



# Research Bulletin

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## Barriers and Benefits of Volunteering for Seniors

Summary of Stage 2 of the project, Volunteering and Productive Ageing. Prepared for the National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre by Dr Jeni Warburton and Jessica Paynter. Stage 2 reports on the findings of a survey undertaken with members of National Seniors.

### Background

There is a preconception that older people, particularly those who are retired, will be more likely to volunteer to 'fill in time'. Consequently the ageing of the population is seen as a potential boom period for volunteer based organisations. However, in reality, statistics show that volunteering activity peaks in the 35 – 44 year age group.

As well as contributing substantially to the economy, volunteering has been shown to have a number of benefits to individuals. This is particularly true amongst seniors who have been shown to derive a number of health and social benefits as a result of engaging in volunteering activity. Why then do so few people volunteer?

To better understand the motivations and barriers to seniors becoming volunteers NSPAC, in conjunction with the University of Queensland, conducted a three stage research project into the role that volunteering can play in aiding the productive ageing process. Stage 1 of the project reviewed existing research into the area of seniors and volunteering and is reported in Research Bulletin 4. This Research Bulletin reports on the findings of Stages 2 and 3 of this project which focus on a survey of members and a series of interviews with volunteering experts.

Based on the findings reported in Research Bulletin 4 it was decided to further explore the barriers to volunteering amongst seniors by conducting a survey with seniors, both volunteers and non volunteers, and then supplementing this information with interviews with organisations and managers of volunteers.

### Study

An anonymous web based survey was sent out via email to National Seniors members. The survey was completed on line and could be accessed via the NSPAC website. In total 106 people responded to the survey.

The survey itself consisted of four elements:

- Volunteering information – which covered questions about how much volunteering respondents did, how long they have been volunteering, when they first volunteered and so on;
- Factors to encourage volunteering – respondents were asked to rate a number of different policies to encourage volunteering on a scale of 1 to 5;
- Barriers to volunteering – next respondents were asked to rate potential barriers to seniors volunteering on a scale of 1 to 5; and
- Demographics – respondents were asked about themselves so that researchers could classify different responses.

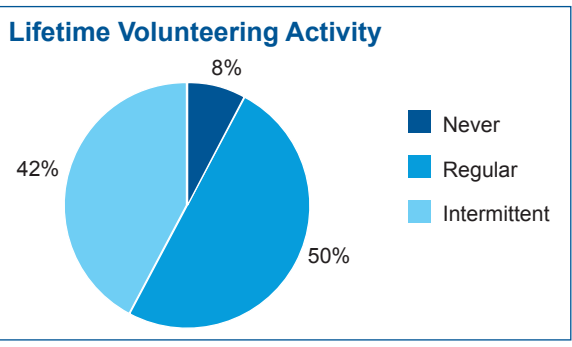
The final part of the study was to interview 10 volunteering 'experts'. These experts comprised of the following:

- national and state volunteering peak organisation CEOs,
- a volunteer trainer,
- two well know Australian researchers into volunteering,
- two people from leading Australian businesses which encourage corporate responsibility through supporting employees volunteering efforts;
- a corporate social responsibility practitioner, and
- a former government director responsible for volunteering in a major federal government department.

The interviews took between 30 minutes and an hour to complete. All interviews were based on a series of consistent questions and all were tape recorded for further analysis.

### Profile of Volunteers

Based on this survey data a majority of people engage in formal volunteering activity during their lifetime with only 8% reporting that they had never volunteered.



Currently 59.8% report that they are involved in formal volunteering. When the definition of volunteering was expanded to include “informal volunteering”, that is helping out friends, neighbours, relatives and the community but not within a formal organisational structure, the numbers rise to 67%. As would be expected there is a strong overlap between those who formally volunteer and those who engage in informal volunteering. Eighty per cent of those who volunteer formally also engage in informal volunteering activity. The number of hours that respondents reported giving to volunteering varied (Table 1).

**Table 1: Average hours spent in volunteering**

Time	Percentage
More than 10 hours	15
6 to 10 hours	29
1 to 5 hours	44
Less than weekly	13

**Retirement, Age and Volunteering**

There is a popular idea that once people are retired, they will have plenty of time on their hands and therefore will seek volunteering opportunities to give them a purpose in life, as a replacement for work or as a means of socialising. This survey showed that retired people are significantly more likely to engage in formal volunteering activities than those who are still in the workforce (71% compared to 41%). The majority of retired volunteers (55%) also reported that they volunteered more after retirement than before while a further 20% said that their volunteering contribution remained the same. Two thirds (67%) of those still working anticipated participating in volunteer work in retirement.

Despite the fact that retired respondents were more likely to engage in volunteer activity more often than those who were not retired, only 22.2% first volunteered as a senior (ie at the age of 50 or over). This fell to just under 5% of respondents for those aged 60 or over.

Volunteering, therefore, can be considered a lifelong activity. Those who are active volunteers in the senior years, tend to be those people who have had a lifelong commitment to volunteering throughout their lives.

**Attracting Seniors as Volunteers**

With the ageing of the population combined with the fact that people are living longer and healthier lives in retirement, there is a lot of potential for volunteer organisations to tap into the productive ageing concept and develop volunteering activities that appeal to the growing seniors population.

“...there is a lot of potential for volunteer organisations to tap into the productive ageing concept...”

Experts in the area of volunteering agreed that older people were an extremely useful source of volunteers. Further they reported that while volunteering has a number of benefits to individuals at all stages of life, it can be particularly valuable as people aged due to the decline in the emphasis of other roles such as worker or parent. Benefits of engaging mature aged volunteers to volunteer organisations that the people interviewed reported included their:

- Knowledge and experience
- Availability of time
- Willingness to contribute
- Greater flexibility
- Patience, and
- Day time availability.

Attracting and retaining mature age volunteers involves an understanding of two key issues: first what factors would engage people to volunteer in their seniors years and second, what factors deter them from being involved.

To answer the first question, respondents in this survey were asked to rate 9 different factors which might encourage them to volunteer. These factors were taken from a range of existing studies on volunteering and the results are summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2: Factors which encourage volunteering**

Factor	Ranking (1 = most important)
Programs which include training to help develop mature age volunteers' skills (eg IT and computing)	1
Create more opportunities for volunteering involving both older and younger people	2
More flexible volunteer options	3
Governments providing more opportunities for volunteering older unemployed	4
Inclusive organisational cultures which welcome diversity in volunteers	5
Better protections through government policies	6
Programs designed around the needs of mature age volunteers	7
Business engaging in proactive strategies to encourage mature age workers to volunteer prior to retirement	8
Directly targeting mature age volunteers through appeals	9

It is interesting to note that mature age volunteers did not believe that they required special treatment or programs. Instead they viewed volunteering as an opportunity to expand their skills and work with people of all ages.

However, while Table 2 shows the overall results, when the agreement with the statements is compared on the basis of gender, some significant

differences emerge. Women are significantly more likely to be attracted to organisations that

- Directly target mature age volunteers
- Have inclusive cultures, and
- Create intergenerational opportunities to work with young people.

Women are also significantly more likely to support businesses engaging in proactive strategies to encourage mature age workers to volunteer before retirement and support government initiatives to provide opportunities for the mature aged unemployed to volunteer.

The view of the expert stakeholders towards mature age volunteers was generally positive and reinforced the concept that organisations need to be proactive in encouraging, managing and using older people rather than expecting individuals to change to fit the needs of the organisation. One co-ordinator of mature aged volunteers identified the following issues that organisations need to address:

- Good recruitment, orientation, training and supervision practices
- Listening to volunteers' needs
- Being flexible enough to incorporate changes
- Offer a range of roles including professional roles, and
- Encourage cross generational teams rather than expecting older volunteers to only work with each other.

Managers and experts agreed that there is enormous choice around volunteer opportunities yet volunteering options are not easy to access. Word of mouth is still the most common method of recruitment into volunteer organisations however it is not always successful in recruiting people who have never previously volunteered.

One manager identified that more positive first experiences, or entry points, into volunteering are needed along with softer entry points which means creating more flexible options for intermittent volunteering opportunities rather than expecting a firm regular and ongoing commitment.

### Barriers to Volunteering

The other side of recruitment is to identify and reduce the barriers that might prevent mature age people from volunteering. Again respondents were asked to rate a series of statements from 1 to 7.

**Table 3: Barriers to volunteering**

Factor	Ranking (1 = most important)
Volunteer organisations do not use volunteer's skills and experience effectively	1
The financial costs associated with volunteering are too high	2
People are too busy with other activities	3
Volunteer organisations are poorly managed	4
Existing volunteers don't make new volunteers feel welcome	5

Volunteering is too inflexible time wise	6
Mature age volunteers are concerned they will encounter age discrimination	7
Organisations prefer to work with young volunteers	8
Volunteer work is boring	9

In the case of barriers to participation there were no significant differences found between the views of men and women, however, experience with volunteering seems to be a factor in determining how great different barriers are. There were three specific barriers to volunteering that non volunteers rated as being significantly more important than existing volunteers. These were that:

- Volunteering is too inflexible time wise
- Volunteer work is boring, and
- Existing volunteers don't make new volunteers feel welcome.

When compared on work force status, it was found that there were also significant differences in the perceptions of those respondents who were retired and those still in the work force. Retired volunteers were significantly more likely to agree that

- Organisations prefer to work with young volunteers
- Mature age volunteers are concerned they will encounter age discrimination, and
- Existing volunteers don't make new volunteers feel welcome.

Most of those who currently are not volunteering have had some previous experience of volunteer work so it is reasonable to assume that a poor experience with a volunteer organisation in the past will continue to have a negative impact on volunteers as they enter their senior years.

The interviewees working in the volunteer sector as managers and recruiters agreed that most of the perceived barriers to volunteering related to poor organisational management. There was a general recognition that little specific is done for older volunteers in terms of developing new roles or taking into account the specific needs of mature age volunteers. This is of particular concern with the approaching retirement of the baby boom generation which, according to those interviewed, are a lot more demanding in their roles and are more likely to simply walk away if they needs are not being met.

Other concerns that were raised in relation to barriers to engaging mature age volunteers from the organisational perspective were issues such as the impact of ageism. It interesting that the professionals in the sector saw this as a greater problem than the volunteers. Age discrimination was seen as pervasive but subtle and often manifested itself indirectly. A specific example which was raised by several interviewees was the impact of requirements surrounding insurance and risk management policies.

Another indirect form of age based discrimination is being encountered in the move towards skilled volunteers. With the rapid pace of change in all work place environments, potential volunteers in

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the seniors age group may no longer have the skills that are being sought by some volunteer organisations.

Managers and co-ordinators of volunteers saw that there is a need to expand the ways in which all volunteers, including mature aged volunteers, are recruited if greater diversity is to be achieved. In particular it is important to develop appealing strategies to help recruit those people who are not traditional volunteers.

Both respondents to the survey and the professionals interviewed recognise that it is very difficult for individuals to work up the courage to approach an organisation and volunteer. This is why word of mouth remains so important as a recruitment process. However the big problem with relying on word of mouth is that those people already in volunteer positions, will tend to recruit others who are similar to themselves. The consequence of this is that many potential volunteers are excluded if they don't know people already involved.

Work colleagues are a major source of interaction and therefore recruitment to volunteering roles. Increasingly companies are using their position to assist volunteer based organisations by encouraging employees to participate in outside volunteering activities.

### Implications for Research and Policy

Volunteering is a lifelong activity. Very few individuals take up volunteering in later life so although seniors are a large potential source of volunteers, this potential is not being realised. It is very encouraging, however to note that volunteer based organisations and their management are recognising that they need to be more proactive in their recruitment and management strategies rather than blaming individuals.

A critical issue identified throughout was the need to provide safe and easy pathways into volunteering. A significant number of respondents to this survey were ex-volunteers. The volunteering experiences of the past have clouded their view of volunteering as a productive ageing activity.

To overcome this, organisations need to recognise what the barriers to volunteering are and then lower them. In part this will require improved communications strategies to reach potential volunteers but as well there needs to be changes within organisations.

Once volunteers have been recruited effective orientation programs need to be put in place along with relevant training so that volunteers feel that they, and their skills, are being valued. Further it is important to train existing volunteers to adapt to new volunteers and ensure that the environment is welcoming and supportive.

Understanding what people want to get out of volunteering, and then adjusting programs to suit, will help not only to attract new volunteers but also to retain them. For seniors this means providing opportunities to use their existing skills, develop new skills and work with people of all ages.

Recognising that seniors today have full lives and not assuming that the new retirees will automatically want to 'fill in time' with volunteer work is a major step in the right direction towards developing new and appealing programs to tap into the huge potential resource of seniors ageing productively through volunteer work.

## National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre

National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre (NSPAC) was established by National Seniors in 2002, in partnership with the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing and the University of the Sunshine Coast.

The Centre's annual program consists of consumer research and policy forums, cross-sectoral research collaborations, development of productive ageing research products and innovative use of a range of media to disseminate research widely.

The National Seniors Association and the National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre gratefully acknowledge the financial and other support provided by the Australian Government to the National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre Project.

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National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre for consistency with the National Seniors membership base uses the term 'senior' to describe an individual aged 50 years and over.

