



Is it too late to engage the baby boomers as volunteers?

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ONN invited Cathy Taylor, Executive Director of the Volunteer Centre of Guelph/Wellington to share her thoughts on two papers that focus on an emerging issue of significance to scholars and practitioners - the impact of the aging of baby boomers on the nonprofit sector. Thanks Cathy!

Is it too late to engage the baby boomers as volunteers?

I have listened and participated in many debates recently that focus on why people volunteer and why those motivations are important. Clearly, if we understand why people in our neighbourhoods, communities, and our province volunteer – then we can further engage more people or access more time out of the volunteers we have. And this influx of volunteers will grow our organizations and build our communities. The role that volunteers play in our organizations uniquely distinguishes the community benefit sector (or nonprofit sector) from the public and private sectors in our country. Volunteers are our lifeblood.

But the traditional definition of volunteering is now under debate. With so much renewed emphasis on service learning and community service, is volunteering really “giving one’s time freely”? Is the assumption that volunteering should only be construed as an altruistic method of spending one’s time now passé? Is there really a hierarchy of motivations and the “real” volunteers do it for “the right reasons”? Are there “wrong reasons” to volunteer?

Recent studies in the US that focused on our aging population and volunteering has shed some light on how we understand these issues. The baby boomer demographic has enormous implications for our society and our economy and provides us with an excuse to reconsider and re-frame our debates.

One paper called: “Is Volunteering Work, Prosocial Behavior, or Leisure?” lays out the paradigms of how volunteering is viewed by summarizing three models:

1. Volunteering is unpaid work.
2. Volunteering is prosocial behaviour; that is a form of civic and political engagement focused on altruism and reciprocity
3. Volunteering is Leisure; volunteering is seen as a lifestyle choice



These models were tested by surveying retirees to see if they could predict who would volunteer once retired – and see which of these models is most likely to explain volunteering patterns. Most interestingly, there was little correlation to the assumption that volunteering is a replacement for work, in any way, for early retirees. In fact, the single strongest predictor of whether or not a person volunteering when they retired was their past volunteering experience. It is this continuity in voluntary participation over the lifetime of a citizen that is the best predictor of their engagement in retirement.

Another paper: “Respecting Difference Without Privileging Visibility: Prospects for Volunteering and Civic Engagement by Aging Baby Boomers” also contends that one size does not fit all – there are different views and approaches to aging which our sectors needs to take into consideration. This paper describes three prevailing, and contradictory, views about boomers’ future civic engagement:

1. boomers will be less involved in civic and volunteer activities than their parents
2. boomers will re-engage, returning to their activist roots
3. boomers will engage in new and different ways, reframing the concepts of work and retirement as they go

Although no conclusion is reached and an alternate conceptual model is proposed – that of socioemotional selectivity theory (throughout one’s life, certain selections cultivate a person’s network and social patterns of interaction) – there are some strong conclusions that reinforce the need for our sector to rethink our engagement.

Why is this important? It sheds light on an issue we should be, if we’re not already, grappling with: how do we engage the baby boomer population as they retire to encourage them to support our community benefit organizations – because we need volunteers more than ever as our community’s services expand to serve this exact same cohort.

There is no SINGLE motivation for volunteering. And we all know this. People volunteer for different reasons all the time. It is our job as community benefit organizations to keep our eye on the prize – to ensure that despite various motivations and a vast array of volunteer tasks and activities, volunteers understand that they have the power to build their community and they are doing so through their volunteer work, every single day.

And yes, I believe that there is also a self-interested component to volunteering. Even my grandmother’s generation who were seen to be motivated solely by altruism, were also motivated by self interest. She volunteered with Women’s Institutes throughout Ontario to make her community a better place but also volunteered to escape from what could sometimes be the tedious work in the farmhouse for a while to play with her friends in what was a respectable forum in which to do so.



We need to reconsider that volunteering is not just about making a difference (that is often our sales pitch to prospective volunteers), but also about becoming an engaged community member through small steps. “Defining volunteering as a membership, communal or even leisure activity may be a more successful strategy for recruiting volunteers than defining it as ‘productive work’.” And improving the management of volunteers and the infrastructure needed to support them is critical to our future, as pointed out by these authors – “Well-run programs will attract older volunteers just as they will attract people of all ages.”

Have we missed the boat? If the single most important predictor of retirees to volunteer means is their previous volunteer experience, we should have started fostering the baby boomer cohort years ago to ensure we would capture their interests and time as volunteers when they retired. This sheds even more importance – even more than we thought – on our activities to engage youth, thirtysomethings and those in their last ten years of working - to participate in our communities. Because if we motivate and inspire them now, then we won’t have to motivate them later. They will have experienced the fun, socialization, reward and satisfaction of building their communities and they’ll be hooked.

There is no doubt that organizations in the community benefit sector need to rethink their volunteer recruitment activities in order to tap the time and the talents of the millions of people born between 1946 and 1964. We’ve got some work to do.

Is Volunteering Work, Prosocial Behavior, or Leisure? An Empirical Study by Susan M. Chambré of Baruch College, City University of New York and Christopher J. Einolf of the School for Public Service at DePaul University is an empirical study that analyzes the validity of three paradigms of volunteerism which guide research and practice. This paper may be found at:

http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/spa/researchcenters/nonprofitstrategy/documents/Chambre_Einolf_IsVolunteeringWork.pdf

Respecting Difference Without Privileging Visibility: Prospects for Volunteering and Civic Engagement by Aging Baby Boomers by Susan M. Chambré of Baruch College, City University of New York and and F. Ellen Netting from Virginia Commonwealth University offers a broader policy analysis of these issues. This paper may be found at http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/spa/researchcenters/nonprofitstrategy/documents/ChambreNetting_RespectingDifference.pdf