



Sector Has Key Role in Rebuilding Social Capital

The secret is connection.

Nonprofit organizations should encourage closer links between service users and volunteers to reverse the decline of civil engagement, according to U.S. academic Robert Putnam, speaking at London's Third Sector Foresight Conference recently. The Harvard social scientist outlined his research on the demise of social capital in the United States, which shows people are less likely to be active in local groups than they were 25 years ago.

Asked how the voluntary sector could help stem this malaise, Putnam noted the importance of encouraging connections among people. "Volunteers should think of themselves not as merely doing *for* but doing *with*, focusing on the connectedness at least as much as the service being provided," he believes.

Putnam's research is echoed by the European Values Survey recently published by Britain's National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO). This survey noted a dramatic decline in social trust over the past decade, with seven out of 10 British people feeling that they can't trust others compared to almost half trusting others in 1990.

Andrea Passey, head of research at NCVO, says, "We must address how the many types of voluntary

organizations in the U.K. can foster social capital. Even more importantly, will the government recognize their potential to do so and enable them to act accordingly via changes to funding regimes?"

The European Values Survey found that young people and those with lower incomes are the most distrustful while those involved with

clubs, societies, or other nonprofit organizations are more trusting of others. Community groups and large charities enjoy high levels of confidence.

Details of the U.K. study of the European Values Survey are available on request. Contact Andrew Passey at NCVO, andrew.passey@ncvo-vol.org.uk. ■

10 Ways to Build Connections

1. **Create a newsletter, and use it to promote participation** in your organization, your community, and the nonprofit sector.
2. **Foster mentoring and coaching**, pairing new people—members, employees, volunteers, trustees, clients—with more experienced ones.
3. **Collaborate** in small ways. Ask local nonprofits to help you plan a joint meeting, share office space, swap mailing lists, exchange board members for a few months. Not only will you build connections, but you will pave the way for even greater collaborations.
4. **Use surveys and focus groups** to find out what people really want. Use the results to get people involved.
5. **Team up** with other local nonprofits to improve the community. For example, hold a litter clean-up day or renovate an old building.
6. **Never pass up a chance** to recruit supporters for your organization. Talk about your work wherever you go. When you see a spark of interest, ask for some specific commitment, no matter how small. Always ask for names of other people who might be interested.
7. **Listen** 80% of the time, and talk no more than 20% of the time.
8. **Offer creative ways**—flexible work hours, family volunteer days, on-line mentoring, virtual volunteering—for people to get involved.
9. **Use the connecting power of technology** to increase your global reach. You'll find it quicker and more convenient to use e-mail and fax when connecting with people in other countries.
10. **Get to know local reporters**, help them understand the importance of the nonprofit sector, and work with them to promote civic involvement.