



ENGAGE 2025



**STRENGTHENING CIVIC AND
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN NIAGARA**

About ENGAGE

On September 15, 2025, NEXTNiagara, an advisory council of the Greater Niagara Chamber of Commerce, hosted Engage 2025. The event brought together young professionals, employers, community leaders, and civic partners to explore how community and civic engagement can be strengthened in Niagara for people under 40.

Weak civic engagement has far-reaching consequences for communities. The infrastructure of social capital makes coordination and shared problem-solving easier. Lack of civic engagement can deepen silos and disinformation bubbles in which economic outcomes, education, crime control, and even health can decline for a community. This is supported by a significant body of research.

At Engage, expert speakers like Dr. Roxanne Cohen and Mark John Stewart spoke to how low civic engagement manifests itself on the ground, especially for young people: lower wellbeing and capacity, defeatism in the face of overlapping social crises, a lack of public trust in institutions and norms.

Engage was held with a focus on community and civic engagement to consider how to turn that ship around. The event aimed to clarify what civic engagement means to young people, what barriers prevent or impair engagement, and solutions that employers, institutions, and local leaders can enact to make involvement easier, more accessible, and more inclusive. The goal was to offer practical insights that would help elevate engagement in ways that young people found to be meaningful and help to erase barriers.

Engage used facilitated roundtable discussions to draw out these insights. This report summarizes the common elements, recurring themes, and points of consensus across all tables. The separate groups at the event converged on common challenges to engagement, and common conditions required to rebuild participation and trust.



Findings

What Community Engagement Means Today

A common thread among participants was that engagement was not so much about formal volunteering, and more a sense of being connected, heard, and able to contribute meaningfully at a local level. Engagement had to stem from a sense of belonging, a sense of purpose, and a feeling that the engagement had a real and visible impact.

Many participants felt that commonly-held ideas of engagement had not kept pace with changes in demographics, technology, or shifting expectations around time, work, and family. This is not to say that “new” inherently meant “better” to this group. There was broad agreement that digital participation could be deceptive, for instance; online platforms can support awareness and connection, but they can also seduce users into a falsely elevated sense of participation and cannot replace in-person relationships.

Two-way engagement was a desire that emerged strongly. Participants did not want a purely contributory model of engagement; they preferred models which were accessible and connected to outcomes. Put simply, they said people are more willing to participate when they understand why their involvement matters and can see what it does. They were unwilling to put their time and energy into a “black hole” from which nothing they could see emerged, strongly preferring to be engaged and consulted on what they were doing, and to be shown the results.



Findings

Barriers to Engagement for Young People

Strong consensus emerged around the barriers to civic and community participation among younger people. Some of these barriers were structural, others psychological.

Time and capacity pressures

Young people must face the demands of their jobs, and are more likely to have multiple jobs. In the under-40 age group, it is also more likely that people have young children themselves, and/or older relatives in need of care, which places additional demands on their time. Young people often feel that they don't have the bandwidth for community contributions on top of their personal obligations.



Rigid engagement models

Attendees felt that the structures of community engagement options had often not been designed with them in mind. Simple examples include daytime meetings, impractical for young people with jobs and who are at stages in their careers where their work schedules are set by superiors rather than defined by themselves. Heavy onboarding processes and long-term commitments were deterrents for people whose time is constrained and valuable. Unpaid roles often don't align with participants' skills or interests. Additionally, participants consider informal engagement (helping neighbours, mentoring, local action) as legitimate. They suggested that institutions should consider engagement outside their own formal structures in the same way.



Cost and access barriers

Rising costs of living are affecting the young. Transportation is an issue; in a region like Niagara, a lack of car ownership is a significant barrier to civic engagement compared to a region with a well-developed public transit network, such as Toronto. Without an automobile, even if a public transit option is available, the time required is much greater and eats into the already-limited free time for young people. Under-40s with young children must also find childcare in order to participate; this is an additional cost and logistical headache that deters many.



Fear and confidence gaps

Many participants at the conference reported feeling unwelcome, intimidated, or simply uncertain as to how to begin. Onboarding processes could be off-putting, and this problem was particularly pronounced in spaces dominated by older or more established participants.



Low visibility and unclear pathways

Opportunities are hard-to-find or poorly advertised. Without existing networks, young people are finding it hard to connect to opportunities for civic engagement. Even for those with motivation, finding ways to get engaged is challenging. Participants also noted that social networks have changed post-pandemic. Informal networks are weaker, making it hard to discover new opportunities or to feel comfortable entering new spaces.



Distrust of civic institutions

Previous experiences where participants did not feel heard, where transparency was limited, or where follow-through was lacking often left a sour taste. When the total number of experiences is limited, a single bad experience can weigh heavily and produce an outsized reaction when it would be more dismissible in a longer and broader history. When it comes to youth engagement, first impressions count. Some tables also raised Indigenous and equity perspectives, emphasizing that meaningful engagement must be designed with communities rather than for them, respect cultural protocols, and prioritize safety and dignity. While not raised universally, these insights reinforce broader calls for flexibility and trust-building.



Findings

Role of Employers and Institutions

There was a clear consensus that employers had a critical role to play, and could either be a pathway or a barrier to community engagement. The right workplace policies could produce high incentives to community engagement; the wrong ones could shut it down. Participants widely agreed that engagement should not be treated as an “extra,” but as something that can be integrated into work and organizational culture.

Commonly supported approaches included:



Flexible work arrangements, including paid volunteer days, flex time, and hybrid work options.

These would allow employees free time to engage in civic engagement when it was needed by the employee and by the institution or activity involved, rather than when convenient for the employer. Proposals like paid volunteer days go a step further and actually incentivize and normalize civic engagement as part of the work culture.

Team-based and skills-based volunteering that matches employee strengths to community needs.



Employers know their teams; by utilizing their networks and matching employees to programs, they can help solve the issues of both finding engagement opportunities and delivering meaningful impact.



Visible leadership buy-in and mentorship opportunities that normalize civic involvement.

Employers can create a culture of engagement, not only encouraging participation but being seen to participate themselves. Engagement is more likely when it permeates through an employer’s culture rather than existing as a line in a mission, vision, or values statement.

Participants also noted that small and medium-sized employers may need additional guidance or support to understand the value of civic participation and how to implement supportive practices.

Disconnect from Civic Institutions

Across discussions, participants agreed that disconnection from civic institutions is a major concern. This disconnection is driven by limited civic literacy, opaque processes, and unwelcoming environments. Attendees reported that even when they reached out to official institutions, many never received a response. Misunderstandings of how local government, boards, or councils function, how decisions are made, or how public input is used are common. For young people, this is a low-information environment.

Consensus solutions focused on:

Clear, plain-language communication about how to engage and what to expect.



Institutions cannot assume prior knowledge or experience and must make communications clear to those who have never engaged before, as this is the demographic most worth engaging in the long-term.



Greater transparency around outcomes and decision-making.

Many participants not only reported feeling disconnected from the process but also that the results were invisible. Greater transparency restores that feeling of full participation and of having an impact.

Creating spaces that feel respectful, inclusive, and safe, particularly for younger, newcomer, and marginalized participants.



Institutions should create an environment that is suited not only to their currently-engaged base, but to the demographics they want to attract.



Providing low-barrier entry points that allow people to start small and build confidence over time.

Low-effort, low-commitment opportunities can serve as a funnel into deeper commitments. Institutions may need to let go of the idea that engagement must be all-or-nothing and be willing to create opportunities for those with very limited time and bandwidth.

Recommendations

Immediate

Improve visibility of community and civic opportunities through centralized, plain-language communication channels. Focus on messaging for those currently unengaged and in ways that meet young people where they are.

Introduce flexible, short-term, and skills-based volunteer opportunities that respect time constraints. Focus on opportunities that are compatible with limited availability and multiple, non-negotiable other commitments.

Encourage employers to pilot paid volunteer time, team-based engagement, or community days. Build engagement into the workplace and remove the work/life balance question from the equation.

Design engagement opportunities that prioritize psychological safety, clear expectations, and early wins. Normalize informal and hyper-local volunteering as legitimate forms of engagement.

Medium-Term

Develop structured pathways for young professionals to engage, including mentorship, peer-based participation, and onboarding supports.

Support employers, particularly SMEs and smaller non-profits, in building cultures that value civic participation.

Increase civic literacy through workshops, “how-to” guides, and practical education on local systems.

Reduce practical barriers by exploring transportation supports, childcare considerations, and accessible scheduling.

Strengthen partnerships between business organizations, municipalities, employers, and community organizations to co-design engagement opportunities.

Long-Term

Modernize civic and volunteer institutions to reflect contemporary work, family, and social realities.

Embed flexibility, transparency, and accountability into civic engagement processes.

Foster a regional culture that values participation, recognizes contribution, and clearly communicates impact.

Position civic engagement as both a community good and a pathway for leadership development, workforce readiness, and long-term regional vitality.

Persistent Themes

While the report reflects consensus across discussions (except where specifically noted), several themes were present across all tables with few to no exceptions, although sometimes expressed in different ways. Those dominant themes are:

Safety, belonging, and purpose are prerequisites to engagement for young people.

Any engagement strategy that does not engage with these issues will fail.

Flexibility is essential, not optional.

Engagement opportunities that cannot fit around employment, the needs of a young family, and work/life balance are at serious risk of being ignored by young people.

Employers are key leverage points for increasing participation.

Building civic engagement into the workplace may be the fastest and most effective way to build civic engagement overall.

Trust is rebuilt through transparency, respect, and visible impact.

Young people want to feel welcomed and heard, and they want to see that what they do makes a difference. Engagement models that accomplish this will resonate with them.





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