9 **VANCOUVER COMMUNITY NETWORK AS A SITE OF DIGITAL AND SOCIAL INCLUSION**

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Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are central to the shifts taking place within Canadian immigration; often used as a pre- and post-migration information source, ICTs also provide greater transnational communication opportunities, including access to cultural media such as online local newspapers in languages other than English or French, newsgroups, and chat rooms (Aizlewood and Doody 2002). Because of the increasing roles of ICTs in immigration and settlement activities, it is important to conduct research that explores the relationship between ICTs and social and economic inclusion for immigrants to Canada. The findings from this study suggest that urban community networks (CNs) can serve as sites of inclusion for newcomers. This chapter illuminates an unanticipated, socially beneficial outcome of a community-based technology initiative: the potential for an urban CN to contribute to newcomers’ social networks, and to broaden the range of information newcomers can access. While many new immigrants become volunteers at Vancouver Community Network (VCN) as part of their search for employment, comments about the lasting impacts of their experiences suggest that volunteer activities at VCN helped to foster the development of a sense of community as well.
VANCOUVER COMMUNITY NETWORK: THE RESEARCH SITE

VCN is an urban community network that offers a variety of free services to individuals and non-profit groups in Vancouver, including dial-up Internet service, public access computing space, computer software training, email accounts, website creation, and listserv and website hosting. In 2005, when this case study was conducted, 11,000 individual members and over 1,200 non-profit groups made use of VCN’s services. The focus of VCN’s initiatives is using ICTs to organize and empower marginalized individuals and groups. VCN works closely with community groups and community centres to equip and train staff and volunteers with computing resources, and to develop interactive websites to make their programs better known and more accessible to the local community. Significantly, VCN coordinates hundreds of public Internet access sites throughout the city, many of which are situated and designed to serve the poor, new immigrants, youth, and the homeless, including the residents of the city’s Downtown Eastside neighbourhood, one of Canada’s poorest. These sites exist in part because of support from the federal Community Access Program (CAP) and its Youth Initiative (CAP YI). Federal funding for both CAP and CAP YI has frequently been in danger of being terminated: in March 2010, coordinators of CAP sites received letters informing them that the funding had been cut, but a reprieve was granted in the same month, and the program continued for another year. In the Lower Mainland region, CAP sites succeed through partnerships between VCN and community organizations, including neighbourhood offices, public libraries, career centres, and settlement organizations. These sites are visited by a broad range of people who do not have regular access to the Internet, including a large number of recent immigrants to Canada (Moll and Fritz 2007).

Besides many recent migrants’ use of CAP sites, the composition of VCN’s volunteer base—nearly two-thirds of the volunteers immigrated to Canada within the past five years—exemplifies another way that a community network can meet some of the needs of its local community. In Vancouver, a city in which nearly half of the population was born outside of Canada (Statistics Canada 2010), many recent immigrants are looking for employment commensurate with their skills. Through its volunteer program, VCN provides an opportunity for civic participation, which many recent immigrants have found beneficial during their period of settlement.

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 to enhance their skills and knowledge, particularly in relation to ICT work and related English
language acquisition. Basing the study on qualitative and quantitative research completed in Vancouver during the spring and summer of 2005, I examine how the social inclusion of newcomers is influenced by VCN’s volunteer program.

**IMMIGRATION AND THE CANADIAN LABOUR MARKET**

Many of VCN’s volunteers have come to Canada as part of the Skilled Worker Class, defined by the Immigrant and Refugee Protection Act of 2002 as those applicants “who may become permanent residents on the basis of their ability to become economically established in Canada” (Tolley 2003, 1). Throughout the recent past, Vancouver’s immigrant population has “grown at a considerably faster pace than its Canadian-born population” and consequently, in 2006, persons born outside of Canada and living in Vancouver, represented more than 45 percent of the city’s population (Statistics Canada 2010).

In the past, when people migrated to and arrived in Canada, they faced challenges in getting established in the workforce. Given time, they overcame these difficulties and attained incomes on par with those of domestic-born workers (Schellenberg and Hou 2005, 49). Unfortunately, for people who migrated to Canada since the 1980s, this trend has not continued. Four related factors are thought to underlie immigrants’ declining labour market outcomes (Schellenberg and Hou 2005, 49). First, there has been a marked shift in source countries from Western European nations to Asian ones. Currently, China, India, and the Philippines are the top three countries that newcomers emigrate from, and increased challenges exist due to differences in language and culture, as well as discrimination (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2009). Second, declining returns to foreign experience and foreign education means that degrees and experience attained in the newer source countries are not recognized on the same basis as degrees and experience from Western countries. Third, during the 1980s and 1990s, all people looking for work in the Canadian job market—including young people, people returning to work, and recent immigrants—have found fewer attractive employment opportunities (Schellenberg and Hou 2005, 50). And last, the education levels of Canadian-born individuals have increased dramatically in the past twenty-five years. In this “competitive market, even marginal differences in educational quality, language or communication skills, or cultural norms could have an impact on employment outcomes” (Schellenberg and Hou 2005, 50).

The impacts of these and other factors are evident. Three-quarters of recent immigrants settled in the urban centres of Toronto, Montréal, and Vancouver. In 2001, in both Toronto and Vancouver, recent immigrants accounted for 17 percent of the total population, but composed 32 percent of the low-income population (Schellenberg and Hou 2005, 51). Between 1984 and 1999, the
wealth of Canadian-born families increased by 37 percent, but for immigrant families who had been in Canada for less than a decade, wealth decreased by only 16 percent (51). Results of a survey of immigrants in Vancouver who had been in Canada since 1991 demonstrate that nearly 40 percent experienced problems entering the labour market (Hiebert 2003, 29).

Given these circumstances, what is a newcomer’s best strategy for settlement? Acknowledging that most newcomers’ key goal is to support themselves and their families, the findings described in this study suggest that time and effort devoted to 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.

THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

This study examines how recent immigrants consider volunteering as a means of increasing social inclusion; it considers some of the relationships between digital and social inclusion. Recent scholarship theorizes relationships between social capital, social inclusion, and the experiences of newcomers to Canada (Caidi and Allard 2005; Frith 2003; Justus 2004; Kunz 2003; Schellenberg and Hou 2005; Tolley 2003). This body of scholarship highlights the important role that civic participation and the development of social networks play in the settlement process. The field of community informatics provides further context to considerations of the relevance of recent-immigrant volunteers’ in-person interactions at VCN. Community networks are 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 2005, 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” recognizes the importance of the “lived physical community” and interactions within it that involve ICTs. Through the lens of effective use it is possible to see recent immigrants as more than potential ICT users: their work and interactions at VCN—and perhaps other CNs—can be recognized in terms of contributing to social capital-building and increased social inclusion.

METHODOLOGY AND QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

The case study approach of this project focused on VCN’s volunteer programs. The project examined the influences of ICTs and community networks on settlement practices for people who had recently immigrated to Canada. The
use of ICTs by people who have migrated to Canada continues to gain attention (e.g., Caidi et al. 2008; Chien 2005; Dechief et al. 2010; Jansen, Jansen, and Spink 2005; Veenhof 2006; Vertovec 2004; Zamaria and Fletcher 2007). Using mixed methods to generate data provided a means of triangulating and gaining multiple perspectives on VCN’s volunteer program. For three weeks in March 2005, I observed VCN’s day-to-day goings-on as well as interviewing nine of VCN’s volunteers; I generated data through these interviews as well as my ongoing conversations with VCN’s coordinators. During individual interviews with people who had immigrated to Canada in the past five years and who were at that time current or past contributors to VCN, we discussed their reasons for volunteering, the benefits of their volunteer experiences, and their information-seeking strategies related to settlement activities and employment seeking. An analysis of the data provided through the qualitative research component of this project is presented in 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 Vancouver Community Network.

Completed in July 2005, the quantitative research component of this project contextualizes and demonstrates the pertinence of the insights gleaned from the project’s initial component. This second phase of fieldwork involved collecting and 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. These data sets provide multiple snapshots of VCN’s diverse volunteer demographic.

On the basis of the quantitative data generated in 2005, more than 60 percent of VCN’s volunteers are recent immigrants who have been in Canada for five years or less. Almost half of the volunteers were looking for work, and they considered civic participation a means to becoming more employable. They were selected to become volunteers at VCN because of their strong ICT skills, gained through education and work experiences in their home (or other) countries. In contrast with the findings at VCN, a 2003 survey completed by Statistics Canada found low levels of civic participation amongst a broader immigrant demographic. People who immigrated to Canada after 1980 are less likely to be involved in even one organization than those who are either Canadian-born or who immigrated to Canada in the 1970s or earlier.
(Schellenberg 2004, 11). In particular, people aged 25 to 54 who came to Canada after 1990 were less likely than people who were born in Canada to have taken part in participatory activities such as signing a petition or attending a public meeting (Schellenberg 2004, 13).

In contrast to the minimal engagements reported in these general, pan-Canadian findings, at VCN the civic contributions of recent immigrants are vital. Reed and Selbee (2000) coined the term civic core to describe the “middle-aged, well-educated and affluent” people who are thought to take on the majority of the volunteer work accomplished in Canada (Schellenberg 2004). In some respects, the volunteers at VCN are atypical—VCN’s “alternate civic core” is well educated: across the volunteer base 83 percent hold Master’s or Bachelor’s degrees, and within the recent immigrant demographic, 91 percent have these same levels of education, while the remaining 9 percent have computer-related technical diplomas. All of the recent immigrant volunteers have computer-related work experience from countries other than Canada, though 70.5 percent do not have any work experience in Canada.2 With respect 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, although the average age in the recent-immigrant volunteer demographic is slightly higher at 33.4. While there was no measure of wealth, or personal or family savings in this study, at the time of application 50 percent of VCN volunteers described their career status as “looking for work” and another 27 percent of VCN volunteers were students. Most VCN volunteers, therefore, share an employment situation that is not in concordance with that of Canada’s civic core.

While VCN’s volunteers have strong ICT skills, their absence of strong social networks is part of what makes VCN an attractive place to spend their time. The types of responsibilities the volunteers hold at VCN demonstrate their technical capabilities; they create language portals, work at the help desk, administer the network, and teach Internet skills to other network members. Language portal volunteers describe networking within language communities and choosing suitable web content as the most challenging tasks of portal creation. While the work of the language portal volunteers is largely independent and behind-the-scenes, help desk volunteers are VCN’s “front-line” workers. Help desk volunteers must have strong technical skills to coach network members through establishing and troubleshooting dial-up connections, but strong social and language skills are also important, as these volunteers represent VCN to network members and to the public both 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 help desk volunteers and VCN’s coordinators, these volunteers also maintain and repair in-house and
donated equipment that is then passed along to community groups. The final set of volunteers are Internet instructors who also combine their social skills with technical skills; they provide one-on-one Internet and software instruction to the network members who visit VCN’s computer lab.

Given the strength of the volunteers’ knowledge and technical skills—their access to, habitual use of, and expertise with the Internet—they can be described as “digitally included.” Findings from one Statistics Canada report support the suggestion that many recent immigrants make regular use of their 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, 16).

Although the volunteers are digitally included—more so than is common amongst longer-term residents of Canada—recent international relocation has resulted in these volunteers being less socially connected and more economically vulnerable than they were prior to emigration. This chapter’s focus on a group of people who have strong technical skills and who are able to connect to information available online demonstrates that technical connectivity alone is not enough to ensure social well-being and economic security. Digital connections do not ensure social ones, and economic exclusion is often linked to social barriers.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

During interviews, people shared many different reasons for why VCN is a popular place to volunteer. The majority connected their choice to volunteer at VCN with a desire to increase their employability, by practicing English, gaining local experience, or getting a local work reference. Others mentioned VCN’s central location and the ease of going there via public transportation. Contributing to the community and getting to know people was another common reason:

[I volunteered to] do something for the community and also to practice computer skills. . . . [I want] to help others and . . . to better my communication skills because you know I am a new immigrant and my English is not good. (Volunteer 1)

I came to VCN to improve my technical skills and to involve myself with more people. (Volunteer 7)
I liked that it is in Vancouver, not Surrey or Langley, so it is easy to come here. (Volunteer 2)

I think volunteers are serious because they can also benefit from this experience. After three months they can get a work reference, and they can practice their language skills and technical skills and communicate and learn things from others. Volunteers do get benefits from this. (Volunteer 3)

Each volunteer mentioned either job seeking or gaining work experience as a significant factor in his or her decision to volunteer at VCN. These volunteers are not unusual; according to the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP), 62 percent of unemployed volunteers “believed that volunteering would improve their job prospects” (McClintock 2004, 7). Also in concordance with the NSGVP, volunteers usually gave more than one reason for their civic participation, indicating that the reasons for and benefits of volunteerism amongst VCN’s newcomer volunteers are multiple and overlapping (McClintock 2004, 7). While volunteers’ initial attraction to VCN was the potential to establish a network of more or less instrumental relationships, or “weak ties” (Granovetter 1973), most volunteers reported that they valued the social benefits of volunteering at VCN more than the instrumental ones, particularly in terms of expanding their social networks, fostering a sense of community and, ultimately, easing their integration into the rest of Canadian society.

Social interactions are key to VCN’s functions. VCN welcomes new volunteers who can contribute to the network’s functions, and likewise there is great demand for the opportunity to volunteer in such a practical but specialized capacity. VCN’s organizational strategies encourage personal initiative as well as relying on interactions between volunteers. A description of VCN’s volunteer-training practices illustrates how this is achieved. Because the turnover of volunteers is high, new volunteers are trained by other, more experienced volunteers. Each role is challenging and volunteers are required to learn quickly. The variety of questions asked of volunteers necessitates working together to respond to requests appropriately. One volunteer describes this positive learning experience as particular to nonprofit 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.” (Volunteer 6)

In their official capacities at VCN, volunteers train one another, ask each other questions, and regularly come to other volunteers’ aid. As an extension of
these activities, volunteers also tend to feel comfortable sharing information that is more 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 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. (Volunteer 2)

Basically it is an information exchange centre. You have so many people here [and] they all bring ideas and news to this place. (Volunteer 3)

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. (Volunteer 7)

The interviews made it clear that information exchange is a necessary and regular part of the VCN volunteer program’s functioning. Caidi and Allard (2005) explain the importance of information as an aspect of social inclusion. Citing 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, such as 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 have gained access to 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 personal interactions.
A social network provides important context for understanding culturally specific 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. (Volunteer 1)

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, 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, aid provided by CAP in the form of free access to computers and the Internet also proves helpful. 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.

The more information one has available, the easier it is to increase one’s human capacities (abilities that allow an individual to gain human capital), and having greater human capacities creates access to even more information. For technically skilled recent immigrants, the civic participation that VCN offers provides a tangible means of stepping into this cycle. As volunteers increase their human and social capital—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). Powell’s (2006) research with a different population, technologically savvy but socially disengaged youth who volunteer with a Montréal-based community wireless group, also suggests that taking part in a volunteer-based, technology-enabling organization serves as a gateway to community and civic participation (see also Dechief et al. 2008).
All of the volunteers 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, but they are looking to connect with people in person. Although the volunteers are technically enabled and are aware of opportunities for online interaction, they choose to make face-to-face contact with other volunteers and network members on a regular basis. One volunteer describes the importance of regular interaction this way:

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. (Volunteer 9)

One way of thinking about the relevance of recent-immigrant volunteers’ in-person interactions at VCN is in terms of Oldenburg’s (1989) concept of “third place.” Third places tend to be casual hangouts such as coffee shops or pubs that “exist on natural ground and serve to level their guests to a condition of social equality” (42). They are “remarkably similar to a good home in the psychological comfort and support” 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 the 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
• furnishing 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 of the people who use VCN as an Internet service provider (ISP) gain information and opportunities for online interaction, contributing to the network in person (as a volunteer) may have significantly greater impacts. Werbin (2006, 13) reports similar findings: “The access that [foreign-trained professionals] really seem to value is access to in-person, physical communities that develop around initiatives like CAP sites, where work experience opportunities surface, and learning to be part of Canadian society is achieved face-to-face.” (See also Dechief et al. 2008).
THE INTERRELATED CONCEPTS OF HUMAN CAPITAL, SOCIAL CAPITAL, AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

Throughout these interview excerpts, volunteers’ experiences illustrate the concepts of human and social capital, and social inclusion. Human capital relates to the knowledge, education, skills, and experience held by an individual. Conversational English language capabilities are a significant aspect of human capital; research demonstrates that “proficiency in one of Canada’s official languages is critical to effective integration” (Frith 2003, 35). Because English is the language spoken at VCN, every conversation is an opportunity for newcomers to practice conversational English and, in this small way, increase their 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, [and] women. I talk with people from different places too. (Volunteer 5)

This same volunteer was just about to start a new job and explained how his interactions at VCN contributed to his employment success:

Getting this job has benefitted a lot by my work experience at VCN. [At VCN] I learned how to talk with people, and even in the interview, how to answer their questions. Working at VCN gave me a lot of practice. (Volunteer 5)

Besides communication and language skills, volunteers’ technical skills are kept up to date and broadened by their experiences at VCN:

When I came here I learned to troubleshoot by going through this series of steps. I had to upgrade these [troubleshooting] skills. (Volunteer 7)

I have learned about free software, and what kinds of software are used in Canada. I get to meet with other technical guys and learn and talk with them. (Volunteer 1)

When you go for a [work] position it is good to show that you are still staying active in your field. (Volunteer 9)

Some of the activities at VCN are directly related to job seeking. One volunteer describes a seminar planned for this purpose:

At the end of last year there [were] a couple of volunteers who got jobs and told us about how they did it—how they did the job search, how they did at the interviews. (Volunteer 3)
Even though the volunteers are already skilled and knowledgeable, gaining some experience with these skills in Canada seems to enhance their human capital and to benefit their job-seeking processes. Volunteer contributions to the network—while resulting in enhanced technical skills and practice with English language skills—also build social capital.

It is through interactions between volunteers and with network members at VCN that trust and social capital are built. Kunz (2003, 33) states: “Unlike human capital that is observable through diplomas and certificates, social capital is less tangible because it exists in the relations among individuals.” Social capital is a “public good” created through social interactions. Putnam (2000, 21) defines it as “social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity.” According to Kunz (2003, 33), “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.” 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 and memberships.

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. (Volunteer 9)

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. (Volunteer 2)

Put 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). According to Kunz (2003, 34), “bridging capital is . . . essential for immigrants to expand their networks beyond their own ethnic community and to acculturate into the receiving society.” Conversely, social networks that bond members of a group to the exclusion of others are useful for “getting by” (Putnam 2000, 22). Kunz states (2003, 34) that “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 (Kunz 2003, 34).

The human and social capital building that occurs within VCN’s offices is supported by a prevailing openness toward diversity. In accordance with its vision statement, VCN endeavours to be inclusive and multicultural in its efforts to provide access to electronic creativity and broad exchanges of ideas and knowledge (Kunz 2003). Breton (1997) suggests that “participation beyond ethnic or racial boundaries is partially a function of the openness of the associations, networks and structures of the host society.” He adds: “The structure of opportunities for participation is crucial” (9).

How does social inclusion fit with human and social capital? Duncan (2003, 31) suggests that “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 goes on to note 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.” 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.

As an inclusive, diverse network, VCN fosters social inclusion and social capital. Valuing diversity, providing opportunities for participation and personal development, recognizing competence, creating access to public places and opportunities for interaction, and belonging are some of the ways that VCN is socially inclusive (Shookner 2002, 1). Volunteers 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, elements of being socially included. 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. (Volunteer 8)

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. (Volunteer 8)
Over time, volunteers’ comfort levels increase and through their enhanced capabilities, 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. These experiences are illustrations of Breton’s (1997, 6) 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.” 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 co-operation may be generally advantageous.” In this way, participation leads to increased social capital and inclusion.

The impacts of volunteering at VCN may continue for a lifetime, 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. 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. One obvious longer-term impact of volunteering at VCN is gaining local work-related experience, which may impact future economic stability.

Although this study’s fieldwork was completed in 2005, its findings remain valid. As of spring 2010, VCN’s volunteer program remains a sought after means of gaining “Canadian experience.” Indeed the idea that volunteerism is a significant means of stepping into the Canadian job market has become further entrenched in the Canadian settlement landscape and is even recommended on the federally funded employment seeking website WorkinginCanada.com (Canada 2010, 11). As of 2010, at VCN’s headquarters, the day-to-day volunteer roles and types of interactions remain similar to those in place in 2005, although a group of volunteers who work on Java programming projects now exists. Since 2005, the demand for dial-up Internet has generally decreased, which has resulted in fewer people making use of this service through VCN (and unfortunately annual individual donations to VCN have decreased as a result). However, the number of CAP sites resulting from partnerships with local community organizations, particularly in neighbourhood offices, has increased. These sites offer opportunities for their clients to receive basic computer and Internet training, as well as access to the Internet for purposes such as job seeking, settlement information, and free communication with friends and family in other countries. The benefits of these sites are significant; the potential termination of funding to this program would affect a great number of VCN’s clients adversely.
**CONCLUSIONS**

The VCN, communities within the Lower Mainland, and the volunteers themselves all benefit as interactions at the 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 in which to interact and share information with others, and providing a means to gain “Canadian experience” by providing 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.

Community networks, even smaller access points such as those funded by CAP, function as third places to provide information, social interaction, and support. Differing from pubs and coffee shops, CINS provide purposeful reasons for interaction. Arguably, VCN’s volunteer program provides an organizational structure for volunteers to act as vital sources of local economic development and innovation. The impacts of an ongoing opportunity for people from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds to engage purposefully in civic participation should not be underestimated.

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**NOTES**

1. This is not a situation that exists only at VCN. At St. Christopher House, in urban Toronto, the CN reports high numbers of recent immigrant volunteers. The online availability of a number of resources developed to aid volunteer coordinators who are working with recent immigrants also indicates that volunteering is a growing trend amongst newcomers. Examples of such resources include Volunteer Canada’s *Career Information for New Immigrants and Refugees: Needs Assessment Research* (2004), Calgary Immigrant Aid Society’s *Culturally Diverse Youth and Volunteerism: How to Recruit, Train and Retain Culturally Diverse Youth Volunteers* (2004), and the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy’s *Understanding Canadian Volunteers: Using the National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating to Build Your Volunteer Program* (2004).

2. It is possible that a higher percentage of volunteers do have Canadian work experience, but because it is not in their professional field, it is not listed on their résumés, which were the source for this figure.
Of VCN’s volunteers who began their volunteer experience during the 20-month period between 1 November 2003 and 30 June 2005, 80 percent also completed their duration within this timeframe.

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