citation:


For further information or to order hard copies of CRACIN materials, contact:

Project Administrator
Faculty of Information Studies
University of Toronto
140 St. George Street, Rm 652
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G6
Phone: (416) 978-4662
Fax: (416) 971-1399
Email: cracin@fis.utoronto.ca
Web: www.cracin.ca
Introduction

Vancouver Community Network (VCN) is a charitable internet service provider offering opportunities to contribute to VCN’s operations in a volunteer capacity. Nearly all of VCN’s volunteers are information and communication technology (ICT) professionals—or students with career goals in that field—and more than 60% have immigrated to Canada in the past five years. As newcomer-volunteers search for full-time employment commensurate with their skills, they volunteer as Technical Help Desk Support, Internet Instructors, Local Area Network Support, or Language Portal Developers. By doing so, newcomers interact with one another and with VCN’s members in ways that increase social capital and contribute to social inclusion. Assisting in the network’s mandate of providing opportunities for online participation creates openings for volunteers to meet face-to-face, share information, and work with network members from diverse cultural backgrounds and varied socio-economic circumstances.

While it is the volunteers’ own efforts and initiative that bring them to VCN, their collective contributions are important to the success of VCN’s internet service provision and additional member services. Working toward these goals allows newcomers to experience civic participation and community-oriented learning, particularly in relation to ICT work skills. Based on qualitative and quantitative research, this is an examination of how human and social capital is built at VCN, and how it contributes to social inclusion and integration for immigrant-volunteers.

Immigration and Economics

In Canada, immigration and the economy are functionally intertwined. Because of declining birthrates and an aging population “immigration is being seen, increasingly, as necessary for economic growth and well-being” (Trolley 2003, 1). Based on their reasons for immigration, newcomers to Canada are categorized into three classes: refugee, family, and economic. The economic class is separated into categories determined by potential contributions to the economy. Many of VCN’s volunteers have come to Canada as part of the Skilled Worker Class, defined by the Immigrant and Refugee Protection Act (2002) as those applicants “who may become permanent residents on the basis of their ability to become economically established in Canada” (Trolley 2003, 1). The economic achievements of immigrants—both recent and longer-settled—are measured by the federal government. As context for this study, it is important to consider some of these statistics.

Schellenberg and Hou estimate that, “Between 1991 and 2000, 2.2 million immigrants were admitted to Canada—the highest intake in any decade over the past 100 years” (2005, 49). By 2001, with the exception of Miami and Toronto, Vancouver was home to a higher proportion of foreign-born than most major cities throughout the world (Justus 2004, 44). Through the recent past, Vancouver’s immigrant population has “grown at a considerably faster pace than its Canadian-born population” and consequently, in 2001, “almost 739,000 persons born outside of Canada were living in Canada, representing 38% of Vancouver’s population” (Justus, 43).

In the past, immigrants have experienced “difficulties getting established in the workforce when they first arrive in their host country, but [have] overcome these difficulties and obtain[ed]
earnings comparable to those of domestic-born workers as time passes” (Schellenberg & Hou, 49). Unfortunately, for immigrants who arrived in Canada since the 1980s, this trend has not continued.

According to Statistics Canada, four related factors underlie “the deteriorating labour market outcomes of immigrants” (Schellenberg & Hou, 49). First, there has been a shift in source countries from “Western” cultures including Europe and the United States. Now China, India, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Sri Lanka comprise the top five countries that newcomers emigrate from and increased challenges exist due to differences in language and culture, as well as discrimination (49-50). Second, “declining returns to foreign experience and foreign education” means that degrees and experience attained in these recent source countries are not recognized on the same basis as degrees and experience from Western countries. Third, through the 1980s and 1990s “new entrants—including young people, people returning to work and recent immigrants—to the Canadian job market have experienced deteriorating employment outcomes” (50). And last, the education levels of Canadian-born individuals have increased dramatically in the past 25 years. The Statistics Canada report suggests that “in such a competitive market, even marginal differences in educational quality, language or communication skills, or cultural norms could have an impact on employment outcomes” (Schellenberg & Hou, 50).

The impacts of these and other factors are statistically evident. Three-quarters of recent immigrants settled in the urban centres of Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver. In 2001, in both Toronto and Vancouver, recent immigrants accounted for 17% of the total population, but composed 32% of the low-income population (51). Between 1984 and 1999, the wealth of Canadian-born families increased by 37% but for immigrant families who had been in Canada for less than a decade, wealth decreased by 16% (Schellenberg & Hou, 51). Results of a survey of immigrants in Vancouver who had been in Canada since 1991, demonstrate that nearly 40% experienced problems entering the labour market, and half “believed that their difficulties were the result of discrimination” (Hiebert 2003, 29).

Given these circumstances, what is a newcomer’s best strategy for successful settlement? Acknowledging that most newcomers’ key goal is to support oneself and one’s family, the findings described in this study suggest that time and effort exerted in civic participation and community formation may be vital for achieving economic success. For many newcomers with ICT expertise, VCN has provided opportunities to expand human capital in a Canadian context while building social capital in a culturally-diverse setting.

Description of Research

Recent scholarship theorizes relationships between social capital, social inclusion and the experiences of newcomers to Canada (in 2005: Caidi & Allard, Kunz, Schellenberg & Hou, Galabuzi, in 2004: Justus, Doody, Quan-Haase &Wellman, in 2003: Biles & Burstein, Ruddick, Sweetman, Trolley, Frith). These scholars provide insights beneficial to understanding what takes place in a location as dynamic and diverse as VCN’s headquarters. VCN volunteers and coordinators are based in a large senior citizen’s centre located at 411 Dunsmuir, one block from the Vancouver Public Library and equidistant from Vancouver Community College. Chinatown
is not far away, nor are the amenities of the downtown core. While the streets near the 411 Seniors' Centre are diverse and busy, they pale in comparison to what takes place within the building. VCN occupies one narrow side of the third floor and many neighbouring organizations fill the cubicles nearby. As the cafeteria and second-hand shop do business on the main floor, people—mostly seniors—are active throughout the building, taking dance lessons, playing ping pong, practicing English, and learning to use computers. Conducting research in such a busy space requires organization and flexibility. However, data collected while visiting VCN and learning about the network’s activities from its volunteers and coordinators has proven to be rich fodder for seeing case-in-point examples of how and where social capital and social inclusion are fostered.

Interviews with nine VCN volunteers conducted in March 2005 provide the qualitative research component of this project. Conversations were held with individuals who had immigrated to Canada in the past five years and who were at the time, current or past contributors to VCN in the volunteer roles named earlier. During our one-on-one meetings, we discussed the newcomers’ reasons for volunteering, what they see as benefits of their experiences, and how they look for information. An analysis of these conversations is found throughout the pages that follow. I describe how civic participation at VCN has augmented human capital for individual volunteers while it has simultaneously increased social capital within the network.

Completed in July 2005, the quantitative research component of this project contextualizes and increases the pertinence of the insights gleaned from earlier interviews. Fieldwork involved collecting or perusing three data sources of varying sample size and time periods:

1) Survey of current and past volunteers
2) Collection of volunteers’ resumes
3) Database of online applications

Each of these data sets provides evidence of how many people have been involved with VCN in a volunteer capacity, and how many of these people were recent immigrants. While none of the data can be considered longitudinal, it does provide more than one snapshot of VCN’s diverse volunteer demographic. As is described in the following section, VCN’s volunteers are not typical of those participating in civic activities across Canada. At VCN we see an “alternate civic core” at work, looking to meet economic goals through the route of civic participation.

Who are VCN’s Volunteers?

According to Statistics Canada’s 2003 findings:

…immigrants who had arrived in Canada since 1980 were less likely than earlier arrivals and Canadian-born persons to have been involved in at least one organization. More specifically, immigrants (aged 25 to 54) who had arrived in Canada since 1990 were less likely than Canadian-born persons to have signed a

---

1 For descriptions of the volunteers who took part in interviews at VCN in March 2005, see Appendix A.
2 See Appendix B for further details.
petition, boycotted or chosen a product for ethical reasons or attended a public meeting… (Schellenberg 2004)

In contrast to these general, pan-Canadian findings, at VCN recent immigrants are key volunteers. In comparison to both longer-settled immigrants and to Canadian-born individuals, recent immigrants constitute more than 60% of the network’s volunteers. In some respects, VCN’s volunteers are atypical of Canada’s “civic core” (Reed and Selbee 2000), described by Longford (2005) as “middle-aged, well-educated and affluent” (11) (See Table 1). VCN’s “alternate civic core” is well-educated: across the volunteer base 83% hold Master’s or Bachelor’s degrees. And within the recent immigrant demographic, 91% have these same levels of education while the remaining 9% have computer-related technical diplomas. Pertaining to age, VCN’s volunteers tend to be younger than “middle-aged”. The average age of volunteers determined by the July 2005 survey is 31, though the average age in the recent-immigrant volunteer demographic is slightly higher at 33.4. While there was no measure of wealth or savings in this study, at the time of application 50% of VCN volunteers describe their career status as “looking for work” and another 27% of volunteers are students. Most VCN volunteers share an employment situation that is not in concordance with that of Canada’s “civic core”.

Table 1: Contrasting Canada's "Civic Core" with VCN's "Alternate Civic Core"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Canada’s “Civic Core”</th>
<th>VCN’s “Alternate Civic Core”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Socio-economic status</td>
<td>Affluent</td>
<td>Economically insecure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Well-educated</td>
<td>Over 90% hold a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree related to ICT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Middle-aged</td>
<td>Mid-thirties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience (in Canada)</td>
<td>Established in a professional occupation</td>
<td>Over 70% have no Canadian work experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dwelling place</td>
<td>Non-metropolitan community</td>
<td>Vancouver or a neighbouring suburb</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(“Civic Core” descriptions from Longford 2005, p.5 and Reed & Selbee 2000, p.17)

Besides having lived in Canada for a relatively short period of time, VCN’s recent-immigrant volunteers share other attributes:

- 91% have a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree earned in a country other than Canada in the fields of computer science, engineering, informatics, or a field related to communication technologies

- 100% have computer-related work experience from countries other than Canada
• 70.5% do not have work experience in Canada

When completing their online volunteer applications, more than 90% of the candidates rate themselves as being advanced email and world wide web users, and 99% of the candidates said that they own a computer. Additionally, more than one third listed a website that they had created or contributed to.

Further evidence of the volunteers’ skills is demonstrated by the types of responsibilities they hold at VCN; they create language portals, work at the help desk, administer the network and teach internet skills to other network members. During interviews, I learned that language portal volunteers tend to have backgrounds in programming; they describe the Graphical Use Interface (GUI) tool they used to build VCN’s language portals as “straightforward”. Language portal volunteers depict activities such as networking within language communities and choosing suitable web content as the most challenging tasks of portal creation. While the work of language portal volunteers is largely independent and behind-the-scenes, help desk volunteers are VCN’s “front-line” workers. Help desk volunteers must have the technical skills to coach network members as they establish and troubleshoot dial-up connections, but strong social and language skills are imperative as they represent VCN to network members and the public over the phone and in-person. Volunteers in the role of network administrators are experienced with hardware and servers and have the capabilities to maintain VCN’s office networks. While liaising with helpdesk volunteers and VCN’s coordinators, these volunteers also maintain and repair in-house and donated equipment that is passed along to community groups. The final set of volunteers described here are the internet instructors who also combine their social skills with technical skills; they provide one-on-one internet and software instruction to network members who visit VCN’s computer lab.

Based on the strength of the volunteers’ knowledge and technical skills, they can be described as “digitally included.” They are on the upper-half of the so-called “digital divide” in terms of their access to, habitual use of, and expertise with the internet. Findings from one Statistics Canada report supports the suggestion that many recent immigrants have—and make regular use of—strong technical skills:

…immigrants who arrived in Canada since 1990 are more likely than others to use the internet to communicate with their relatives. This is probably because the internet is a cost-effective way for immigrants to communicate with family members in other countries, as well as because recent immigrants have, on average, higher levels of educational attainment than Canadian-born persons. (Schellenberg 2004)

Although the volunteers are “digitally included”—perhaps even more so than is common amongst longer-term residents of Canada—recent international relocation has resulted in these volunteers being less “socially included” than they were prior to emigration. The following section explains how interactions at VCN increase social inclusion.

---

3 It is possible that a higher percentage of volunteers have Canadian work experience, but not in their professional field, so it is not listed on their resumes, which is the source of this finding.
Human Capital, Social Capital and Social Inclusion: How do they fit together?

Before continuing, it is important to explain the differences between the three interrelated concepts of “human capital”, “social capital”, and “social inclusion”. Human capital relates to the knowledge, education, skills and experience held by an individual. For newcomers, levels of conversational English and French are significant aspects of one’s human capital. Because English is the language spoken at VCN, every social interaction is an opportunity to practice conversational English and in this way, increase human capital. Indeed, many volunteers say that improving their spoken English was a key reason for starting to volunteer at VCN. One volunteer describes his experiences this way:

In China, I had little practice speaking in English, so it has improved a lot here. And now I talk to all kinds of people: seniors, men, women. I talk with people from different places, too.

As volunteers practice English together, social capital is built. Kunz (2003) argues that, “Unlike human capital that is observable through diplomas and certificates, social capital is less tangible because it exists in the relations among individuals” (33). Social capital is a “public good” created through social interactions. Putnam (2000) defines it as “social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity” (21). Interactions between volunteers and with network members at VCN are thought to build trust and social capital. According to Kunz, “Success in the labour market depends as much on one’s human capital as it does on the social capital one is able to accumulate” (33). While one can often work on her human capital independently—through study, practice, and information searches—social capital can only be generated through social interactions. Finally, the relevance of civic participation becomes clearer!

Many people who would not otherwise have an opportunity to meet are able to connect and exchange information at VCN. For some volunteers, VCN provides a source of community other than one based on shared first-language or home-country cultures. Informally, it facilitates interaction amongst people from diverse cultural backgrounds, which in turn provides a means of learning about local or Canadian culture and other volunteers’ home countries. Two volunteers describe their interactions in VCN’s heterogeneous setting:

Every week I meet people from many different origins. It’s the most interesting.

It is already a year since I started and I have found many friends here. I have friends from Yugoslavia, Germany, China, Austria, from France, from everywhere. Most of them have found jobs, but I keep in touch and sometimes we email. I like this place.

To put this in context in terms of social capital theory, Putnam differentiates between “bridging” and “bonding” social capital by describing social networks that include or bridge people of different races, ages, genders, religions, education, ideologies, geographies and classes as useful for “getting ahead” (Putnam, quoting de Souza Briggs 1993, 21). According to Kunz, “Bridging capital is … essential for immigrants to expand their networks beyond their own ethnic community and to acculturate into the receiving society” (34). Conversely, social networks that bond members of a group to the exclusion of others are useful for “getting by” (22). Kunz states, “in terms of employment, [an] ethnic network is useful mainly in finding jobs with low human capital requirements.” For those immigrants who are highly skilled and educated, it is bridging capital that enables economic and social advancement (34).

Next, what is social inclusion and how does it fit with human and social capital? Duncan (2003) suggests, “A society that is socially inclusive is a society that grants access to everyone to
the vehicles of the good life, as it is defined by that society.” He adds that, “the good life’ is not a scarce resource, but one that grows as more people are involved.” The quantity of “good life” available is “influenced by the extent to which people in a society, and this encompasses immigrants, are included in its workings and its decision-making” (31). Because social capital is generated through social interactions and trust built through them, a more inclusive society “generates increased social capital” while an exclusive society reduces social capital (31). Because VCN is an inclusive, diverse network, it fosters social inclusion and social capital.

It comes down to this: The more information one has available, the easier it is to increase one’s human capacities, and having greater human capacities creates access to even more information. For technically skilled recent immigrants, VCN offers a means of stepping into this virtuous cycle. As volunteers increase their human capacities—through improved English language skills, enlarged social networks and increased employability due to having local experience and a local employment reference—they also become more “socially included”. According to Frith (2003), “A real sense of belonging is created when newcomers can fulfill their potential—get and keep a job, transfer and apply previously acquired occupational skills and participate fully in Canadian institutions and community life” (36).

To round out this description of the interrelationships of human capacities, social capital and social inclusion, it is necessary to note that these sociological theories are one approach to conceptualizing recent immigrants’ experiences in Canada. Another is “life-course lens” which provides ways of thinking about the long-term impacts of volunteerism and more generally, integration. The theory of “life-course lens”—“likely the second most popular sociological concept, after social capital, exported to the policy and research community”—is beneficial for thinking about the process of immigration (Kunz, 41). According to Kunz (2003), the “life-course” has several properties:

- First, it is a dynamic process, consisting of many overlapping trajectories over an individual’s course of life. The key trajectories are family and household formation, formal learning, paid employment, and community participation.

- Second, each of the trajectories is marked by a series of transitions, some of which are often age-graded and socially regulated, such as the age to drive, to vote, to work and to retire, and so on. These transitions opportunities and challenges to the individual.

- Third, along the various trajectories each individual accumulates resources through his/her interaction with the society in which he/she lives. These resources appreciate or depreciate over life, affecting the person’s ability to respond to changes brought about by significant transitions such as from school to work, being in between employments, marriage or childbirth. (41)

Application of the life-course lens to the context of immigrant integration is beneficial in at least two ways. Immigration is “a significant and often disruptive transition in life, affecting major life-course trajectories.” As well, immigrants “are a diverse group in terms of age, gender,
family status, category of admission, and socio-economic status. These attributes have implications for how well individuals fare in society” (Kunz 41). Effective use of the life-course lens requires longitudinal data, which was not collected for this study. It is still worth introducing the concept here as it provides an alternate perspective to that of social capital and allows us to see immigration as a process beginning prior to migration and continuing beyond the initial settlement stage (Kunz 41). The impacts of volunteering at VCN—even though the actual stint of volunteerism may begin shortly after an immigrant arrives in Canada and end with the attainment of full-time employment—continue for a lifetime. Lasting benefits of volunteerism include building a social network, gaining exposure to the operations of a not-for-profit organization, and attaining the technical or social skills required in each volunteer role. In some cases, volunteering at VCN can shift how recent immigrants perceive Canada. One recent immigrant was unable to continue volunteering because of family demands. She sent an email to the volunteer “listserv” saying that she was sorry to leave and, “Thanks a lot to all of the volunteers, they make me like Canada” (quote from email sent to VCN volunteers list on Sept 30, 2005).

One obvious longer-term impact of volunteering at VCN is gaining local work-related experience which may impact future economic stability. As well, recent-immigrant volunteers are provided with practical exposure to a charitable organization in Canada’s not-for-profit infrastructure. At the time of their application, 66% of VCN’s potential volunteers stated that they had basic or no knowledge of not-for-profit organizations. None of the volunteers who participated in interviews had ever volunteered in their home countries and many described their surprise at learning how many opportunities to volunteer in community-based and even national organizations exist. That VCN has provided recent immigrants with exposure to—and even knowledge of the inner-workings of—a not-for-profit organization may influence these individuals’ decisions about civic participation long after they leave the label of “newcomer” behind. One can only hope that—as is exemplified in the email above—newcomers’ experiences at VCN have provided a positive perspective of not-for-profit organizations!

How does Vancouver Community Network play such a vital role?

VCN welcomes newcomers who can contribute to the network’s functions; the strategies used to engage volunteers are dynamic and effective. There is great demand for the opportunity to volunteer in such a practical, but specialized capacity. In fact, over the twenty-month period ending in July of 2005, VCN received online applications from 793 individuals. During research interviews, nearly all of the participants said that they discovered VCN through the internet after local settlement organizations recommended finding a volunteer “job” in order to get local work experience.

According to its vision statement VCN, “strives to be an inclusive, multicultural, community-based organization which ensures the free, accessible electronic creation and exchange of the broadest range of information, experience, ideas and wisdom” (http://www2.vcn.bc.ca/about). The human and social capital-building that occurs within VCN’s offices is not through chance; openness toward diversity prevails and anyone with skills that might benefit VCN is invited to a volunteer interview. According to Breton (1997), “participation beyond ethnic or racial boundaries is partially a function of the openness of the
associations, networks and structures of the host society.” Breton adds, “The structure of opportunities for participation is crucial” (9).

VCN’s organizational strategies encourage personal initiative and rely on interactions between volunteers. A description of VCN’s volunteer-training practices illustrates how this is achieved. Because the turn-over of volunteers is high, besides being interviewed and orientated by VCN’s two full-time coordinators, new volunteers are trained by other, more experienced volunteers. Before committing to become a volunteer, candidates “shadow” another volunteer in the same role, in order to see what a typical shift entails. If after this, candidates are still interested in volunteering, they take part in an orientation session led by one of VCN’s coordinators. Here, they are introduced to the communication tools used by the network, as well as VCN’s policies, history, and mandate. Once that session is complete, volunteers sign up for their first official shifts. Each role is challenging and volunteers are required to learn quickly. Because of the variety of questions asked of volunteers, a typical helpdesk shift necessitates working together to respond to requests appropriately. One volunteer describes this as a positive learning experience particular to non-profit organizations:

[At VCN] everybody shares information and that’s interesting. In a company, everybody expects you to know everything. Here you feel free to say, “I don’t know this part.

In their official capacities at VCN, volunteers train one another, ask each another questions, and regularly come to other volunteers’ aid. As an extension of these activities, volunteers also tend to feel comfortable sharing information that is personally relevant. Conversation topics range from employment opportunities to educational programs, and even to the daily challenges of being a newcomer to Canada. Volunteers describe the exchange of information at VCN as free-flowing and non-hierarchical:

\[I \text{ feel very comfortable with the volunteers at VCN. We are in the same position. We came from different countries to start work, to find something.}\]

\[ Basically it is an information exchange centre. You have so many people here [and] they all bring ideas and news to this place.\]

\[ There are a lot of opportunities. When the volunteers come here, they exchange information about where there are jobs, and where there are interviews and which websites have a lot of postings. They tell each other about companies that are hiring people. That’s the [kind of] information that is exchanged amongst volunteers. It’s a cycle; it goes on and on.\]

Volunteers also describe VCN as a place where they feel socially supported. In the absence of full-time work, volunteering is one way of being engaged and feeling useful. Interacting with others in the shared circumstances of job-seeking and being a newcomer contributes to feelings of comfort and solidarity.

\[ You have to help each other. Because everyone is a foreigner here, it is easier if you help each other and get to know each other. That way you don’t feel as depressed that you have left all of your friends behind.\]

---

4 Eighty-percent of VCN’s volunteers who began their volunteer experience during the 20-month period between November 1, 2004 and June 30, 2005, also completed their duration within this time frame.
When I came here, I met some other people who were volunteering as well. It was nice because you could talk to them and discuss your problems and get some idea of their problems. I felt a little bit better after I had a chance to meet people here and know that I am not alone in my situation. They have the same problems so we got to see our similarities. That was really good for me.

These experiences are illustrations of Breton’s (1997) suggestion that, “Social participation can … sensitize group members to the fact that they are subject to the same economic, political, cultural or social conditions—such as immigrant status” (6). He suggests that through “social involvement, people may realize that they share the same lot, are ‘in the same boat’ as others in certain respects.” Newcomers can then “identify with a ‘community of fate,’ so that social expectations are based on the feeling of interdependence, involving mutual obligations, and the idea that cooperation may be generally advantageous” (6). In this way, participation leads to increased social capital and inclusion.

The specificity, duration and frequency of information exchanges between VCN volunteers and network members are greater than purely social interactions in a public setting would be. Over time, volunteers’ comfort levels increase and through their enhanced capacities they are more able to contribute to VCN’s projects, as well as to access information beneficial to their own employment searches and skills development. Charged with assisting in VCN’s mandate, volunteers who in casual, social circumstances may be shy about their language skills—or simply inexperienced in interacting with people from other cultures—may be emboldened by their official roles. Over time, information exchanges created through face-to-face interactions between volunteers and other community network members increase the human capacities and social inclusion of newcomers. Meanwhile these newcomers are sharing their skills and contributing to the overall mandate of VCN, including the amelioration of digital and social divides.

Besides its mandate toward diversity and its training strategies that promote volunteers’ social interactions, VCN offers opportunities for civic participation at a later stage of settlement, when it may be particularly valuable. For newcomers in earlier stages of settlement, one of VCN’s projects—the Community Access Program (CAP) that provides free access to computers and the internet—also proves helpful. CAP is an Industry Canada initiative targeting recent immigrants—along with older adults, First Nations, rural dwellers, and those with low education and/or low incomes—as a demographic likely to benefit from free internet access. According to Mwarigha’s (2002) description of the information needs of recent immigrants, some newcomers’ immediate information needs for sustenance, housing and language, may be aided by making use of a CAP site, but the final stage, integration—which involves more diverse and individualized needs—is more likely to be realized by becoming part of Canada’s “alternate civic core”, as a volunteer at VCN or another community network.

Caidi and Allard (2005) explain the importance of information as an aspect of social inclusion. Quoting Mwarigha (2002), they describe the information needs of recent immigrants in three stages:

- *Immediate* includes essential matters such as where to find food and shelter, how to get around geographically, and ways of dealing with language barriers.

- *Intermediate* includes how to access and use various systems including municipal and legal services, long-term housing, employment, and health services.
Integration needs are more diverse and individualized; meeting them contributes to social inclusion through cultural, political and economic terms.

The current or past VCN volunteers who took part in interviews tend to be nearing the end of the second stage or are currently in the third stage of settlement. The then-current volunteers I spoke with were looking for work, completing contracts, or going to school: situations with limited economic security. Interviewees who were no longer volunteering were working full-time in the ICT industry. All of the interview participants had been in Canada long enough to have found a reasonable place to live and accessed educational and health care services. They were volunteering at a stage of settlement when their information needs were not so general as to be easily located online, but required more in-person interactions.

A social network provides important context for making sense of information. One newcomer describes the importance of a social network for making sense of information:

> Other than using the internet, I read Citizenship and Immigration Canada leaflets, and some information from other organizations. Because we get a lot of information like this, we don't know which is best, so a friend here helped me.

Whether it is information provided about day-to-day events or knowledge gained over a series of interactions, VCN provides recent immigrants with opportunities to learn and exchange information in a broad social context. As well, the challenges and demands of VCN’s volunteer positions create purposeful interactions.

While the focus here is to describe how VCN’s functions develop human capacities, build social capital and foster social inclusion, it should be noted that assisting newcomers in integration process does not come without costs to VCN in terms of time and effort as well as how the network is perceived by its users and the general public. Because newcomer-volunteers tend to leave their volunteer positions once they find full-time work, their turnover is high. Less-experienced newcomer-volunteers may take longer to provide assistance and their less-practiced language skills may create misunderstandings, resulting in less efficient service for VCN’s users. It is possible that these high-turnover outcomes may discourage use of the network. Through what means can VCN continue to assist newcomers in integration processes while maintaining its user base? The economics of this situation will be touched upon in the conclusion, but at this point it is worth articulating one point about funding. VCN does receive support from Industry Canada for hosting a CAP site, and in fact is supported for managing an entire region of sites from its offices. Currently, VCN’s volunteer program receives no support from Industry Canada or other federal departments—such as Heritage, Social Development or Citizenship and Immigration Canada—that could see the benefit of VCN’s role in community integration for newcomers. In recommendations made to Industry Canada, EKOS Research Associates (2004) considers recent immigrants to be one of the “‘hard to reach’ and ‘have-not’ target groups” to whom CAP site use should be promoted (44). Based on these recommendations and the lack of financial support for VCN’s volunteer program it seems likely that recent immigrants are recognized more as CAP-site users than as a valuable “alternate civic core”. In fact, VCN’s newcomer-volunteers work as part of a team of providers of internet access to the less digitally-included. Considering the relationship between human capacities, social capital and social inclusion, federally-supported recognition of VCN’s volunteer programs as a key provider of
newcomer integration would greatly benefit current and future newcomers, and other residents, of the greater Vancouver area.

**Building Social Capital through Face-to-Face Interactions**

It is important to note that social capital building and increased social inclusion take place in the physical environs of VCN, in a face-to-face manner. While all of the volunteers I spoke with have the digital skills required to keep in touch with friends and family in their home countries and to find online information about living in Canada, they are looking to connect with people in-person. During interviews, volunteers said that meeting and getting to know people from diverse backgrounds, and making small talk or “chit-chat”, are key rewards of volunteering. Although the volunteers are technically enabled and aware of opportunities for online interaction, they choose to make in-person contact with other volunteers and network members on a regular basis. One volunteer describes her experience:

*Every Thursday [when I came to volunteer] there were a lot of new people, but I might see one or two people who I had already met. When you don’t have a job or know a lot of people and don’t have a very large social life it is good to know that every Thursday afternoon you will see these same people.*

One way of thinking about the relevance of recent-immigrant volunteers’ in-person interactions at VCN is in terms Oldenburg’s (1989) concept of “third place”. Oldenburg theorizes home as the first place and work as the second place. “Third places” tend to be casual hang-outs such as coffee shops or pubs which “exist on natural ground and serve to level their guests to a condition of social equality”. They are “remarkably similar to a good home in the psychological comfort and support” which they extend (42). In contrast to the casual interactions that take place at most third places, volunteers do come to VCN with the purpose of contributing to the organization’s mandate, and once there, they follow an organized structure. However, the site suits many of the attributes of third place including:

- nourishing relationships and a diversity of human contact
- helping to create a sense of place and community
- encouraging sociability instead of isolation, and
- being a highly accessible place where a number of people regularly go

Because a recent immigrant’s home or “first place” is a relatively new one, and his or her workplace, or “second place” is absent, as a “third place” VCN may be a key provider of much-needed social interaction and information exchanges. While all users of the Vancouver Community Network gain information and opportunities for interaction, contributing to the network as a volunteer may have significantly greater impacts, depending on the recent immigrant’s stage of settlement.

The field of community informatics provides further context to considerations of the relevance of recent-immigrant volunteers’ in-person interactions at VCN. VCN is an exemplary and unique community network (CN), but one of many locally-initiated “ICT organizations committed to universal access to the internet and the use of ICT systems to promote local economic and social development, civic participation and community learning” existing around the world (Longford, 5). The composition of VCN’s volunteer base—nearly two-thirds of the volunteers emigrated within the past five years—exemplifies how a CN can meet the needs of its
local community. In a city where more than one-third of the population is foreign-born, it is not a surprise that many of the locally determined goals are those of recent immigrants looking to overcome the social barriers limiting them from employment commensurate with their skills.

CNs are but one application of the field of “community informatics”, an “emerging interdisciplinary research field concerned with the study of enabling uses of information and communication technologies in communities” (Longford, 6). Community informatics promotes a perspective beyond technical connectivity which tends to focus on issues of access and digital divides. Gurstein’s (2004) frame of “effective use” allows for recognition of the importance of the “lived physical community” and interactions within it which involve ICTs, but work toward the accomplishment of self or collaboratively identified goals. Through the lens of “effective use” it is possible to see recent immigrant as more than potential ICT users. Their work and interactions at VCN—and perhaps other CNs—can be recognized in terms of contributions to social capital-building and increased social inclusion.

Many scholars are contributing to the growing literature of community informatics, and some with a particular focus on social capital (Simpson 2005, Doody 2004, Pigg & Crank 2004). These scholars consider the ways that online interactions extend, or vary from, in-person ones. The case of VCN’s volunteer program is unique; increased access to ICTs supplies the impetus for interactions, but the volunteers are already digitally included and these exchanges are taking place in-person, at the community network. Over time these interactions may be aided and extended by ICTs; many past-volunteers use email to continue their relationships with people they met at VCN. There is definitely a case for further examination of VCN’s volunteer programs from a rigorous community informatics perspective.

Conclusion

VCN, communities within the Lower Mainland, and the volunteers themselves all benefit as interactions at VCN contribute to newcomers’ settlement processes. These contributions include involving recent immigrants in a not-for-profit organization, supplying training for volunteer roles, offering a space to interact and share information with others, and providing a means to gain “Canadian experience” including references for potential employers. At an individual level, each volunteer’s human capital increases. Collectively, these interactions create social capital and enhance social inclusion at a community level.

While numerous recent immigrants do benefit from the CAP program by accessing the internet through systems at public libraries and community centres, at VCN newcomers contribute to CAP as members of the “alternate civic core”. The impacts of volunteering at a community network may be even greater than being able to access the internet upon initial arrival, though this is immeasurable as it is different for each newcomer, depending on skills and needs. Accessing the internet on CAP-sponsored computers and opportunities for civic participation are both of potential benefit for recent immigrants. However, while the CAP site is funded by federal resources, VCN’s volunteer programs are not. Arguably, volunteering at VCN provides experiences that are of great individual benefit to recent immigrants. As well, the more opportunities these volunteers—or any residents of Canada—have to socialize with culturally diverse populations, the better. Interactions with people outside of known circles allows for exchanges of information that may have immediate or future benefits. Such interactions also build social capital and foster feelings of inclusion.
Let’s conclude by returning to earlier comments on twinning immigration and the economy. As was described, the current economic situation for recent immigrants to Vancouver and other major Canadian centres is not positive. While opportunities for civic participation such as those at VCN do help, in their current, unfunded capacities they cannot grow or offer more learning opportunities to newcomers. While more structured, federally-funded work experience programs do exist, they have long waiting lists and less flexibility for newcomers who are unable to commit to a full-time program.\(^5\) Recognition of the ways that VCN’s volunteer program promotes social inclusion and fosters integration could be made by appropriately funding these activities. Currently, many of the network’s operations are confined to regular, week-day office hours and there are restrictions on the amount of space available for the repair and storage of donated hardware. VCN’s physical site has limitations; an investment in the network’s infrastructure—in consultation with its coordinators—could greatly enhance VCN’s functions. Federal support for integrative programs such as VCN’s volunteer programs is an investment in a more prosperous and inclusive society.

\(^5\) One example is the ‘Work Experience for Immigrants Program’ at Bow Valley College in Calgary, Alberta http://www.bowvalleycollege.ca/weip/sa_eligibility.htm
Appreciation

What might not be demonstrated by the data discussed here is the commitment and effort made by the networks’ coordinators and volunteers. Keeping 10,000 people connected to the internet is an inestimable feat, especially when the work is accomplished by volunteers, many of who have only been in Canada for a short while. Earlier this year, having a curious researcher in the midst of the operation required extra effort on the part of the coordinators and volunteers, and I thank each of you for your help. Thank you in particular to VCN’s Coordinators, Steven Chan and Peter Royce, whose work allowed this study to exist. Heartfelt appreciation goes to the nine volunteers who—speaking English as their second or third or fourth language—participated in the sometimes challenging interviews. They remain nameless for anonymity’s sake. Thanks to all of VCN’s volunteers: past, current and future!

I am grateful to the members of the Canadian Research Alliance for Community Innovation and Networking (CRACIN) for their encouragement and support.
Bibliography


Appendix A  Description of Interview Participants

Kyle\(^6\) completed a Master’s degree in computer science in Beijing before coming to Vancouver on his own in September 2004. He intended to begin a doctoral program in computer science upon his arrival, but he was not accepted into any programs. Instead, he volunteered at VCN’s Help Desk for several months before being hired by the CAP Youth Initiative. Although he is currently underemployed, he is happy to be gaining local experience in his field.

Sonja has been volunteering at VCN as the Russian language portal developer for over a year. Although she wasn’t working when she began volunteering, she now works nearly full-time in a small technology firm. She also takes programming courses at BCIT. When she emigrated from Russia with her husband and their two children they initially settled in Winnipeg, but her husband was challenged to find work, so they relocated to Vancouver in 2000. Sonia’s education and previous work experience is in mathematical programming.

Min emigrated from Shanghai, China in 1999. She has a degree in Computer Science as well as eight years of work experience in UNIX administration. Three years ago she began volunteering as part of VCN’s network administration team. As well as volunteering, she completed several paid contracts at VCN. Min recently left VCN as she found full-time employment commensurate with her experience.

Hung Sook is a Korean man who came to Canada on his own in October 2003. He has a Bachelor’s degree in Computer Science and worked as a programmer for four years at telecommunications corporation in Seoul. At the time of the interview, Hung Sook had been volunteering as the Korean language portal developer for just one month.

Jim holds a Bachelor’s degree in Computer Science. He worked in the IT department of a major national bank in Shanghai until 2004, when he moved to Vancouver by himself. He volunteered at VCN’s Help Desk three days per week during January and February of 2005, and in the week following the interview he began a job as a web designer.

Leila is a volunteer who emigrated with her husband from their native Iran in 2000. Her work experience in Iran was administrative. In Vancouver she completed a technical diploma at BCIT, and is currently enrolled in a Bachelor’s degree in Computer Science. At VCN, her volunteer roles include help desk technician and network administrator.

Edgar works as a project manager and business consultant for an IT firm located near VCN. When he has free time from his work projects, he spends part of his day at VCN, volunteering at the help desk and with the network administration team. He immigrated to Vancouver from India in December 2003.

Astrid has a technical diploma and ten years of work experience in electronics. She lived in Austria until she and her partner moved to Vancouver in May 2004. Prior to finding full-time employment related to her previous experience, Astrid volunteered at VCN as the German language portal developer, a site that includes links to the Austrian and Swiss cultural communities.

---

\(^6\) Participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.
Marie-Claire and her partner emigrated from France in 2002. In Canada, she spent her first six months living in Montreal, before moving to Vancouver to avoid cold winters. She attained a Master’s degree in Computer Science in France, and she is currently employed full-time as a bilingual help desk technician. As a VCN volunteer, she developed the French language portal.
## Overview of Quantitative Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Volunteer Status</th>
<th>Data foci</th>
<th>Key findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1) survey of current and past volunteers | 26 | July 7-14, 2005 | All are or have been active volunteers | Duration in months and hours per week of volunteering | • 62% have volunteered for 6 months or less  
• 7.5 months is the average duration of volunteering  
• 7.62 is the average number of hours volunteered per week  
• 86% of respondents were not born in Canada  
• 65.22% of respondents have been in Canada for less than five years  
• 45% of respondents are looking for work,  
• China is the most represented country of origin of these volunteers  
• 31 is the average age of volunteers  
• Of recent immigrants only, the average age is 33.4 |
| Average ages may be lower than at other times of the year because many students volunteer through the summer months. | | | | Percentage of recent immigrants longer-term or Canadian-born volunteers |
| | | | | Work status |
| | | | | Country of origin |
| 2) analysis of volunteers’ resumes | 116 | Complied between July 7-14, 2005 | Active volunteers from within the last year | Work experience in Canada/ elsewhere | • 62.86% immigrated to Canada within the past five years  
• 100% have work experience in a home country  
• 70.5% have no work experience in Canada  
• 83% of volunteers have Bachelor’s or Master’s degrees  
• 91% of recent- |
| Limited data to these volunteer roles because they match the roles of interviewees in qualitative | | Resume submission dates are indeterminable | | |
study:
- Language Portal Developer
- Help Desk
- Local Area Network Administrator

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education levels</th>
<th>immigrant volunteers have Bachelor’s or Master’s degrees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3) analysis of online application database</th>
<th>793</th>
<th>November 1, 2004- June 30, 2005</th>
<th>Applied online to become volunteers</th>
<th>Total number of applicants</th>
<th>Percentage of applicants who became volunteers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Applicants self-report technical skills and knowledge</th>
<th>99% own a computer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>95% rate themselves as advanced email users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>93% rate themselves as advanced email users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>34% list a website they own or have worked on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>66% had basic or no knowledge of not for profit organizations at the time of application</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Career status</th>
<th>50% looking for work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>27% students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11.3% employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.5% retired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10.2% other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason for application (Words searched in text fields of applications)</td>
<td>5% state “work experience”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5% state “gain experience”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.4% state “Canadian experience”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5% state “improve English”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>