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Senior Volunteers

Solutions waiting to happen

ELISABETH HOODLESS

SUMMARY

The focus of this chapter is on senior volunteers who represent an expanding resource offering abundant skills, time and experience. Governments worldwide are seeking to harness this energy, but with mixed results.

The chapter argues that most of these 'baby boomers' are looking for challenging opportunities that will harness their expertise and availability. However, few will grasp the chance to push a hospital trolley for two hours every Thursday indefinitely. What is it, then, that will attract senior volunteers into service and make the most use of their available time, skills and experience? In this chapter Hoodless draws on her extensive experience to tease out some of the factors that make for their successful involvement.

Many senior volunteers will want to solve problems directly, often harnessing their friends and former work associates –

such as the former medical practitioners who run North Carolina's free health centres or those in the UK who offer a free legal advice and representation service for parents wanting to secure the legitimate rights of disabled children. A related factor is that senior volunteers value their autonomy; in the UK a 10 000 strong programme is entirely volunteer organised, employing fewer than ten staff to do the tasks volunteers do not enjoy. Cross-generational initiatives are also popular and promote community cohesion.

Introduction

Senior volunteer energy and availability is expanding worldwide as people enjoy longer, healthier lives. The number of older people, as a proportion of the population, is growing faster than that of the under-25s, and since 1988 there has been growing recognition of their potential as volunteers – partly because of the number of hours they are able to give after retiring and partly because of their skills, wisdom and energy. In other words, older people are no longer seen as a 'problem' but as a resource. However, enlisting this growing resource needs innovative new approaches if it is to attract and retain 21st century seniors.

Changing age profiles

The pyramids which represent the shape of populations in Australia, the USA and UK are rapidly turning downside up 'as the proportion of under 45s shrinks and their seniors' expand. For example, in Australia, the proportion of the population aged 55-64 is projected to increase 38 per cent and the 65+ group, by 20 per cent. As the under 45s decline, the sharpest fall is in the three youngest groups (Wilkinson & Bittman 2002).

Assuming that the propensity to volunteer does not change, a substantial increase in available volunteers is approaching. Surveys reveal that between 1998 and 2021 every adult Australian will volunteer an extra two hours a year – in contrast with Robert Putnam's projections that volunteer availability would fall away (Putnam 2000).

Australians born after the Second World War are volunteering more than those born during the war. The evidence is that the number of volunteers (Freedman 1999) and the length of their commitment are likely to increase.

Figures for the US and UK show similar trends and amongst the 55+ age group, the availability of seniors is especially marked. Not only is the US rapidly approaching the point where 25 per cent of the population will be 65+, but retirees have more time available. 'Retirement frees up 25 hours a week for men and 18 for women' (Freedman 1999).

Growing research reveals another benefit in the positive impact of volunteering on seniors' health. For example, a University of Michigan study reported that civic engagement reduced participants' blood pressure and cholesterol levels, and lengthened their lives.

Seniors have lived more time, acquired more knowledge, experience and, in many instances, wisdom than other members of society. The time seniors have left to live may give them a special reason to engage in civic and service work: it becomes their legacy. According to the late psychologist Erik Erikson, the hallmark of successful later-life development can be 'I am what survives of me.'

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Attracting seniors into service

The task of involving this growing number of volunteers is not simple. Many 20th century approaches will not attract 21st century seniors. Stuffing envelopes or collecting letters are unlikely to attract them from their alternative opportunities.

In the UK, a number of major agencies such as the Women's Royal Voluntary Service, St John's Ambulance, and National Association of Hospital and Community Friends report a rising age profile complicated by the non-availability of insurance for the 85+. Their challenge is to recruit from the newly retired 40 to 65 group.

Although older Americans serve less than any other group, spending half their time watching television, a Harris poll reveals that a majority of the older respondents lamented the loss of usefulness (Freedman 1999).

A poll by Civic Ventures of 803 Americans aged 50 to 75 found that the majority were keen to become more involved in civic activities. Sixty-five per cent viewed

retirement as a new chapter in life and an opportunity to remain engaged. Only 25 per cent saw retirement as 'a well deserved rest.'

In Canada, research by Stoffman and Foot (1997) predicts that the non-profit sector will see a surge, as volunteering tends to increase with age. 'This is also when, after years in the corporate world, you rediscover the idealistic side of your personality.'

Many 'baby boomers' are now experiencing a time of 'mid-life crisis'. For many, especially men, it is the movement of a mindset from success to significance. And as Martin Luther King put it, 'Everyone can be great for everyone can serve.'

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Government efforts in the US and UK

Given the increase in the number of volunteers and the growth in the number of hours available, how have governments responded to this enormous new resource? The US was the first to respond with three initiatives launched under the umbrella of 'The National Senior Service Corps'. The Foster Grandparent Programme (1965) recruited older people to work with needy children; the Senior Companions Programme (1968) matched older volunteers to frail elderly people, enabling them to retain their independence in their own homes; and the Retired and Senior Volunteer Programme (1971) links retirees with assignments drawing on their skills. By 1997, 500 000 retired volunteers were involved nationwide. They were organised by paid professionals reporting locally and accountable to the Federal Government for the \$163m expenditure entailed by the requirement to match funds from non-government sources.

More recently, in June 2003, the US Congress further supported the efforts of senior volunteers when it helpfully enacted legislation to protect retired and uninsured physicians, who offer voluntary services, from legal action by patients.

In addition, the US government's Peace Corps began to increase its number of senior volunteers. The unique blend of expertise and determination to 'leave a legacy' that senior volunteers bring to service has led to a high level of demand from overseas partners. Whilst few were involved when President Kennedy created the Peace Corps in 1961, some eight per cent, (over 500), were 50+ by the turn of the century.

In the UK in March 2000, Prime Minister Blair announced the launch of the 'National Experience Corps'. In England the government committed a budget of £17m over three years focused on recruiting one million volunteers in the 40-65 age group through a non-charitable company. A massive press and radio advertising campaign was launched in 2002, but most volunteers have been recruited by a network of 'animators' employed nationwide. Results so far have not yet met expectations.

In 2000, the Scottish Executive contracted with Community Service Volunteers (CSV) to develop six pathfinder projects in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Stirling, Moray, West Dunbarton and South Lanarkshire. Volunteers responded swiftly to the chance to tutor school pupils, support the patients of family doctors, and to design and launch their own initiatives with support but not direction from paid staff.

The Welsh Assembly similarly drew on CSV's prior experience to recruit senior volunteers to enrich schools and health services and also to invest their skills, training and expertise in other ways. For example, a former chief executive of the Bank of Wales helped Blaenau Gwent Educational Authority to devise a strategy for excluded children, drawing on his project planning skills.

As far back as 1972, CSV in the UK recognised that the new generation of seniors was growing fast and that seniors were keen to engage 'in their own right' rather than as 'handmaidens' managed by a volunteer organiser from the government or not-for-profit sector. In response, it launched 'Action in Retirement' in 1972 in England's Northwest. Persuading a retired professor and the retired former leader of the YMCA to take a lead was not difficult. Working in a rural area, Cumbria, however, brought a different challenge; the readily recruited volunteers were accustomed to claiming expenses in their working lives and were not disposed to change in retirement. Hospitals and schools, for example, welcomed the help but had no budget line for expenses. After some years, the Joseph Rowntree Trust committed funds and the initiative was handed over to local management.

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A model for senior service

In the USA, the Experience Corps was launched in 1996 by Public/Private Ventures and continues through Civic Ventures in Berkeley, California. With start up grants of \$1.3m, the organisation aims to focus on ways to put 'baby boomer' retirees to work on community service efforts aimed at solving America's most pressing problems. Unlike federal programmes, it offers regular meetings for volunteers and a daily site to work on. It is open to all retired professionals, not just those who are poor. They must complete 40 hours of training and commit to 15 hours a week for a year. There is a monthly stipend of \$150.

Marc Freedman (1999) outlines the four strands from which the model was developed:

- Ideas articulated in a concept paper by John W. Gardner, former Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) during the creation of both Medicare and the Administration on Ageing, which outlined the contours of a new approach designed to involve older Americans in central roles serving the community, while emphasising their ingenuity, leadership and self-governing potential;
- Gerontological research conducted at Johns Hopkins University;
- Recommendations emerging from a research project undertaken by Public/Private Ventures (P/PV), a non-profit organisation that develops innovative strategies to help disadvantaged children and youth; and
- Pressures for reform of the Corporation for National Service's (CNS) National Senior Service Corps (NSSC).

The model has shown a capacity 'to influence public policy and leverage funds at a variety of levels. The state of Ohio put \$2 million into taking a reading-focused version of the project to eight cities in the state; and the Philadelphia school district is expanding the project to new clusters within its jurisdiction. In addition local foundations have shown a willingness to invest in expansion after the initial pilot: in Portland, for example, the Meyer Memorial Trust has put \$150 000 into expanding Experience Corps, while the Hayden Foundation has joined the Pinkerton Foundation in supporting efforts in New York' (Freedman 1999).

After demonstrating successful initiatives in nine cities, further research is underway. 'Civic Ventures is conducting research to explore the potential for service by older adults and identify the most significant needs of children and potential partner organisations in specific geographical regions, including San Mateo County, CA and Kansas City, MO' writes Freedman (1999). 'This research project may be extended to an east coast city. The exploratory studies will culminate in reports which will be used to influence public policy and funding streams to support further activity that provides opportunities for community involvement by older people. Civic Ventures is also providing technical assistance to CNS on the development of its senior service programmes.'

'Civic Ventures is working to move away from establishing showcases and pilots, to cultivating the replication networks that could vastly expand the contribution of older adults to society in the coming decades, developing replication, technical assistance materials and other tools to help national and local organisations adapt the Experience Corps model to their own particular circumstances to better engage older people in the strengthening of communities across the country.'

Innovative approaches prepare for the 21st century

Some of the most successful projects engaging senior volunteers are those that have been self-initiated and specifically exploit the acquired skills and abilities of the volunteers. Such projects span significant social, economic and environmental areas and frequently involve the offering of professional services.

Self-initiated projects

Triggered by an offer from retired headmistress Edith Kahn, the 'Action in Retirement' initiative was relaunched nationwide in 1988 as the Retired and Senior Volunteer Programme.

Its approach was mould-breaking: members were invited to join groups of ten or twelve volunteers in their community organised by one of their members. Groups hold regular meetings to identify opportunities and plan their programmes. As groups grow, they divide like amoeba. Currently almost 10 000 volunteers engage nationwide, sharing responsibilities and sometimes negotiating contracts to enable them to employ help to undertake the necessary but not always attractive administrative work.

Popular tasks include support to the patients of family doctors, help with budgeting, practical help with travel to appointments, sharing parenting skills or regular telephone calls to remind patients to take their medication. Group leaders negotiate tasks and then take responsibility for their execution, providing relief to the doctor and flexibility for the volunteers. Holidays or sickness can be covered by a colleague, a facility much valued by this generation of travellers. Moreover, this direct relationship has produced the kind of support that no job specification in a classic 'human resources' process could have envisaged, like the free massages volunteered by a retired physiotherapist.

No one is too old to participate. In one residential home, a bed-bound volunteer aged 105, organises her fellow residents in knitting jumpers for penguins through one of the CSV's Radio Action Desks with the BBC. Off the coast of Queensland, Australia, many penguins mortally poison themselves by licking off oil from spills. Fitted with a jumper, they cannot reach the oil and the wool absorbs it. Regular

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audio tapes are exchanged reporting on progress; broadcast updates greatly encourage the volunteer knitters.

More than one third of volunteers serve in schools; many help with reading and numeracy. Others work in teams supporting teachers organising citizenship education. A number of former head teachers mentor newly appointed heads.

Not only is this approach very cost effective – Community Service Volunteers employs just eight back up staff for almost 10 000 volunteers – but it meets the volunteers' needs to refresh their social circle at a time when shrinkage is inevitable.

It also ensures that opportunities match volunteers' interests. For example, in the Isle of Wight, a group of keen gardeners (the UK's most popular leisure activity) identified the pain and grief suffered by older people unable to tend their plots. Their solution was not individualised help, far from it. They formed multi-skilled teams – grass and hedge cutters, weeders, planters and others – to liaise and converse with the resident.

The volunteers' aspirations to socialise and tackle real needs were met. The residents were delighted. Demand escalated; the need for heavier duty equipment became urgent. So the group organised a flower show to raise funds and now owns trucks, massive lawn mowers and mechanical hedge cutters. From the island's point of view, the flower show also increases tourism to the island, its major industry.

Similar enterprise was demonstrated by two seniors in Namur, Belgium, renowned for its handcrafted chocolates. On retirement, they volunteered their services to their town council, but no outlet for their energy could be identified. So they asked what the town's main problem was. 'Jobs for people with learning difficulties' came the reply. Their response was practical. Through their professional contacts in Japan, they negotiated a huge and profitable contract for regular supplies of chocolates. Then they visited all the chocolate makers to invite them to participate, on just one condition, that they employed two people with learning difficulties to help in their expansion. No public official or paid official could have achieved such an outcome, but the volunteers' mix of time, energy, skill and contacts delivered the results.

Cross-generational developments

In addition to the pioneering work with school pupils, a number of cross-generational developments have emerged. For example, in the UK, demonstrators camped in trees to prevent the extension of the runway to Manchester airport. At first they were dismissed as youthful enthusiasts. Later it emerged that their food was brought fresh and hot daily by a network of senior volunteers who also brought dry socks and did their laundry. When this partnership emerged, the authorities began to take matters seriously, for seniors are respected for their commitment to exercising their votes.

Professional services

In both the US and UK, groupings such as lawyers, accountants and doctors have organised 'pro bono' activities – avoiding the use of the word 'volunteer'. Médecins Sans Frontières fly round the globe giving two weeks annually to serve the poor. Accountants audit charities and sit on boards. Lawyers represent those unable to afford representation. Many continue to serve after retirement, drawing social support from their younger peers.

Others manage their own involvement, such as newly retired medical staff from England's Nottingham University medical school who often invest the first six months of their 'retirement' in the African hospital linked to their medical school. In North Carolina, USA, retired doctors have collaborated to operate a medical centre of such quality that those whose income makes them ineligible complain they are being excluded.

What impact do volunteers make?

In certain areas and activities the impact of senior volunteers is quantifiable and measurable, whereas other aspects of their contribution – e.g. to increased social cohesion and strengthened democratic practices – are no less significant, but not as easily measured.

For example, in supporting family doctors, volunteers reduce the number of prescriptions by 30 per cent and hospital appointments by 35 per cent (Pietroni et al. 1991: 83-90). No doctor likes to send a patient away empty-handed; the support of a volunteer is more highly valued than a hospital visit or a script. And volunteer involvement hugely increases the quality of life for hard pressed doctors.

Volunteers working in schools giving a child an hour a week can raise reading levels by a year in one term (Moseley 2000).

In California, volunteers supporting families where children are being abused have reduced the level of abuse by 24 per cent (Minicucci Associates 2002).

In Redding, California, crime is prevented by seniors patrolling on bicycles.

Less measurable is the impact on social capital or what Professor Putnam calls 'the principle of generalised reciprocity' (2000). When trust and making connections is extended to other people, we know sociability is transformed into a capacity for democratic organisation – critical to the sustaining and renovation of economic and political institutions. Networks, norms and trust built for one common purpose can be used for another. Volunteers meeting to plan future volunteering activities may also develop Manchester airport style initiatives.

Motivators and barriers

In Western Australia, a research project was set up with the particular aim of identifying the necessary factors for the successful enlistment and retention of senior 'baby boomers' in volunteer service. The authors observed that, 'No matter how

motivations or volunteers are categorised or labelled, it is almost a truism to state that there are nearly as many motivations and reasons for volunteering as there are individual volunteers' (Team Consultants 2001). They cited other researchers (Heartbeat Trends 2001) who describe 'categories of volunteers and their fulfilment needs: nurturers (emotional connection and self-worth through nurturing); socialisers (a sense of belonging through social interaction); and workers (self-worth through being useful and productive)' (*ibid*).

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Judy Esmond and her fellow researchers, however, suggest a different perspective. Through their research they identified seven strategic focus areas captured by the acronym BOOMNET (see below). They found that whatever the initial motivations or needs of 'baby boomer' volunteers, they are unlikely to commence or continue volunteer work for an organisation if the seven strategic focus areas are not in place. They also observed that this finding is congruent with Marc Freedman's experience in the US Experience Corps.

Boomnet research developed an acronym to codify the factors which motivate and deflect volunteers:

- B** Boomers
- O** Organised
- O** Openness
- M** Meaningful
- N** Needs
- E** Education
- T** Time

B is for understanding the aspirations and characteristics of the 'Baby boomers' themselves (born between 1946 and 1963). 'Baby boomers' do see themselves becoming more involved in volunteering in the future, and have clear ideas about what they expect from their volunteering experiences.

O is for organised, professional and well-managed organisations. 'Baby boomers' will re-shape and re-define many organisations in the non-profit sector as they will not volunteer for, or continue with, organisations that cannot provide a professional service not only to their clients, but also to their volunteers.

O is for openness and supportive organisational environment where volunteers are truly valued, including evaluation and feedback; support; insurance; occupational health and safety; and the valuing of volunteers. In this regard, the key elements present in successful organisations were: (i) an in-built, planned and on-going process of consultation with and evaluation by their volunteers; and (ii) a real valuing and appreciation of volunteers by everyone in the organisation.

M is for meaningful, interesting, creative and challenging volunteering opportunities being offered to 'baby boomer' volunteers by organisations.

N is for meeting the needs of 'baby boomer' volunteers as they are now asking: 'Will this volunteering experience meet my own personal needs, not just the organisation's needs?'

E is for education rather than simply 'traditional' training, as 'baby boomers' are interested in education and learning opportunities that develop their own skills, benefiting themselves and the organisation. Successful organisations need to monitor and evaluate, in consultation with volunteers, whether the training is needed, effective, relevant and above all well presented.

T is for time, as 'baby boomers' feel they do not have enough time to volunteer. They are increasingly unlikely to commit for the long term. Organisations need to develop a range of volunteering opportunities that are short term, time specific and flexible.

... Depending on how organisations adapt, change and respond to the 'baby boomer' generation, some organisations will experience 'boomtime' as their volunteer numbers soar, and for others it will be 'gloomtime!' (Team Consultants 2001)

In most nations the not-for-profit sector is better able to adapt than the state sector. Nevertheless, as noted earlier, many state schools have grasped the opportunity to enrich their offer and calm their classrooms by enlisting senior volunteers.

Another issue is that some employees sometimes feel threatened, or expect to feel threatened by volunteers with more skills or experience than they have, whether in the state sector or not. However, careful preparation normally ensures that their fears are dispersed by the pleasure and support the volunteers bring.

Volunteer programmes in rural areas face particular challenges. For example, most volunteers prefer to walk to their service project, but in the countryside this may well not be possible and the alternatives are costly.

Conclusion

The number of older people is growing fast thanks to increases in longevity and many of them are keen to volunteer service. However, the post-1945 generation of 'baby boomers' is less willing to stuff envelopes and more likely to respond to opportunities that draw on their expertise. Research suggests that 'baby boomers are set to re-shape and re-define volunteering and organisations will need to adopt new approaches and strategies to attract and recruit these Baby Boomers to volunteer' (Team Consultants 2001).

Organisations will need to adopt new approaches and strategies to attract and recruit 'baby boomers' to volunteer

Seven strategic focus areas have been identified for organisations wishing to capture the 'baby boomer' volunteer. Not least amongst these is that seniors' tolerance of poor organisation is low and a significant proportion will prefer to organise their own participation. Setting the right conditions in place, however, will enable organisations to tap into an enormously valuable resource.

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