

50+

Volunteering:
Working for
Stronger Communities



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50+ Volunteering: Working for Stronger Communities

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■ ABOUT THIS HANDBOOK

“America’s burgeoning older population is poised to become the new trustees of civic life in this country. These individuals have the time to care; they have the skills and experience required; they have the personal need to contribute in new ways. This match, between the untapped resources of older Americans and the needs of American communities, constitutes the greatest opportunity presented by America’s aging.”

Marc Freedman, Prime Time

To realize the vast potential of the baby boomers and older adults to strengthen their communities through volunteering, organizations nationwide must begin to create innovative programs that tap the tidal wave of talents and experiences of this huge group. The Points of Light Foundation and Volunteer Center National Network, along with their many business, nonprofit, government partners, and others have the resources and positioning to be catalysts of this innovation. The goal of this handbook is to spark and deepen these groups’ work with baby boomers and older adult volunteers.

More specifically, this publication seeks to:

- Offer information and resources to inform program creation, proposal development, and fundraising efforts at the local level
- Provide effective practices, tips and suggestions to create volunteer opportunities that will attract and sustain the interest of 50+ volunteers
- Explore the state of 50+ Volunteering and how the Points of Light Foundation and Volunteer Center National Network are currently engaging this demographic

What is a 50+ Volunteer?

Attempting to define and categorize “mature” adult volunteers is a formidable challenge. Most people under the age of 70 don’t think of themselves as seniors, and many baby boomers detest labels evoking chronological age or separation from earlier stages. This challenge is further compounded by the fact that the excitement around “older adult volunteering” often stems from the civic activity of those in their mid-70s, as well as the civic potential of the baby boomers.

Because of the wide range of people being discussed, some of the confusion associated with labels and terminology is unavoidable. While they are inadequate and sometimes confusing, for the purpose of this piece the terms used to describe “mature” Americans are *baby boomers*, *younger older adults*, *older adults*, and *seniors*. Generally, these terms are used in the following ways:

- *Baby boomers (or boomers)* refers to those persons born between 1946 and 1964. There are 79 million baby boomers in America today.
- *Older adults* refers to persons 65 and older. There are 35 million older adults in America today.
- *Seniors* traditionally refers to persons 65 and older. This term is being used less frequently because of its negative and often inaccurate connotations. As a result, this designation is used sparingly to indicate programs that typically appeal to persons who are 70 or older.
- *50+ Volunteers* is just like it sounds, a term used by the Points of Light Foundation to refer to volunteers who are 50 and above. This term reflects our desire to create programs that match the skills and interests of today’s mature adult, but also appeal to the next generation of older Americans, including the baby boomers.



“The United States today possesses the fastest-growing, best-educated, and most vigorous population of older adults in the history of the world.

The wisdom, experience, talents, and skills of older Americans are going to revamp the face of volunteerism. As the first wave of the 75-million member baby boom prepares to retire, the whole structure of volunteerism is about to be reinvented. There exists a virtual tidal wave of skilled professionals, talented individuals, and top-drawer executives who are ready to do good.”

Edgar Bronfman, *Third Act: Reinventing Yourself After Retirement*

A Growing Trend, Vast Potential

Considering that 70 percent of non-retirees between the age of 50 and 75 report that retirement is “a time to begin a new chapter in life” and that, just after traveling, volunteering is what this group looks forward to most, the number of older Americans volunteering has the potential to increase dramatically [Hart]. Moreover, small inducements such as learning new things, making new friends, and putting career skills to good use could double the older volunteer force in the United States [Kleyman].

With almost 30 years added to the average American’s life since 1900, older adults are healthier, more financially secure, and better educated than any previous generation. Because they are also more active than ever before, there is an increased awareness of the potential of highly skilled older volunteers to help address serious community issues. This recognition comes at the same time that nonprofit organizations and government agencies are facing tremendous demands to do more with less. If we can address the gap between the capacities of 50, 60, and 70 year-olds and the opportunities available for them to serve, the individual and societal rewards will be unprecedented.

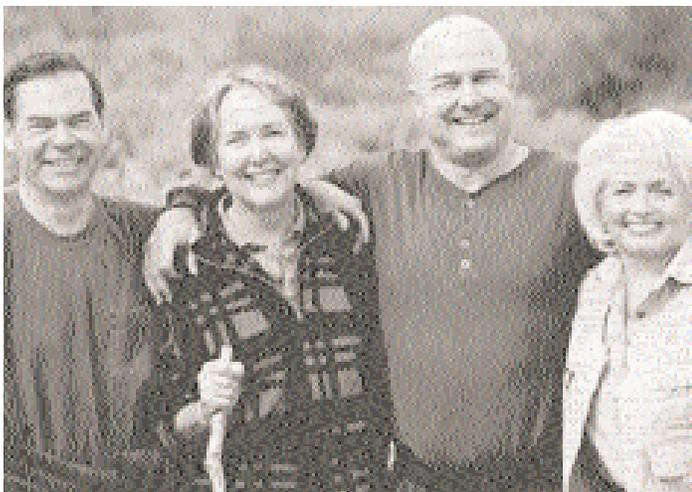
Limited Opportunities

While 50+ adults offer great promise to community building efforts nationally and worldwide, the volunteering infrastructure to engage them effectively is limited. The number and scope of service opportunities available to this demographic clearly do not reflect the diversity, skills, and needs of this burgeoning group.

Barbara Weiderecht of the Volunteer Center of Bergen County, New Jersey, echoes the industry’s deepest concerns: “Today’s older volunteers do not want to be thought of as just office help or envelope stuffers, and are increasingly turning down all such opportunities.

Yet when this is addressed with many of the agencies where we place volunteers, they do not understand nor do they want to hear it. ‘What do they expect? They’re only volunteers,’ is a frequent reply. That attitude is deadly for attracting volunteers.”

One of the factors contributing to this problem is that the articulation of a new vision for later life that includes challenging and dynamic volunteer opportunities is outpacing the construction of programs and institutions needed to realize that vision. Although the promotion of the civic engagement of older adults must continue, without additional resources directed toward building the capacity of community-based organizations to utilize this potential tidal wave of volunteers, 50+ adults may find themselves ‘ready and willing’ with nowhere to go. To the extent that this is already happening across the nation, federal and local governments, foundations, businesses, nonprofits and Volunteer Centers, among others, must direct attention and resources toward creating more opportunities, developing model programs, and disseminating effective practices that support the civic engagement of older adults.



Volunteer San Diego, California

Volunteer San Diego's Flexible Volunteer Program offers a calendar of more than 70 projects a month which take place outside of traditional working hours, during lunchtimes, evenings and weekends. The program is unique in that it requires no ongoing commitment from volunteers who can serve once a week, once a month or just once in a while. Each month, flex volunteers feed the homeless, tutor K-12 students, clean up beaches and neighborhoods, provide companionship to seniors and much more. While the program is intended for adults of all ages, baby boomers and older adults have been particularly drawn to this program. Volunteer San Diego believes that by offering flexible opportunities to pre-retirees, they will choose to make volunteering a central component of their retirement years.

■ TODAY'S OLDER VOLUNTEERS



According to the 2002 Bureau of Labor Statistics study, Americans age 65 and over who volunteer contribute more time (an average of 96 hours per year) than any other segment of the population. Referred to as “Super Volunteers” by some volunteer coordinators, these adults (when successfully placed and supported) are often the most reliable and committed of all volunteers. However, only 22 percent of older adults volunteer, less than any other segment of the American population. These figures show that a small population of older adults is performing the majority of the volunteer work in this country.

Volunteers age 65 and over have found a variety of ways to give of their time. The overwhelming majority of those activities (45.2 percent) are performed through or for a place of worship. While some of these activities are focused on supporting the faith community itself, most religious organizations also have extensive outreach programs to serve individuals in economic and personal need. The remainder of older adults' volunteer work is divided among social or community service organizations, hospitals, civic, political, and international organizations, among others.

And while the accomplishments of organizations that engage senior volunteers are many, both in terms of meeting the needs of this population and the communities they live in, these programs have been unsuccessful in reaching a broader and more diverse array of older adults. Although there are many reasons for this, there is a generally accepted belief within the volunteer and service arena that the landscape of senior volunteer opportunities is “spotty” [Freedman]. Accounts of passionate and skilled older adults showing up at nonprofits to offer their time and services, only to be turned away, have become commonplace. Until the hype around the civic potential of older adults is translated into additional opportunities, programs, trainings, effective practices, and funding, this volunteer workforce will continue to walk away frustrated by an inadequate response from the nonprofit sector.

If agencies are currently ill equipped to handle older volunteers, how will they successfully utilize the 79 million baby boomers? The specter of thousands of older individuals rejecting volunteer work as an appropriate use of their time is looming on the horizon.

To avoid this scenario, organizations may have to rethink the way they work with volunteers to fulfill their own mission while simultaneously meeting increased expectations and desires of volunteers. For example, the local Red Cross in Montgomery County, MD found that they could no longer find volunteers to help with administrative duties, but they were able to find two qualified volunteers to co-direct an emergency preparedness program. With the \$50,000 that normally would have paid the salary of this full-time position, \$25,000 was used to hire administrative support and the remainder was used for other services.

■ BABY BOOMER VOLUNTEERS

Persons age 35 to 54 are most likely to volunteer, with one in three having donated their time in 2002 [Bureau of Labor Statistics]. Baby boomers, currently between the ages of 40 and 58, make up the majority of this segment.

Consistent with their life stage, boomers with children under the age of 18 are more likely to volunteer than persons without children in this age group. In addition, parents are more than twice as likely to volunteer for an educational/youth service related organization than one of their peers without children.

Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that:

Persons age 35 to 44 (many of whom are young boomers) volunteer more than any other group. The largest part of their volunteer work (39.3 percent) is for educational/youth service related organizations.

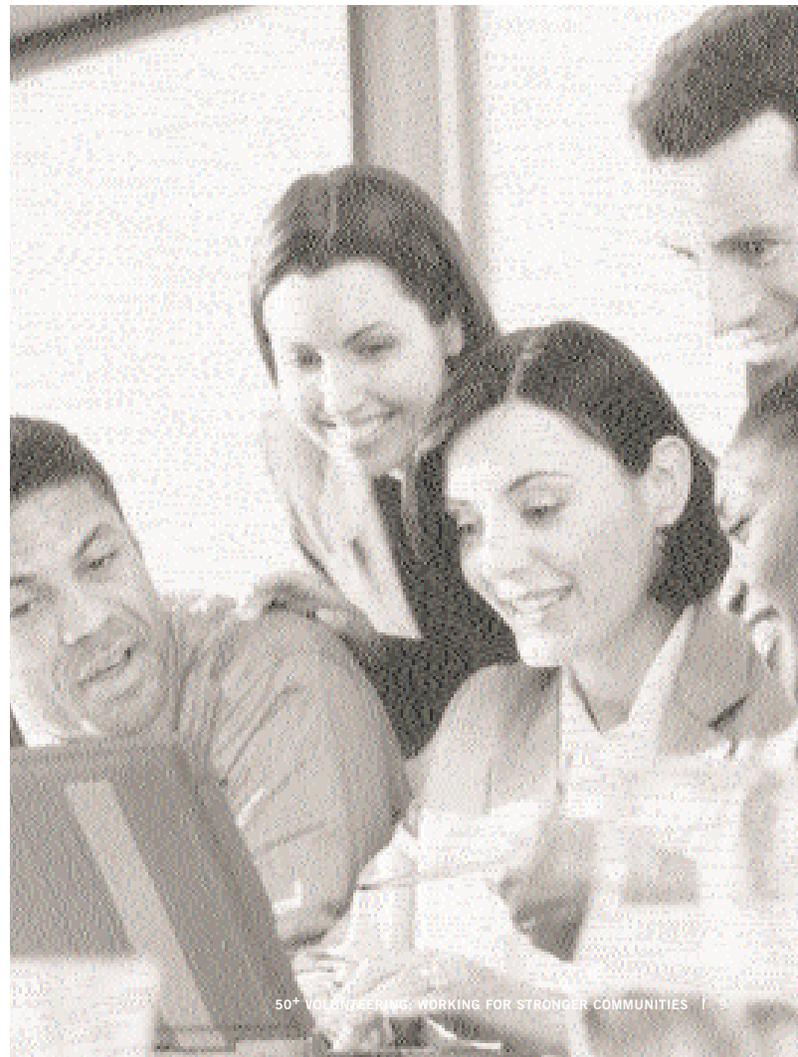
Persons age 45 to 54 (all of whom are boomers) are the second most active group of volunteers. The largest part of their volunteering is done for religious organizations (34.5 percent). The second largest is educational/youth service organizations (25.5 percent)

This data raises key questions about the relationship between parenthood and volunteer participation and whether baby boomers, currently some of the most engaged volunteers in the country, will continue to serve their communities after they have finished caring for their children. While it is a fact that people who volunteer as youth are more likely to volunteer as adults, it remains to be seen if individuals who volunteer as parents will continue to be involved as older adults.

Though still significantly engaged in their places of worship, baby boomers have a lower level of religious affiliation than their parents and this may also negatively impact older adult volunteering. AARP's 1997 Civic Involvement Survey found that the biggest difference between baby boomers and older adults' motivations

for volunteering was the degree to which "religious commitment" is cited as a motivator, with 42% of older persons - but only 31% of boomers - citing this rationale.

To ensure the 79 million baby boomers continue to volunteer at the same impressive rates they do today, more diverse channels for volunteer engagement beyond their involvement with educational/youth service organizations and places of worship must be developed.



Montgomery County Volunteer Center, Rockville, Maryland

The Montgomery County Volunteer Center is working with the Points of Light Foundation to create an alliance of organizations to help 50+ adults serve effectively as high impact volunteers. Through focus groups and interviews, the Volunteer Center is helping local nonprofits design high level volunteer projects that address those organizational or community needs they currently are unable to meet. Then by working with local corporations to recruit veteran employees and retirees, the Volunteer Center aims to address businesses' community outreach needs while simultaneously securing skilled volunteers who may bring additional resources and personnel with them. Finally, this prototype program, which is largely being implemented by a retired lawyer and current volunteer, will help prepare older adults for volunteer and paid post-retirement work in the nonprofit sector. The program's construction is well underway and will be launched in 2004.

Innovative Paths to Volunteer Opportunities

Baby boomers and older adults have already begun to make their mark on volunteering by choosing some non-traditional ways to get involved in their communities. Three examples of this are: workplace volunteering, family volunteering, and singles volunteering.

1. Workplace Volunteering

Workplace volunteering has become a popular alternative for busy employees, retirees and their companies. It allows companies to better their communities while simultaneously building employee teamwork skills, morale, improving corporate public image, and meeting strategic goals. Though many businesses focus on engaging their staff in one-time or episodic events, others have designed progressive programs that enable their employees to stay involved with local organizations and causes.

Example: **Wachovia Bank's** "Time Away from Work for Community Service" program allows employees to use four hours of paid time each month to participate in community service, tutoring, and parental involvement in education.

2. Family Volunteering

50+ adults are also volunteering with their children, parents, and other family members. Volunteering as a group allows families to make significant contributions to their communities while also providing quality time, strengthening communication, and offering opportunities for family members to serve as role models.

Example: The **Donn Family** of Tampa Bay, Florida, has turned an annual volunteer event into family volunteering for all generations. Alan Donn and Dorothy Holle-Donn, along with Alan's parents Ruth and Ray, are the organizers of the Florida Coastal Cleanup, a yearly event to help rid local shorelines and oceans of trash and debris. The project started in 1993 with 25 friends, family and co-workers as volunteers, and

grew to 97 in 2001. Their efforts have transformed a former dumping ground into a pristine area now being developed into a public park.

3. Singles Volunteering

Giving back to the community while connecting socially with new people is also proving to be a powerful way to engage volunteers. Addressing the desire of single adults to form new friendships and romantic relationships, organizations dedicated to engaging single volunteers have become increasingly popular.

Example: The organization **Single Volunteers** now has over 18 chapters across the United States that bring individuals together for service events at national parks, humane societies, and food pantries.

Hands On Portland, Oregon

In partnership with Portland Community College, Morrison Center/Arras Inc., Oregon Public Broadcasting, Portland State University and others, Hands on Portland is establishing an innovative program to meet the expanding demands of an aging population that is positioned to learn, grow and contribute for decades into the future. A Life Options Center will provide resources for continued education and travel; opportunities for civic involvement, including volunteer and employment options; as well as resources to face life's challenges, including healthcare and financial management. Hands On Portland, which merged with VolunteerWorks, is working with its partners to seed the Life Options Center in 2004.





Since its inception, the Points of Light Foundation and Volunteer Center National Network have successfully engaged hundreds of thousands of adults 50 and older in service. Volunteer Centers have used a variety of program models – including Board Banks, Days of Service, the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), Nonprofit Management Consulting Services, and others – to provide vehicles for these adults to share their talents and resources with others in their communities.

Volunteer Center National Network's 50+ Survey

Results of the 2001 Volunteer Center Survey indicate that 72 percent of Volunteer Centers actively engage adults 50 and above as volunteers. To gain a better understanding of this work, a follow-up survey was conducted with Volunteer Centers that place 50+ adults in volunteer positions.

In terms of Volunteer Centers management and sponsorship of 50+ programs:

- 35 percent directly oversaw a Senior Corps program (Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, Senior Companions, Foster Grandparents)
- 23 percent ran Board Banks that place older adult professionals on boards of directors
- 15 percent managed programs in which older adults tutor youth
- 25 percent partnered with a nonprofit management consulting organization
- 26 percent sponsored older adult service-learning programs

Volunteer Centers also reported directly managing and sponsoring Senior Environmental Corps, senior transportation services, Homeland Security initiatives, and several other programs. Volunteer Centers also recruited older adults to participate in several of their one-time volunteer events included in the Days of Service throughout the year. On June 15, 2002 alone, Volunteer Centers convened over 19,000 50+ volunteers to take part in an intergenerational Day of Service called Join Hands Day.

Partner organizations that Volunteer Centers reported working with on such programs include:

- Big Brothers Big Sisters of America
- Habitat for Humanity
- Leadership groups
- Community colleges
- Corporate retiree volunteer programs
- Corporate Volunteer Councils
- Area Agencies on Aging
- Senior Corps programs
- AARP
- Senior centers
- Kiwanis clubs
- Rotary clubs

With the mounting number of skilled professionals beginning to leave the workforce, this survey also revealed that a growing number of Volunteer Centers are recruiting and placing experienced executives and young retirees in program-level volunteer positions. Some of the opportunities Centers are connecting these volunteers to include:

- Public relations, communications, and media
- Training and education
- Program development
- Information technology
- Strategic planning

Other opportunities mentioned were disaster volunteer management, environmental assistance and education, grant writing, and board of directors positions.

While the development and support of programmatic-level volunteer opportunities is encouraging, the greatest challenge Volunteer Centers reported in engaging experienced executives and young retirees was the inexperience of agencies in working with this population. Other obstacles included volunteer recruitment and the volunteers' busy schedules.

In addition to requiring new revenue streams to create and support additional services and programs, Volunteer Centers reported that the tools that would be most helpful in increasing their and their partner agencies' ability to engage this segment in high-impact service opportunities are:

- New program models
- Targeted marketing resources
- Training around the effective placement of 50+ volunteers

FIRSTLINK®, Columbus, Ohio

An important driver for older adult volunteers is the chance to build meaningful relationships while putting their skills and experience to use. Responding to this need, the Volunteer Center in Columbus Ohio, FIRSTLINK, is working to develop team volunteering opportunities for this age group. One example of this work is a recently created technology initiative run by a team of volunteers to assess the Volunteer Center's information technology requirements and capacities, and to build a system capable of meeting its growing needs in this area.

To capture the time and talents of the 35 million people over 65, as well as the 79 million baby boomers as they transition from their primary careers and family building towards this new chapter of their lives, the menu of volunteer opportunities available to this segment must be significantly grown and diversified.

A great deal of research has been done on what drives older adults and the baby boomers. From this research, three clear patterns have emerged. (1) These volunteers want to make a difference; (2) they expect numerous ways to do so; and, (3) they insist that these opportunities be professionally managed with incentives that speak to their own personal and economic needs. Based on these expectations, meaningful volunteer opportunities for 50+ adults can be designed by thinking of this segment as Activists, Consumers and Workers.

1. Activists: Opportunities that Inspire

Baby boomers came of age during a time that witnessed impressive gains in terms of human, environmental, and civil rights. And while only a percentage of the boomers were involved in the political activism and local organizing that defined the '60s, an undeniable element of this generation's character is a deep desire to make a difference in ambitious and inspirational ways.

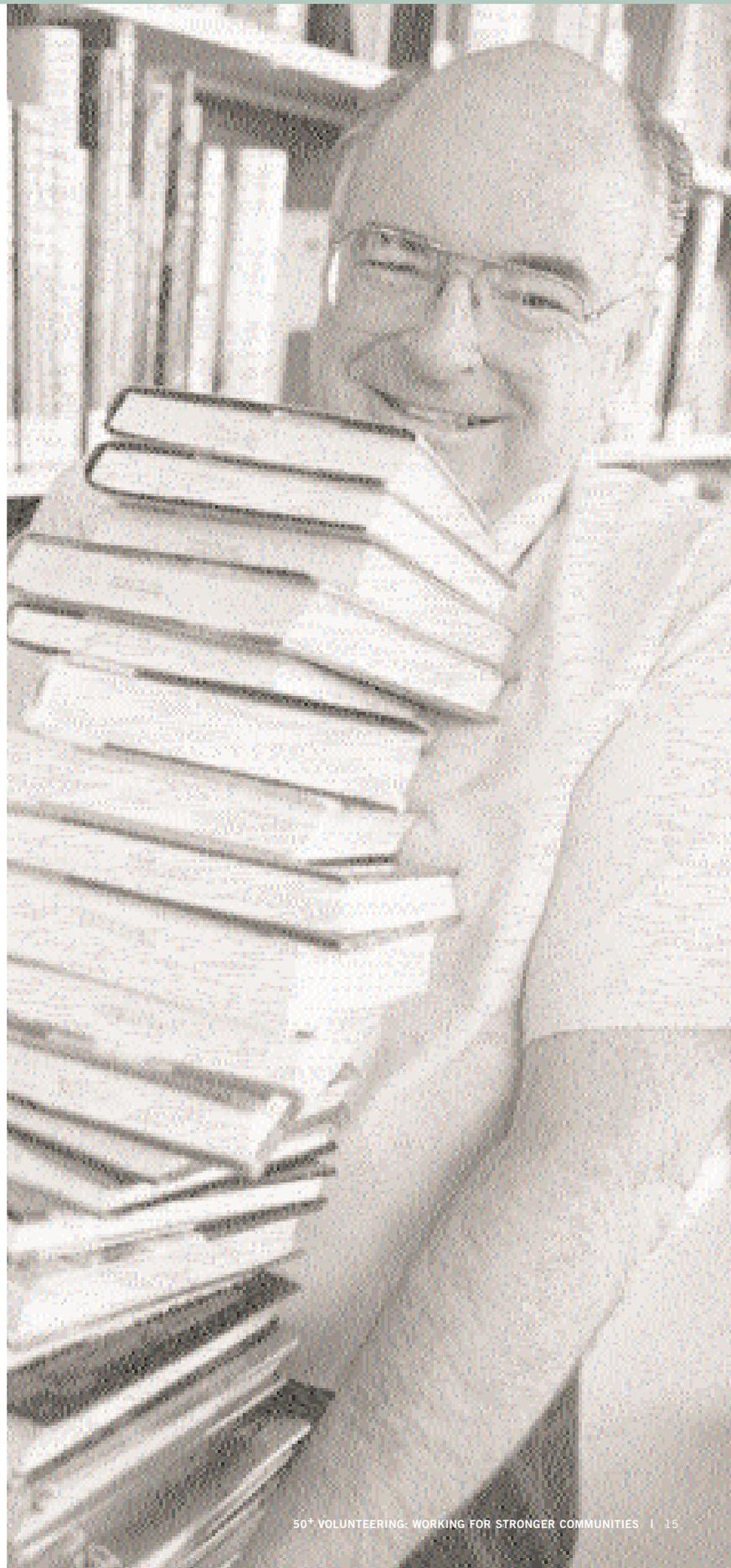
As a result of the defining ethos of their earlier years, the unprecedented economic expansion of the past two decades and the affluence that has come with it, a large number of adults have been led toward activities focused on self-fulfillment and self-realization. In "The 75 Percent Factor: Uncovering Hidden Boomer Values," James Gambone and Erica Whittlinger note that 75 percent of boomers came from poor, working-class, family-run farms or small businesses — and feel indebted and thankful to those persons and institutions that helped them along the way. Together, these attitudes and the focus on self-fulfillment have resulted in one of the defining characteristics of baby boomers: *the desire to give something back to society.*

Implications:

Volunteer opportunities should be designed and marketed for mature activists who still dream of changing their neighborhoods, communities, and world. With the skills, knowledge and networks they have accumulated throughout their careers and lives, never before have 50+ adults been in a better position to effect social change. Programs should help volunteers imagine how their efforts will bring about justice and equality and systems should be put in place that ensure that volunteers at all levels of the organization know and are passionate about the ultimate goal and purpose of their work.

TIPS:

- **Don't seek volunteers; seek activists working to propel a movement.**
- **Ensure that the mission of your organization is clear and compelling and that your paid staff and volunteers know it, talk about it regularly, and understand how their efforts help to realize it.**
- **Strive to increase staff and volunteer interaction so the two groups feel as if they are colleagues working to accomplish similar goals.**
- **Provide volunteers the opportunity to form relationships that promise to make good use of the skills these men and women have accumulated over the years. Recent research reveals that retirees miss the friendships they formed with their colleagues while working together to achieve a greater good or common end [Mark].**



■ TIPS FOR ENGAGING 50+ VOLUNTEERS

2. Consumers: Multiplicity of Volunteer Options

The 50+ population are sophisticated consumers who have come to expect an abundance of options encompassing everything from cereal to places of worship. As a result of the wealth of products and services available to them, they have an acutely defined sense of their own needs and preferences, as well as what they have to offer and spend. Moreover, 50+ adults are increasingly finding that time is their most limited commodity.

Implications:

The number of short-term and project-based volunteer opportunities that agencies offer boomers and older adults must be significantly increased. One-time volunteer events such as cleaning a park, planting trees, and sorting clothes at a food shelter are all excellent ways to introduce people to volunteering. But to capture the imagination and long-term commitment of this population, project-based opportunities that reflect the high-expectations of agencies and volunteers must be designed and implemented. Short-term research projects, community surveys, and carpentry jobs are examples of opportunities that yield significant results for agencies, and satisfaction for volunteers.



TIPS:

- **Organize a half-day needs assessment retreat for your organization centered around the question: “If we had more time or expertise, we would...”** This exercise can help you create a more abundant selection of volunteer opportunities that address the important organizational needs your staff can not currently address. It is also the first step toward realizing the latent potential of retired and transitioning professionals and helping staff see volunteers as a resource and not competition.
- **Draft project descriptions with clearly stated goals and objectives — but engage volunteers in designing the strategy for implementation.** It is important to be as specific as possible in your organization’s needs, while being as flexible as possible in the management and design of volunteer opportunities.
- **Be single-minded in your promotion and marketing strategies.** Target the specific subset of the boomers that you think will be most interested and qualified to volunteer for your organization, and remember that the quintessential baby boomer advertisement is short, snappy, creative, and alluring.
- **Design project-based volunteer opportunities that reflect the long-term volunteer involvement your organization desires.** What short-term, high-impact projects can you create that will make use of the skills adults have accumulated throughout their work lives? Also explore job sharing and team volunteering.

3. Workers: Professional Volunteer Management

Baby boomers are overworked and thinly stretched. Americans now work more than any other population in the world. According to the International Labor Organization, Americans added 36 hours of annual work during the 1990s and can claim 137 more hours of work than their counterparts in Japan and an astounding 499 hours, or 12 weeks, more than German workers [Freedman].

Despite the fact that exhaustion from their work lives may be one of the biggest obstacles to overcome in getting more of the 50+ population involved in volunteering, a recent survey conducted by AARP of workers over the age of 45 shows that almost 70 percent of adults plan to continue working into retirement. More than 34 percent of the total sample said they would work part-time out of interest or enjoyment, 19 percent said they would work part-time for needed income, 10 percent would go into business for themselves, and 6 percent would work “full-time doing something else.” Fewer than 30 percent of the respondents said they would not work at all.

For those adults who are no longer working, social marketing research reveals that ‘retired’ Americans all along the socioeconomic spectrum cherish their new-found freedom. However, when asked about their overall happiness with the retirement experience, they also express some profound reservations. In particular they reveal a powerful sense of loneliness. What they miss, it turns out, is not only a sense of purpose, but the bonds they experienced at work [Freedman]. Margaret Mark calls these ties “relationships with a purpose.”

Implications:

An important driver for encouraging retirees to volunteer is the chance to regain meaningful identity and relationships, particularly if combined with the opportunity

to put existing skills to use. The trend toward early retirement, however, is shifting and tomorrow’s older adults are likely to be busier than today’s because of the many ways they have to spend their time. As a result, they will expect their volunteer experiences to be well managed and efficient. Moreover, considering the central role their careers play in defining the 50+ adults’ self-worth and identity, it will often be through the lenses of their work experiences that they will evaluate volunteer opportunities. Service experiences should be designed to be time or project limited and offer new opportunities to achieve the level of professionalism and respect that the volunteers had, or aspired to have, during their careers.

TIPS:

- **Design and frame your volunteer projects as if you were engaging consultants or project managers. Playing an active role in setting project goals, procedures and timelines will increase a volunteer’s commitment to and investment in the work. This will also help to raise the stature of volunteering and help to de-stigmatize service as something done only by “little old ladies with white hair.”**
- **Provide opportunities for advancement. Reward increased commitment and accomplishments with increased recognition and responsibility. Establish a volunteer track for people looking for continued and increased involvement.**
- **Offer incentives. According to research conducted by Peter Hart, small incentives, such as learning new things, making new friends, and putting their career skills to good use, could double the older volunteer force in the United States. In addition, 54 percent of volunteers and 48 percent of non-volunteers would give at least 15 hours per week if they received modest compensations such as reduced costs on prescription drugs, education credits, or small monthly stipends.**

■ CHALLENGES TO FURTHER ENGAGEMENT OF 50+ VOLUNTEERS



There are numerous barriers to the recruitment of volunteers. Some of the more typical examples, which often hold true across demographic lines, include transportation issues, menial tasks, lack of job descriptions, and unclear impact. Of the most common barriers to volunteer engagement, three deserve further attention, especially as they relate to 50+ volunteers: time constraints, lack of promotion, and inadequate volunteer management.

Time Constraints

The availability, or lack, of time is still cited as the reason that most people do not participate, or participate more, in volunteer activities.

Volunteer Canada

Increased care-giving responsibilities for grandchildren and parents, additional options for leisure, a busier world, and economic challenges are barriers to volunteering that many 50+ adults experience. As a result, “This generation will be seeking volunteer opportunities in which they can make a meaningful contribution, in a shorter period of time” [Volunteer Canada]. Project-based and time-limited volunteer

opportunities will be necessary for volunteer agencies to be successful with 50+ adults.

Lack of Promotion

While the media, government officials, prominent organizations in the field of aging, and others have given attention to this group, not enough has been done to promote the individual and communal benefits of the civic engagement of 50+ adults. Due to its many demonstrable benefits, the positive message of volunteering will be an easy one to promote. A recent study by the University of Michigan indicates that people who volunteer may strengthen their overall health and longevity. The study found that older people who were helpful to others reduced their risk of dying prematurely by nearly 60 percent as compared to peers who provided no such support. The societal rewards can also be measured. In 1998, 15.6 million volunteers 65 and over gave approximately 2.7 billion hours of time at a value of \$40 billion to nonprofit organizations and causes in this country [Independent Sector].

Convincing individuals that volunteering is both good for others and themselves is also not a difficult task; a recent study found that 84 percent of seniors who were asked to volunteer did [Independent Sector]. There is



one important caveat, however: focusing on a national call to service without simultaneously building the capacity of agencies to place, support, and retain older volunteers could be devastating. And the result potentially worse: hundreds of thousands of volunteers “all dressed up with nowhere to go.”

Inadequate Volunteer Management

As 50+ adults begin to explore the role of volunteering in this new chapter of their lives, negative first impressions could undermine the great potential for expanded civic participation in America.

Citing her concern that most agencies don't have the appropriate volunteer management practices in place to absorb more “high-impact” volunteers, Mary Foley of the Volunteer Center of Manassas, Virginia reports that “Engaging 50+ volunteers in meaningful service opportunities is not difficult, but it is time intensive.” Designing new volunteer opportunities for older adults and working with the volunteers to set project goals, timelines, etc., will demand an initial investment of staff time from agencies. Foley states, “This will also require additional resources to promote these programs, train local agencies, and tend to the volunteers and projects.”

Heart of Florida United Way, home to Volunteer Central Florida

The Research & Evaluation Department at Heart of Florida United Way received a grant from the Winter Park Health Foundation to determine issues relevant to successful planning and implementation of vital volunteer and employment programs for older adults in Orange County. This research and planning project was conducted to help better understand opportunities and barriers to meaningful service and employment. Recommendations that resulted from the project include: “One-Stop” Senior Coaching Programs, expanding Volunteer Management Training, Computer Training, and Employment Assistance Programs. Though an implementation plan is still being devised, the Volunteer Center, along with providing additional older adult volunteer management training, will be one of the various community partners involved in attempting to bring about this vast infrastructure and culture change.

■ CONCLUSION



There are 35 million people 65 and over and 79 million baby boomers in the United States. With an unprecedented level of education, skills, and resources, a new chapter has been added to these Americans' lives. Simultaneously, the infrastructure of nonprofits, which more than doubled during the 1990s, is threatened by the increased demands being placed on it, as well as dwindling private and public funding.

With a solution for each of these challenges within the other, new and innovative 50+ volunteer programs can both add meaning and substance to this new phase of adults' lives while simultaneously building the capacity of community based agencies to solve serious social problems. From this recognition has sprung a compelling new vision for the civic engagement of 50+ adults.

The Points of Light Foundation and Volunteer Center National Network, along with their many business, nonprofit, foundation, government and other community partners, are well positioned to realize this vision by:

- Spurring local innovation
- Replicating effective practices and model programs nationally
- Promoting 50+ volunteering within their organizations and communities

With the leading edge baby boomers rapidly approaching the traditional retirement years, the time to begin writing this new chapter of life is now. And while the cost of these efforts may be significant, the individual, organizational, and societal rewards will be far greater.

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