

ISSUE BRIEF

Baby Boomers and Volunteering: Findings From Corporation Research



Baby Boomers—the generation of 77 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964—represent a potential boost to the volunteer world, not only because of the sheer size of the generation but also because of its members' high levels of education, wealth, and skills. Since Baby Boomers are the next generation of older adults, it is equally important to understand not only how best to capture their experience and energy, but also what factors will impact their decision to volunteer from year to year. To examine this further, the Corporation for National and Community Service has analyzed data collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census as part of its regular decennial Census, as well as data collected in 1974, 1989, and from 2002 to 2006 as part of a special Volunteer Supplement to the Current Population Survey. Here are some findings about Baby Boomers gleaned from that research:

KEY FINDINGS

Propelled largely by the Baby Boomers, 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.

That number will continue to rise for years to come, as the youngest Baby Boomers will not reach age 65 until 2029; in fact, the number of older adult volunteers should double by 2036. (*Volunteering Among Older Americans: Population Projections, 2007-2050*)

Baby Boomers volunteer today at higher rates than past generations did at roughly the same age. At 30.9%, the volunteer rate for those ages 46 to 57 today, who make up the majority of the Baby Boomers, is significantly higher than both the 25.3% recorded by the 46 to 57 age cohort in 1974 (Greatest Generation, born 1910-1930) and the 23.2% recorded in 1989 (Silent Generation, born 1931-1945). (*Keeping Baby Boomers Volunteering, 2007*)

Remaining in the workforce increases the likelihood that a Baby Boomer will continue to volunteer. 60.5% of Baby Boomer volunteers who move out of the workforce continue to volunteer the following year, compared to

69.3% of those who experience no change in their labor status. (*Keeping Baby Boomers Volunteering, 2007*)

Baby Boomers' relatively high volunteer rate is tied to their education level and propensity to have children later in life. Education and having children are two key predictors of volunteer levels, which accounts in part for the fact that the volunteer rate for Baby Boomers is peaking later in life than past generations. In fact, mid-life adults (ages 45 to 64) are nearly three times as likely to have a four-year college degree today as they were 15 years ago (from 11.5% to 29.5%). Once their children leave, Baby Boomers could maintain relatively high volunteer rates because of their higher education levels and expectations that they will work later in life than previous generations, two factors connected to higher volunteer rates. (*Volunteer Growth in America, 2006, and Keeping Baby Boomers Volunteering, 2007*)

Baby Boomers appear to have different volunteer interests than past generations. In the past 15 years, there has been a change in the types of organizations with which people ages 41 to 59 volunteer. In both 1989 and

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from 2003 to 2005, volunteers ages 41 to 59 were most likely to volunteer with religious organizations. However, in 1989, the second most popular type of volunteer organization for the Silent and Greatest Generations was civic, political, business, and international. By 2003-2005, the second most popular type of volunteer organization for Baby Boomers was educational or youth service organizations. (*Keeping Baby Boomers Volunteering, 2007*)

Baby Boomers who engage in professional or management volunteer activities are the most likely to volunteer from year to year. The year-to-year retention rate for Baby Boomer volunteers who perform professional or management activities (such as strategic planning, volunteer management and coordination, and marketing) is the highest, at 74.8%, followed by Baby Boomers who engage in music or other performance (70.9%) and those who do tutoring, mentoring, and coaching (70.3%). (*Keeping Baby Boomers Volunteering, 2007*)

Baby Boomers who engage in general labor or supply transportation are the least likely to volunteer the following year. The year-to-year retention rate for Baby Boomer volunteers who do general labor and supply transportation is the lowest, at 55.6%. (*Keeping Baby Boomers Volunteering, 2007*)

The more hours a Baby Boomer devotes to volunteering, the more likely he or she will volunteer from year to year. As annual volunteer hours among Baby Boomers increase, so do volunteer retention rates, making volunteering a "virtuous cycle." Nearly 8 of 10 Baby Boomer volunteers who serve 100 to 499 hours a year volunteer again the following year, compared to just over 5 in 10 who serve 1 to 14 hours. In between, nearly 74 percent of those who give 50 to 99 hours continue to volunteer the following year. Likewise, 79% of volunteers continue volunteering when they serve 12 or more weeks a year. (*Keeping Baby Boomers Volunteering, 2007*)

Note: In order to fairly compare across generations and between 1989 and today, it is important to control for age.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- ▶ Nonprofits need to rethink how they can attract and utilize Baby Boomers as volunteers.
- ▶ When engaging Baby Boomers, nonprofits should look to put their skills to use (as Baby Boomers are seeking challenging opportunities) in order to retain them as volunteers.
- ▶ Nonprofits also need to strengthen their view of volunteers as assets, similar to how they view their donors and how employers view their employees. The more positive experience a volunteer has, the more likely he or she is to return, just as with an employee or donor.
- ▶ Adoption of key practices, such as matching volunteers with appropriate and challenging assignments and providing professional development opportunities for volunteers, can help build organizational capacity not only to increase volunteer participation, but also to sustain it.
- ▶ Since volunteering and giving are related and trillions of dollars are expected to be given to charity in the coming decades, it makes sense for nonprofits to find ways of encouraging substantial volunteering because it could eventually produce considerable monetary gifts.

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