

# Building the Bridge to Baby Boomer Volunteers

Enriching the volunteer experience to build a better future for our communities

## About the Research Study

The 2010 pan-Canadian research study was a joint project commissioned by Manulife Financial in partnership with Volunteer Canada, and conducted by the Carleton University Centre for Voluntary Sector Research & Development, in collaboration with Harris/Decima.

The study involved a literature review of over 200 documents, a general population phone survey of 1,016 Canadian households, a survey of 551 volunteers, 18 focus groups -- *including 61 participants representing employer-supported volunteers* -- in both urban and rural settings, and an online survey of 208 non-profit and voluntary organizations.

The research yielded practical information for use by volunteer organizations to attract and retain skilled, dedicated volunteers among four specific demographic groups: youth, family, baby boomers, and employer-supporter volunteers.

## How can we bridge the gap between what baby boomers – the generation born between 1945 and 1964 – are looking for in volunteering today and how organizations are engaging boomer volunteers?

Conducted in the summer of 2010, a new pan-Canadian research study provides the most current national data about the changing culture of Canada's volunteers, including information specific to the nation's boomer population.

Unlike earlier surveys that emphasized overall participation rates, this new research captured:

- ➔ **What boomers want in their volunteer experiences;**
- ➔ **The issues boomers have in finding satisfying volunteer roles;** and
- ➔ **What organizations can do to enhance the volunteer experience for boomers,** which in turn can help them achieve their missions and ultimately build stronger communities.

## The Importance of Boomers to the Canadian Voluntary Sector

Baby boomers are an important demographic. Of the 12.5 million Canadians who volunteer, 34 per cent fall in the boomer generation, making this demographic group the most active in volunteering.

The value of volunteering resonates strongly with boomers, who reference a deep sense of social commitment that drives them in their volunteering. Perhaps as a by-product of their upbringing during the civil rights and social change movements of the 60s and 70s, boomers consider volunteering a socially significant activity based on their commitment to support social justice.

## Boomer Thoughts on Volunteering

Boomers who participated in this research felt that while many people want to volunteer, there is a lack of awareness of volunteer opportunities. For instance, although many organizations provide retirement seminars for boomers about to retire, the focus is primarily on money management and there is little or no mention of volunteer opportunities.

Organizations often treat boomer volunteers as inexperienced in volunteering, and believed that this is in fact the opposite, as most boomers who volunteer have been volunteering throughout their lives.



## Common Trends Among Today's Volunteers

The research revealed the following trends, which apply broadly across the majority of today's volunteers, including boomer volunteers:

- **Volunteering changes throughout our lifecycle**, along with evolving priorities, circumstances and interests;
- **Today's volunteers are more goal-oriented, autonomous, tech-savvy and mobile**;
- **Volunteering is a two-way relationship** that needs to meet the goals of the volunteer and the organization;
- **Volunteering is personal** and stems from individual preferences and motivations;
- **Volunteering is a way to transfer and develop skills** by gaining or sharing experiences;
- **Volunteering in groups appeals to all ages** for social and business networking; and
- **Finding satisfying volunteering is not easy for everyone.**

Young boomers have a particularly strong work ethic and pitch in when something needs to be done. Many boomers felt it refreshing to do volunteer activities that are different from what they do at work.

Unfortunately, many boomers felt organizations did not always know how to engage skilled volunteers, and cited the importance of having a sense of ownership over their volunteer activities. Specifically, boomers indicated that being given responsibility on a very important project was a means of ensuring a sense of ownership, which in turn raised their level of commitment.

Boomers also value their independence while volunteering, preferring to do their job and feel engaged in the cause but not necessarily in the organization itself and its staff. A key factor in promoting satisfaction levels among boomers is for organizations to ensure individuals can see the impact they are making through their volunteer work.

While boomers tend to be more willing and available to volunteer, their time needs to be respected and not over-extended. Experiences of being overused, participating in volunteer activities that felt like a full-time job, and suffering from volunteer burnout were echoed consistently among boomers.

### Understanding the Characteristics of Boomer Volunteers

To be more effective at attracting and retaining volunteers in a particular demographic, it helps to first understand their general characteristics and exceptional skills. Canadian baby boomers are:

- *Clear leaders* – in terms of average hours of volunteering compared to other groups
- *Impressive participants* – their overall participation rates are consistently among the highest
- *Looking for meaningful engagement* – they seek purpose in their volunteer activities
- *More flexible and available* – they have more time and relatively flexible schedules compared to other groups
- *Expect organizational efficiency* – they want organizations to be efficient and effective in their management of volunteers and staff
- *Loyal* – they are willing to stay at an organization for many years as long as they are treated well



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## Matching Skills for Boomer Volunteers: Barriers & Opportunities

The results of the study indicated that boomers tend to believe it's the volunteer's responsibility to select an organization based on their interest and what skills they can use within that organization.

They also believed it's generally up to the individual volunteer to speak up about what they want to do and what skills they want to use.

In fact, boomers highlighted that it is common that once a person is 'known as a volunteer', they are often asked to volunteer in other capacities.

However, boomers cautioned that organizations need to be careful about pigeonholing volunteers who become identified with a particular role and whose other skill sets may not be recognized or perceived as qualified when boomers step forward to participate in other types of volunteer activities.

Other barriers to boomer volunteering include:

- Smaller organizations with limited staff that need volunteers to do 'everything' and don't match boomers' skills with tasks;
- The perception that larger organizations may be passing onto boomer volunteers the responsibility of tasks that paid staff simply don't want to do; and
- Not recognizing the boomer as a person with experience and a wide skill set, but simply 'a volunteer body'.

Boomer volunteers suggested that organizations capitalize on opportunities for greater online engagement via social media such as Facebook or Twitter, rather than traditional methods such as phone or email.

For boomers who travel frequently because of work or family commitments, or for those who travel during retirement, virtual communication platforms such as Skype are promising options that could allow boomers to remain engaged in volunteering remotely.

## Providing Volunteer Opportunities That Interest Boomers

The research findings indicate that boomers are most interested in volunteer opportunities:

- Which feature activities that reinforce their strong sense of social commitment;
- With organizations that allow them to work independently and have a sense of ownership over the project;
- Where they can clearly see the impact they are making;
- With activities that offer a chance to act outside their skill/knowledge base; and
- That are defined as casual or short-term so they can see what the organization is like before making a long-term commitment.

## Examples of Boomer-Friendly Volunteer Tasks

- *Activities that allow professional boomers to offer their skills and experience and take on leadership positions, such as serving on a Board or committee work, designing a marketing plan, and executive coaching*
- *Volunteer options for boomers looking for a short-term or 'one-off' commitment with less responsibility, such as reading to children, moderating a workshop for youth, reviewing bylaws, or chairing a conference*

## Organizations Can Improve the Volunteer Experience for Boomers By:

- ✓ *Including volunteer opportunities as a component of retirement seminars – as well as emphasizing the benefits of volunteer involvement as part of a personally satisfying retirement*
- ✓ *Developing integrated human resource strategies – applying the same due diligence and effort to matching tasks with the appropriate candidate for both paid and volunteer work*
- ✓ *Providing casual or short-term opportunities for potential volunteers – so boomers can test the waters before committing to an organization for longer periods*
- ✓ *Recognizing efforts and demonstrating the value and impact of volunteer activities – valuing boomers' contributions and allowing them to see the results of their efforts*
- ✓ *Being sensitive to differences – respecting boomer volunteers' gender, culture, language and especially age*
- ✓ *Providing greater online engagement and virtual communication options – especially for boomers who travel frequently and would like to remain engaged in volunteering activities remotely*
- ✓ *Avoiding the perception that volunteers are performing the functions of paid staff – plus being aware of potential competitiveness and power dynamics between volunteers and paid employees*
- ✓ *Fostering an environment that values boomer input – given the unique combination of life and work experience boomers have to offer, they appreciate feeling like a valued part of the organization and given a role in decision-making processes*
- ✓ *Measuring the social and economic value of volunteering – this is important to boomers in order to demonstrate the impact of their time as well as enhancing their satisfaction with the volunteer activities in which they are involved*

For more details, please refer to the report, '*Bridging the Gap: Enriching the volunteer experience to build a better future for our communities – Highlights of a pan-Canadian research study*' at [www.volunteer.ca](http://www.volunteer.ca)