

Corporation for National and Community Service: Keeping Baby Boomers Volunteering

Lead Agency:

Corporation for National and Community Service

Agency Mission:

The mission of the Corporation for National and Community Service is to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering.

Principal Investigator:

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General Description:

The Baby Boomer generation is more educated, experienced, and larger than any previous U.S. generation. As they begin to retire, they will leave the workforce with unprecedented knowledge and skills. Engaging Boomers through volunteerism represents a tremendous opportunity for nonprofits. To ensure their participation, it is imperative to understand how best to capture their experience and energy in initial recruiting efforts. Secondly, organizations must understand what factors will impact their decision to continue volunteering from year-to-year.

“Keeping Baby Boomers Volunteering” used data obtained from the Current Population Survey (CPS) from 1974, 1989, and each year from 2002-2006. The CPS is a monthly national household survey administered by the U.S. Census Bureau and is the primary source of employment information on our nation’s labor force. The CPS volunteer supplement provides reliable data on volunteering behavior among American households. The data trace the volunteer habits of the same sample of Baby Boomers over two consecutive years, as well as a similar sample of pre-Boomers (the 1974 and 1989 surveys).

“Keeping Baby Boomers Volunteering” highlights several trends that ultimately will help nonprofits design volunteer management programs to generate more volunteer opportunities for Boomers and improve retention. These findings include:

- The number of volunteers age 65 and older in the U.S. will increase 50% by 2020, from just under 9 million in 2007 to over 13 million. The number of senior volunteers will double by 2036.
- Boomers volunteer today at higher rates than past generations did at a similar age. Boomers between the ages 46 to 57 volunteer at a rate of 30.9%, compared to 25.3% recorded by that age cohort in 1974 (the Greatest Generation, born 1910-1930) and 23.2% recorded in 1989 (the Silent Generation, born 1931-1945).
- Education and having children are two key predictors of volunteer levels. Boomers' high education rate and propensity to have children later in life explain their high volunteer rate. This accounts in part for the fact that the volunteer rate for Baby Boomers is peaking later in life than past generations.
- Baby Boomers have different volunteer interests than past generations. Volunteers ages 41 to 59 were most likely to volunteer with religious organizations in both 1989 and 2005. However, in 1989, the second most popular type of volunteer organizations were civic, political, business, and international. By 2005, the second most popular type of volunteer organization for Baby Boomers were educational and youth services.
- The type of volunteer activities done by Boomers affects retention. Baby Boomers who engage in professional or management activities are the most likely to keep volunteering (74.8% retention). Baby Boomers who engage in general labor or supply transportation are the least likely to volunteer the following year (55.6% retention).

Excellence: What makes this project exceptional?

As more and more Baby Boomers reach retirement age over the next several decades, they will have a dramatic and costly impact on Social Security, Medicare, and other social services. “Keeping Baby Boomers Volunteering” emphasizes their importance to society, viewing Baby Boomers as valuable assets to public service in America. The report describes the volunteering characteristics of this highly educated and skilled generation and uses this information to develop a plan for nonprofits to efficiently utilize their abilities for the next three to four decades.

Significance: How is this research relevant to older persons, populations and/or an aging society?

“Keeping Baby Boomers Volunteering” describes the volunteering characteristics of Baby Boomers, who are poised to become the most highly educated and skilled generation of older Americans in history, and the reasons why so many of them volunteer one year but drop out in the next. The report uses this information to help nonprofit organizations develop a plan to harness the abilities and skills of Baby Boomer volunteers for the next three to four decades.

For organizations to effectively utilize Baby Boomers as volunteers, they must be aware of certain trends. Baby Boomers are more active in volunteering activities than their predecessors, but like other age groups, a large proportion (over 30%) of volunteers drop out the following year. The report outlines possible volunteer management practices that will reduce this attrition. Organizations must recognize that Baby Boomers have different volunteering preferences than previous generations. Additionally, they serve for different motivations and prefer specific activities for service (professional management work as opposed to physical labor). To harness Baby Boomers' experience and energy, the study proposes several recommendations to develop a meaningful volunteering experience for volunteers and organizations.

1. Rethink how to attract and utilize Baby Boomers as volunteers.
2. To improve retention, put Boomers' skills to use through challenging projects.
3. Treat volunteers in the same fashion as employees and donors. The more positive experience a volunteer has, the more likely (s)he will return, just like an employee or donor.
4. Adopt progressive management practices, such as matching volunteers with appropriate assignments and providing professional development opportunities for volunteers. This can build organizational capacity and sustain volunteer participation.
5. Because volunteering and giving are related, find ways to encourage substantial volunteering. This could produce considerable monetary contributions.

Effectiveness: What is the impact and/or application of this research to older persons?

The bulk of the Baby Boomer population is rapidly approaching retirement age. Boomers have accumulated exceptional wealth, education, and experience, and many of them will look to continue to have a positive impact on society. Other studies, including one by CNCS, have demonstrated the health benefits of volunteering. By engaging more Boomers in volunteering, they are improving their health, maintaining connections with the community, and contributing their knowledge to the rest of society.

Innovativeness: Why is this research exciting or newsworthy?

The research suggests the relationship between Baby Boomers and nonprofit organizations is symbiotic: by engaging Baby Boomers in volunteering, both the organization and the volunteers can benefit. Boomers are leaving the workforce with unprecedented skills and knowledge, and millions of them are able and willing to make positive contributions to their communities. By understanding how Boomers like to volunteer, nonprofits can both improve the experience of Boomer volunteers, while at the same time maximizing the benefits of the service provided by the volunteers. This in turn provides society with more help in addressing critical areas of need – for example, health care for the aging population. The ability to live independently is one of the primary

concerns of retiring Boomers; older volunteers can help their neighbors live at home longer, while preserving their own health by staying active within their communities.