

Engaging Mature Adults in Volunteering (September 2021)

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(The following is a summary of some of the content from the Engaging Mature Adults in Volunteering workshop presented September 14, 2021 as part of the New Horizon Project, a collaborative effort of Pillar Nonprofit Network, Over55, and the London and Area Association of Volunteer Administration.)

Any discussion of the engagement of mature adults in volunteerism must be done within the context of the times we live in. Recognizing and respecting the humanity of each other is always the first step to creating healthy relationships with others. Building a volunteer program that is attractive to and inclusive of mature adults means building a volunteer program that is attractive to and inclusive of a broad range of citizens. Facilitating opportunities that bring together the needs of a nonprofit or charitable organization and the skills and experience offered by mature adults through volunteering requires a strategy that is founded on:

1. volunteer management best practices,
2. an understanding of the generational influences and traits revealed in the study and articulation of the different generations in the workforce,
3. addressing accessibility challenges of mature adults,
4. the application of targeted recruitment practices to this target group,
5. listening to the lived experience of mature adults who volunteer.

1. Volunteer Management Best Practices

Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement

[The Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement](#) was co-created by Volunteer Canada and the Canadian Administrators of Volunteer Resources (now [Volunteer Management Professionals of Canada](#)) in 2006 to provide a single code for volunteer engagement that is representative of both bodies. The Code was updated in 2012 and plans are in the works to revise the Code yet again to reflect changes and emerging challenges in volunteer management within Canada. The Code identifies standards that lead to a strong volunteer “culture and structure that supports and values the role and impact of volunteer involvement.” (p.6). The Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement includes the following areas:

1. Mission-Based Approach
2. Human Resources Approach
3. Infrastructure for Volunteer Involvement
4. Evaluation: Tracking, Measuring and Reporting
5. Volunteer Roles and Recruitment

6. Risk Management
7. Screening
8. Orientation and Training
9. Support and Supervision
10. Recognition: Valuing Volunteer Involvement

It is up to each individual organization to assess its program and work toward adherence to the code in a fashion that suits the organization and meets the intention of the various aspects of the code. Using the code as a foundational piece of volunteer programs helps to ensure volunteers have meaningful experiences and make meaningful impacts on mission delivery and people who are served.

2. Different Generations in the Workforce

Research into the different generations in the workforce has been ongoing for several years. The purpose of this work is to shed a light on how major historical conditions and events influences each generation's values, especially those around work. The application of this research is not to use it to stereotype people but rather to establish there may be differences between the generations, and those differences need to be acknowledged and integrated into how work gets accomplished within any given environment.

Generation	Watershed Moment/Economics/Tech	Traits
Veterans Born 1945 and before	Stock Market Crash WW II Post-War reconstruction	Loyalty & Dependability Persistence & Hard Working Wisdom over tech knowledge Authoritarian
Baby Boomers Born 1946 to 1964 (largest cohort)	Economic prosperity Child-friendly culture Cold War/Communist threat Lunar landing/ Birth Control pill Vietnam war Rock and roll	Workaholic/Stressed 80s Wall St. Team-oriented Importance of title/status symbols Demanding of respect and sacrifice of subordinates
Generation X Born 1965 to 1976	Economic recessions/Stagflation AIDS Nuclear threat Environmental deterioration Personal computing Rap music	Working within the system Sacrifice personal life for advancement Dependent on close supervision Dedicated to goal achievement Desire for job security

Generation Y Born 1977 to 1995	Information technology Internet and cellphone Downsizing and outsourcing Child-focused society Violence and terrorism Gangsta rap	Independence and autonomy Challenge/Variety-seeking Entrepreneurial Distrust hierarchy and authority -Lack of loyalty/commitment Work-Life balance, Fun and communal workplace
Millennials Born 1996 to 2014	Tech dependent Internationally connected Diversity is the norm Sept 11/ First African American President	More likely to have debt – education or access to credit Less likely to own a car, television, or home Motivated by meaning in work Task not time oriented in work

Adapted from the work of [Dr. Linda Duxbury](#), Spratt School of Business, Carleton U.

3. Addressing Barriers

Research by Volunteer Canada and published under the title ‘Volunteering and Older Adults Final Report 2013’, identified 10 primary barriers mature adults encountered in their attempts to volunteer. These include location, transportation, scheduling, length of commitment, caregiving responsibilities, language, and culture, changing abilities, comfort with technology, access to information about volunteering, negative volunteer experiences in the past. The abbreviated findings were as follows:

- A. Location – With more emphasis on neighbourhood development and locally driven solutions, more people are interested in volunteering close to home to have a direct impact on their environment; therefore, proximity to home or work is a factor. After the amalgamation of cities and public agencies, many smaller organizations have followed this trend and finding a volunteer opportunity close by can be a challenge. Safety and security are also important considerations. To save on rent, many organizations have moved their facilities to isolated or industrial areas and these can be less comfortable for older adults, especially if they are volunteering and attending meetings in the evenings. While most jurisdictions have legislation requiring public services to be in physically accessible buildings, this is still not consistent in all provinces and territories. These challenges of location can create a barrier for older adults or anyone with mobility issues.
- B. Transportation – Some form of transportation to volunteer activities is required. Lack of access to transportation in terms of availability, costs, physical accessibility, and parking can also be a challenge or barrier, whether it is public transportation, adapted transportation, or personal transportation. For those older adults who are no longer driving a car but have not yet adapted to alternate transportation modes, this can be both a practical and emotional challenge, as it may relate to notions of independence. These factors can create a barrier to participation.
- C. Scheduling – Many older adults require a flexible schedule to accommodate travel, health issues, medical appointments, and other seasonable circumstances.

- D. Length of Commitment - Current trends in volunteering are indicating that baby boomers are seeking shorter-term volunteer assignments.
- E. Care Giving Responsibilities – Many baby boomers and seniors are the primary care giver to parents, partners, or grandchildren. The availability and costs of care-giving or respite care can be a barrier to participation.
- F. Language and Culture – Some organizations have systemic barriers to participation in terms of language and culture. People want to feel welcome, comfortable, and informed in a non-profit organization.
- G. Changing Abilities – As abilities change, there may be the need for accommodation in terms of the location as well as the volunteer position or assignment. It is not always comfortable to ask for these accommodations whether one is a long-time volunteer or just now considering getting involved.
- H. Comfort with Technology – Depending upon a person’s work experience and comfort with technology, new technology that is used to sign in or to carry out the volunteer assignment may be intimidating.
- I. Access to Information about Volunteering – Some individuals may lack awareness about volunteer opportunities in the community. Many older adults, particularly if there has been a recent change in employment status, residence, or household make-up, find it difficult to find a volunteer opportunity that suits their new circumstances.
- J. Negative Volunteer Experiences in the Past. – A telephone survey of more than 1000 households revealed that 68% of people had a negative volunteer experience in the past. When asked more about what made these experiences negative, people identified politics, lack of organization, and lack of appreciation as the top three reasons.

The strategies we develop to address these barriers must be incorporated into our volunteer programs in a way that makes it apparent to all applicants that the organization is ready and able to address accessibility issues to the best of its ability. We must also respect that some mature adults may not be good candidates for some specific roles. Identifying the conditions under which a volunteer role must be executed will assist mature adults in assessing whether they are a good fit or not.

Accessibility

Developing a more accessible organization will help to attract not only mature adults but a variety of people with accessibility challenges. Many nonprofits in Ontario have participated and trained staff and volunteers in accessibility standards for customer service (ADOA). The government of Ontario also offers Integrated Accessibility Standards which include a review of transportation modes and how they integrate (or don't) with an organization's physical space. This document also includes a review of signage accessibility (location, size, height etc.).

Another important step in creating accessibility that is public facing and a demonstration of your organization's and its volunteer program's commitment to accessibility is the accessibility of your social media including your website and other audio-visual materials. This includes information about volunteering and volunteer training materials and delivery. Did you know that PowerPoint has an accessibility checker, or that using

the Heading structure within Word provides an easier 'reading' experience for those using screen readers? For more great resources go to [Ontario.ca/AccessON](https://www.ontario.ca/AccessON).

4. Targeted Recruitment

The ability to execute targeted recruitment successfully begins with a thorough understanding of a volunteer role. This understanding can be elucidated through the process of developing a role description. This includes tasks, responsibilities, risks, risk mitigation strategies, skills and qualifications, and benefits to the volunteer. Being as detailed as possible will help to build the profile of the person who will be the ideal candidate for the role. Be sure to include the specific abilities that are required like standing, sitting (and for how long), lifting (how much weight), visual acuity, language proficiency and so on.

Once the role description is complete the next step is to consider where you will find the people with the skills, abilities, experience, qualifications that are required. In the case of mature adults consider if workplaces, unions, and professional associations have retiree or alumni groups associated with their organizations. Places like senior centres or other informal gathering places for mature adults are a source for advertising volunteer opportunities but will provide a broader and less specific group of candidates.

5. Lived Experience

In 2021 [Over55](#) conducted a series of focus groups with mature adults from the London community and volunteer engagement professionals who were members of the London and Area Association of Volunteer Administrators. The input gathered from these sessions informs a new set of courses that will assist mature adults who are looking to volunteer in the community. Among the topics covered will be resume writing or refreshing, navigating Police Checks or other screening activities. These topics complement O55's current offerings on Senior Hub which now includes courses and videos on current popular culture including social media, as well as support for employment and entrepreneurship for mature adults.

As part of the New Horizons Project workshop on Engaging Mature Adults in Volunteering, we heard from a panel of mature adult volunteers who reminded us that it is often the meaningful connections with people that attract them and keep them motivated to continue with volunteer work. The connection can be with a staff person who is passionate about the work of their organization, or with a person who is the benefactor of the volunteer's time and skill that provides its own intrinsic reward. The type, time, and place volunteers became involved in the community was often tied to life events and stages. For example, volunteering may begin with the aim of gaining a sense of connection and belonging in a new community or country, transition over to volunteering for children's schools or sport activities once they have children, and change once more when children are grown and building a life of their own. We were also reminded that making assumptions about immigrants who approach us about

volunteering can be demeaning and discouraging. Some of these assumptions include immigrants do not know how things work in Canada, they are unskilled, or will have language barriers. We must greet each person who contacts us about volunteering with an open heart and mind, and work to discover what they have to offer and where and how they might best offer it our community.

Resources

- [Over55](#)
- [Pillar Nonprofit Network](#)
- [London and Area Association for Volunteer Administration \(LAVA\)](#)
- [Volunteer Canada](#)
 - [Transitions, Milestones, and Legacies: Retirement Planning Module on Volunteering](#)
 - [Volunteering and Older Adults Final Report 2013](#)
- [Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement](#)