

BOOM OR BUST? WILL BABY BOOMERS SAVE US?

There is a good deal of discussion these days about baby boomers and volunteering. It's not surprising since there's a good deal of discussion about baby boomers and everything else. They (or rather, we ... since I am one) represent such a large bulge in the population. Whatever they do has a palpable impact on our society and often on everyday life.

Baby boomers have just come through a stage in their life cycle when participation in volunteering is typically high. Baby boomers have not been an exception. Relatively large proportions of them have been active in all kinds of volunteer work. And they have volunteered in large numbers because there are so many of them. Hence, they have represented quite a large chunk of the volunteer labour force over the last 20 to 30 years.

The availability of the baby boom to the voluntary sector is one of the important factors that have allowed the sector to blossom and grow to unprecedented magnitude. When organizations began, volunteers were available to champion the cause. When organizations expanded, volunteers were there to staff the lines, spread the word, raise the funds, and increasingly, do the "real work" of mission accomplishment. The voluntary sector has had a very good run over the end of the last century and through the first few years of the present century in large part because of the volunteer support they have enjoyed.

But, the question is, is it sustainable?

As more pressures on the voluntary sector push organizations to do more with less, volunteer involvement becomes evermore important. The unpaid workforce is essential now. There's just no other way to describe it. Volunteers are not confined to back rooms or envelope-stuffing. They are on the front lines of service delivery and without them, many organizations would seriously falter, many would fold.

As baby boomers age into a fundamentally new life cycle stage of later adulthood and retirement, the pivotal question is will they stay active as volunteers. Or, and here's the critical point, will they follow the pattern of volunteers who have gone before and begin to drop out of volunteer work?

The volunteer participation pattern of veteran-era volunteers has seen significant portions of active volunteers move away from volunteering in the 55+ age category. The exodus grows with age. The ever smaller number of veteran-era volunteers who have remained in the labour force have been giving a hugely disproportionate share of volunteer hours. In fact, this small number of deeply committed older volunteers has been an important feature in the voluntary sector for the last two decades. While the overall number of volunteers declined around the turn of the current century, the number of hours volunteered each year in Canada stayed relatively the same. Why? Because older volunteers - the civic core - pitched in and increased their involvement. And, importantly, they have been carrying the large burden of organizing, administrative, fundraising, and committee work - often invisible but absolutely essential.

That's great. But.

As the veteran-era volunteers move into older age, they age out of their capacity to volunteer. And many of those volunteers who have been holding things together in the recent past are quite literally at the end of their time. Managers of volunteers across the country are reporting the disproportionate numbers of quite-old volunteers who are declining in their capacity to continue their involvement. While that presents another quite serious volunteer program management issue, the point for the present discussion is, “Will baby boomer volunteers step up to the plate and start volunteering much larger numbers of hours to replace those hours now being lost to declining and exiting veteran-era volunteers?”

My guess – and I admit it’s just a guess – is the answer is “no”. For two reasons.

First, baby boomers are busy, well placed, well-resourced individuals seeking personal growth, personal development, and interesting retirement activities. They tend to be self-focussed and they’re very much looking forward to new adventures and challenges in their retirement years. For most, I suspect, that will mean leaving their volunteer work behind in favour of new opportunities, including, for example, travel, learning, family, and any number of other exiting lifestyle-changing pursuits.

Second, nonprofit organizations continue to offer the same kinds of routine, maintenance ongoing and administrative volunteer opportunities. Veteran-era volunteers filled those positions largely from a sense of civic duty rather than personal satisfaction. Boomers are less likely to be so selfless. Evidence is mounting that boomers – and younger volunteers as well – want interesting, growth-producing, mission-linked, productive, high-level, high-impact work that allows them the freedom to apply their high skills and influence. They want short term work, flexible schedules, and convenient work locations, including for many, the opportunity to do as much as possible online. Contemporary volunteers will not take on the routine, maintenance functions like fundraising, event planning, chapter/branch maintenance, board and committee work that their predecessors (bless them!) have been doing.

The assumption that volunteers have always been there for us and therefore they always will be there for us is fundamentally flawed. In fact, it may be fatally flawed. It’s an assumption that might just whack us on the side of the head in the very near future as nonprofits find it increasingly difficult to fill essential volunteer roles, and as administrative and leadership functions atrophy for the lack of new blood. We already see the start of the trend among so many organizations currently finding it difficult to recruit new board members. I reckon this is just the tip of a very large iceberg.

There’s a very quickly growing list of new research on boomers and volunteering. Just in the last few months several large studies have crossed my desk, each making predictions about what place boomer volunteers may occupy in the near-future of civic engagement. Some research is cautionary. Much is optimistic.

Keep an eye open because the reality is about to unfold in the next 5-7 years. We won’t have to wait very long to see how it’s all going to play out as this particular future is upon us now.

For more on boomer volunteers, [check out this selected bibliography](#).

For more on shifts in the volunteer labour force in Canada, check out: www.CanadaWhoCares.ca