

Volunteerism: Working Together for Everyone

by Tim Hennessy, GBA

At the City of Abbotsford, connection isn't just an HR initiative—It's woven into the culture. From coffee chats, lunch-hour hockey tournaments and yoga sessions, to seasonally themed staff crafts and contests, to community-wide volunteer opportunities, the City's efforts reflect a simple philosophy: When people feel seen and supported, engagement follows naturally.

"Our team represents a wide spectrum of talent, including operators, laborers, firefighters, engineers, planners, lawyers, accountants, lifeguards and more," says Alison Martens, senior people development manager, who leads the learning and development department for the City. "That variety is incredible, but it also means people work in very different environments. Our programs are designed to bridge those gaps."

Championed by the diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) volunteer staff committee, the city began background research in 2022 to update its diversity and inclusion strategy. This included connecting with comparable municipalities to understand their processes, models, and other commonly used connection and engagement approaches. In 2024, the city codified those insights into its Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Strategy 2024-2026 Plan, which focuses not only on attracting a talented and diverse workforce but also on retaining and developing a corporate culture that reflects the community and citizens it serves. This work was also supported by feedback received through the City of Abbotsford's annual employee engagement survey and focus group sessions, as well as the directions found in the City's Retention Strategy and Safety Culture Strategy. Through these combined strategic efforts, the City of Abbotsford supports staff engagement through multiple channels and approaches.

Martens noted that although staff share a common goal of serving and sup-



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porting the Abbotsford community, the City's varied roles and work environments mean many departments rarely interact directly with one another. These limited touchpoints constrained information sharing but also presented opportunities: chances for employees to gain a deeper understanding of each other's work and challenges, as well as to uncover new solutions that might otherwise remain hidden.

Strengthening Connections

To strengthen cross-departmental collaboration, Abbotsford's Volunteer Wellness Team Collective has been instrumental. Formed as a grassroots, staff-led group, the Collective takes a holistic view of well-being—physical, social and emotional—and organizes activities that bring people together across departments. Each October, the collective hosts an annual

interdepartmental pumpkin carving contest. This year, it drew more than 30 entries and nearly 200 votes. "It's one of those small lunch-hour traditions that helps to build belonging and community," Martens said. "Not to mention a healthy and good-hearted competitive spirit between departments!"

Other initiatives focus on fostering connections across the City's roughly 1,000 employees. Twice a year, the Coffee Chat Program pairs participants with a colleague they might never otherwise meet. Each duo has a simple task: Share a cup of coffee over their break, snap a selfie and make a connection. Some rounds have even included themes—for example, matching employees who speak the same first or second language. "It's a fun, low-barrier way to build relationships," says Martens. "And it reminds people we're part of something larger than our own teams."

For those who prefer a more spirited, friendly competition, the Thunderbird Cup offers a lunchtime round-robin hockey tournament complete with a trophy awarded to a new team each year. It's a lighthearted but competitive event that underscores a deeper truth about Abbotsford's approach to a culture of service: Programs work best when they feel authentic, inclusive and driven by the people behind them.

These initiatives only happen because volunteer representatives from multiple departments come together to organize and implement them.

The Power of Volunteerism

Through the city's volunteer services division, residents can make a meaningful impact in Abbotsford. Corporations and community groups can get involved through corporate volunteering and clean-ups, especially in April, when the

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city hosts its annual community-wide clean-up in celebration of Earth Day. From beautifying parks to supporting recreation programs and city-wide initiatives, there are a variety of opportunities for everyone to participate.

Park volunteers help keep Abbotsford beautiful through adopting a park, street or trail. Volunteers can pick up litter, maintain trail markers, remove invasive plant species, and report vandalism or maintenance issues. Recreational volunteers support local arenas, aquatics, fitness programs, day camps, and arts and sports programs at Abbotsford recreation centres, sharing their skills and enthusiasm to help others stay active and engaged.

Storm drain troopers protect local waterways by participating in the City's educational program, painting yellow fish symbols near storm drains to raise awareness about pollution prevention. Volunteers can also join the city's extended emergency support services team, providing critical assistance during emergencies and making a difference when it matters most.

Small Beginnings, Powerful Results

Abbotsford's approach remains refreshingly down-to-earth and cost conscious. "Start small," Martens advises other organizations. "Quick wins, like a kudos board or a coffee chat, can make a big difference. And know your people. Understand how they want to be recognized and what makes them feel valued."

For Abbotsford, that formula is working. In 2025, the City was recognized as an Employer of Choice by the *Canadian HR Reporter* in the 500+category: national recognition that highlights organizations excelling in attracting, developing and retaining employees, with a strong emphasis on workplace flexibility, employee well-being and career development. At the City of Abbotsford, volunteerism turns workplaces into communities united by values, not just objectives. It's part of how employees and community members connect, celebrate and grow—one coffee, one conversation and one clean-up at a time.

