

Big Shoes to Fill: How Will the Next Generation of Canadian Seniors Want to Volunteer?

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Abstract

While Canadian organizations indicate that their volunteer base is getting younger, they also observe that their leadership and top-volunteers (i.e., those who volunteer more than 171 hours per year) are older. How can organizations prepare themselves to fill these “big shoes”? Canadians over the age of 65 volunteer differently from the generation before them and, based on what we are learning about today’s baby-boomers, organizations are being compelled to fundamentally rethink their volunteer engagement strategies. This is essential in order to involve baby-boomers now and to be prepared as they move into their senior adult years. The evolving landscape in the non-profit and voluntary sector and the shifts in the public policy environment add to the complexity that volunteer-involving organizations are facing. While current senior volunteers are loyal to organizations and causes they believe in, younger age groups tend to be more goal-oriented and have multiple interests. With each generation of senior volunteers, a higher percentage is volunteering but they volunteer fewer hours per year and are often seeking shorter-term volunteer opportunities. How will organizations weather this transition?

Key Words:

senior volunteers, baby boomers, Canadian Voluntary Sector

Introduction

Filling the “big shoes” being left by senior adult volunteers requires new volunteer engagement strategies that respond to the characteristics of the next generation of senior adults, namely today’s baby-boomers. Volunteer-involving organizations are seeking to develop innovative approaches within the context of three dimensions of a changing landscape: (1) current trends in volunteering; (2) key issues in volunteer resource management; and (3) shifts in public policy. Against this backdrop, a review of the volunteering patterns of different generations of seniors and an in-depth understanding of baby-

boomers’ volunteer interests will illuminate a path forward to both responsive and proactive adaptations to volunteer engagement. Finally, as the explicit reciprocal nature of volunteering increases with each generation, organizations are recognizing the valuable contributions of senior volunteers to society and the positive health outcomes for seniors in remaining connected and fully active participants in their communities (Butler-Jones, 2010).

The Changing Landscape of Volunteering in Canada

According to the Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating

(Statistics Canada, 2002, 2006, 2009), there has been a steady increase in the volunteer rate in Canada over the past decade, with the most recent survey reporting more than 12.5 million Canadians (or 46% of people over the age of 15) volunteering an average of 166 hours per year (see Table 1). The majority (77%) of the 2 billion hours that Canadians volunteer each year is carried out by 11% of volunteers, many of whom are senior adults.

While this level of volunteer activity reflects a caring and active citizenry, volunteers are becoming more purposeful and selective about the organizations, causes, and tasks that they undertake. People are generally more goal-oriented, have more structure in their work, family, and social lives, move around the country more frequently, have greater technological skills, are more self-directed, and play a variety of roles and have range of interests (Maranta & Speevak Sladowski, 2010). These general characteristics of today's volunteers have challenged organizations to create more focused, short-term, skills-based volunteer assignments.

The trend towards shorter-term, skills-based volunteer assignments can provide an organization with access to highly specialized services, such as strategic planning, market research, and customized database design, but it can also create some challenges for volunteer programs that rely on continuity and relationship building. For example, in one-to-one volunteering, such as friendly visiting or youth mentoring, it can take several months or more to develop a safe and trusting space, in which the volunteer time can really make a difference.

Leadership volunteering has also been challenged over the past decade. With more people being in temporary work situations (Lam, 2010), it can be difficult to commit to multi-year terms on boards of directors. Concerns about risk and liability issues, the pressures of fund raising, and the power dynamics between board and staff have been identified as barriers for people to take on leadership and governance volunteer positions (Bugg & Dalhoff, 2006). Over the past decade, organizations have responded with amendments to their by-laws that reduce the number of directors, eliminate executive positions, reduce the length of the terms of office, and explicitly allow for voting and meeting participation electronically.

Volunteer resource managers (VRMs) and leaders in the voluntary sector have been observing a gradual evolution in the characteristics of volunteers as well as the patterns of volunteering. They have seen the impact of these shifts first-hand, not only on volunteer programs directly, but on voluntary organizations more broadly.

Key Issues in Volunteer Resource Management

The profession of Volunteer Resource Management has cycles of strengths and challenges that are, in some way linked to broader issues facing the voluntary sector. One of the peaks in Canada was connected to the International Year of Volunteers in 2001. Enormous strides had been made in the 1990's towards making the case for paid positions (e.g., directors, managers, and co-ordinators of volunteer resources) and budgets for volunteer programs. Certificates in volunteer resource management were being offered in hundreds of colleges around

the country and professional associations were gaining both membership and momentum. This led to the development of standards of practice and accreditation programs, and the launching of the Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement in 2001. The issue of screening of paid and unpaid staff, before working with vulnerable people, became prominent on the public agenda, with some high profile cases of sex abuse involving volunteers and voluntary organizations (Volunteer Canada, 1999). Training and tools were provided to voluntary organizations. VRMs were not only being included, but were being relied upon to lead risk assessment and policy development related to screening. There was collective pride within the voluntary sector of the recognition of the profession of Volunteer Resource Management.

Significant resources were invested by governments, foundations, and corporations to develop tools and resources to strengthen volunteer engagement in Canada, on topics such as youth volunteering, new Canadian volunteers, employer-supported volunteering, and baby-boomer volunteers (Volunteer Canada, 2001). However, with the shift in funding practices in the late 1990's, from core, multi-year funding to short-term project funding, organizations found themselves continuously uncertain about whether or not positions or programs would continue from one year to the next and the infrastructure was eroded as fewer funders were willing to pay for administrative and overhead costs (Scott, 2003). This did not bode well for maintaining Volunteer Resource Management positions or the continuity of volunteer programs.

By 2005, many community colleges had closed their certificate programs in volunteer resource management, volunteer centres were losing funding, and professional development budgets were being cut. The Canada Volunteerism Initiative, which was initiated by the federal government in 2002 to build the capacity of the voluntary sector to engage volunteers and to promote volunteering to Canadians, was abruptly cut in 2006.

As we celebrate the tenth anniversary of the International Year of Volunteers in 2011, we are seeing a renewed interest by funders and policy makers in supporting and strengthening volunteer resource management capacity, a reconsideration of funding practices, and a stabilization and renewal of the leadership organizations, associations, and networks.

Public Policy and Volunteering

There is a growing interest in supporting and promoting volunteering and the voluntary sector in all provinces and territories in Canada (Campbell & Speevak Sladowski, 2009). Many governments have established initiatives to strengthen their relationship with the voluntary sector in their jurisdictions and to address legislative as well as capacity issues facing voluntary organizations (Carter & Speevak Sladowski, 2008). All 13 provinces and territories have Volunteer Service Awards, through their governments and through the Lieutenant Governors and Commissioners. A number of provinces have Ministers with Volunteerism as part of their portfolio or branches with an explicit mandate to promote and support volunteering.

Over the past decade, we have seen the emergence of a plethora of mandatory community service programs,

requiring people to perform community service hours in order to graduate from high school, to receive social assistance, to enter a university program, or to avoid incarceration. This has created both opportunities and challenges for volunteer resource managers, with increased administrative and supervision requirements.

Public policy related to care-giving has a direct impact on volunteering broadly and on senior adults and baby-boomers, in particular. With shorter stays in hospitals, de-institutionalization, cuts to home care services, and increasing work demands, families are having to absorb a great deal of the care-giving responsibilities, previously provided by public services (Centre for Voluntary Sector Research and Development, 2010). Baby-boomers and seniors are often involved in either temporary or ongoing care of disabled adult children, aging parents, grandchildren, and partners with chronic illness. Voluntary organizations and volunteers are also called upon to help meet the demand for care-giving and respite for care-givers (Butler-Jones, 2010).

Senior Volunteers

Over the past decade, we have seen changing volunteer patterns among seniors (over 65 years of age). As the volunteer rate has increased, the average number of volunteer hours has decreased, with each study (Statistics Canada, 2002, 2006, 2009). Voluntary organizations report that their volunteer bases are getting younger while their leadership volunteers are older (Centre for Voluntary Sector Research and Development, 2010). An overwhelming number (95%) of today's senior volunteers indicate that making a

contribution to their community is the most important reason for volunteering, followed by almost 60% who volunteer for social reasons (i.e., either to be with friends or to meet new people; Statistics Canada, 2009). However, we may not assume that all seniors want the same thing, as they are not a homogenous group. "It is important to keep in mind that there are currently different generations of seniors, and that there are significant differences in the volunteering among the older and younger groups of seniors" (Special Senate Committee on Aging, 2009, p.131).

Following the Report of the Special Senate Committee on Aging, the National Seniors Council held round tables to gather views on volunteering and positive active aging. As one of the witnesses, Dr. Elaine Gallagher, Director of the Centre on Aging at the University of Victoria, stated, "Some want to make a contribution to their communities. Others want to use their skills and knowledge to learn new things, to develop new skills, to be intellectually stimulated, or to feel good or needed" (Special Senate Committee on Aging, 2009, p.132).

Without making assumptions about all senior volunteers, it is important to be aware of the barriers to volunteering that may exist for some, including transportation, physical accessibility, costs associated with volunteering, cultural and linguistic knowledge, and the range of opportunities and preferences for recognizing volunteer efforts (National Seniors Council, 2010.). As Canada becomes more culturally diverse, with each generation, cultural competencies and linguistic skills will become premium assets sought after by voluntary organizations,

in order to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services in the community. At one of the round tables held by the National Seniors Council in Iqaluit, “it was identified that the Inuit culture does not recognize the term ‘volunteering’ however a similar concept is the practice of ‘people helping people’. An important focus for Inuit seniors helping people is intergenerational communications and educating youth on Inuit traditions” (National Seniors Council, 2010, p.16).

The federal, provincial, and territorial (FPT) ministers responsible for seniors in Canada have collaborated on an initiative, “Celebrating Seniors”, to promote “positive and realistic images of aging” (see www.seniors.gc.ca). The issue was explored in depth at a symposium held in Montreal, in December 2010, entitled Spotlight on Images of Aging. The topic of stereotypes and language used to describe senior adults was discussed, noting that many terms and images bring to mind people who are helpless, rather than people who are helpful. Of course many people do not consider their age to be their primary identifier and many others have concerns that any label will lead to some form of ageism. Yet without some language to discuss a segment of our population that is growing in terms of its numbers and importance to society, we may inadvertently ignore both the assets and unique needs of the aging baby-boomers. As Sherri Torjman, Vice-President of the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, stated in her address at the Canada at 150 Forum in May 2010, “We can’t afford to sideline more than 25% of the population in future. We need seniors as workers, mentors, volunteers and fully participating citizens.”

Baby-Boomer Volunteers

Baby boomers, born after World War II, between 1946 and 1964, made up a full third of Canada’s population in 2006 (Martel & Malenfant, 2006). If they were to retire from the paid workforce at the age of sixty-five, they would have 25-30 years of retirement. According to *The Evolution of Giving: From Charity to Philanthropy* (BMO Retirement Institute, 2009), they more intentionally integrate their contributions of money and time, citing a recent survey that showed one third of baby-boomers had been engaged in both fund raising and volunteering in the same charity to which they had made a cash donation. “Baby-boomers are a large but distinct demographic group. While their interests may be diverse, they tend to have more formal education than the current cohort of seniors and prefer flexible, episodic volunteering opportunities that use their professional skills, have identifiable outcomes, and are personally meaningful and challenging” (National Seniors Council, 2010, pp.30-31).

Studies have shown that baby-boomers have mixed views, however, on how they want to engage with the community. For some, using their work skills and talents is seen to be the most effective use of their time. Others are worried about being pigeon-holed into doing volunteer work that is directly connected to their professional designations. Many want to expand their horizons and learn something new. In terms of taking on leadership roles, many said that, outside the office, they did not want the pressure of being in charge of something. They bring a wealth of skills and experience to the table but they may not want to spend their time around the table. These

findings presented a mixed picture of what baby-boomers are looking for in their volunteer activities and reinforced that, like other age groups, they are not a homogenous group (Centre for Voluntary Sector Research and Development, 2010).

As indicated in the section on public policy, many baby-boomers are increasingly being called upon to take on care-giving responsibilities. The term “sandwich generation” was coined in the seventies, referring to those caught between the needs of their children and parents. A more fitting metaphor for today’s baby-boomers might be a “triple-decker sandwich, using whole-grain bread.” Baby-boomers are often providing care to their aging parents, helping adult children through work transitions and family re-grouping, and helping to care for grandchildren. They find themselves balancing the multiple demands of the three generations while they watch their fibre intake, support their partners, and are still active in the workforce. This may mean that there is less time to volunteer and that they cannot make long-term commitments, because the demands of their family remain unpredictable.

Baby-boomers have lived through the transition from in-person to on-line life and many are happy to seek volunteer opportunities and even carry out their volunteer tasks on-line. While many non-profit organizations have embraced technology and incorporated it into their engagement strategies, many others are lagging behind, particularly smaller organizations with fewer resources. Baby-boomers have higher expectations than past generations for more sophisticated communication and more structured roles in their volunteer life.

Given that baby-boomers make up such a significant portion of the Canadian population, that they have lived through such fundamental changes in society, and that those born in the late forties and early fifties are now entering their senior adult years, our understanding of this generation is critical. VRMs will need to adapt their volunteer engagement strategies as well as the volunteer services that are provided to senior adults.

Conclusion

Senior volunteers today are contributing on average more hours each year (i.e., 220 hours compared to the national average of 166 hours) but have a lower volunteer rate of 36%, compared with the national rate of 46%. Today’s baby-boomers are close to the national average in terms of their volunteer rate (at 47%) and average number of hours (at 165 hours per year), and given that they comprised a full third of the Canadian population in 2006, they really set the national standard. With close to half of baby boomers volunteering an average of more than three hours each week, while most of them are also working full-time, we can feel confident that their interest in contributing to the community will continue, as they age.

Unlike the current generation of senior volunteers, baby-boomers are likely to have different expectations of the organizations and from their volunteer experiences. Living more structured lives, they may seek more clearly defined volunteer roles and want the organization to be well prepared so that their time is most efficiently spent. Their interest in results means that they will want to receive ongoing feedback about the impact of their volunteering

and to have input into the evaluation of the programs in which they are involved.

Although most senior adults live independently, some will require support in order to continue their volunteer activities. Organizations will need to ensure that they have the policies, systems, and budgets for transportation, physical accessibility, and flexibility of schedules, to accommodate occasional medical issues or visits to children out of town. Organizations will need to look for new board governance models that have opportunities for both renewal and continuity with fewer meetings, shorter terms, and the possibility to participate through electronic communications.

The next generation of senior volunteers will be different because of the confluence of their common characteristics, general trends in volunteering, the evolution of Volunteer Resource Management, and shifts in public policy. Many organizations have already begun to respond to these dimensions of the changing landscape with innovative approaches to volunteer engagement. For example, having people volunteer in pairs or small groups to provide built-in support for the volunteers as well as back-up for the person receiving the service can be mutually beneficial. This can also help mitigate some of the risks inherent in working with vulnerable people.

Many organizations are stuck in old paradigms or simply do not have the resources to embark on the transition. The field of Volunteer Resource Management is at a critical juncture and there is a great deal at risk. Leadership and infrastructure organizations, as well as academic institutions, need to continue to deepen their understanding of the incoming generation of senior volunteers and build the capacity of

voluntary organizations to meaningfully engage them. If we accept the metaphor of today's baby-boomers being the "triple-decker sandwich generation on whole grain bread" then perhaps we can agree that they will not be filling the big shoes being left by today's seniors but they will certainly be filling their sandals.

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Table 1

Volunteer Rates and Average Number of Volunteer Hours Per Year

Year	Volunteer Rate (%)		Average Number of Volunteer Hours Per Year	
	All Canadians over 15 years old	Canadians 65 years and older	All Canadians over 15 years old	Canadians 65 years and older
2000	26%	18%	162	270
2004	45%	31%	168	240
2007	46%	36%	166	220

(Source: Statistics Canada, 2002, 2006, 2009)

About the Author

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