



Research Bulletin

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Volunteering and Productive Ageing

Summary of the Volunteering and Productive Ageing Report, an initiative of the University of Queensland by Jeni Warburton and Melissa Lovell, prepared for the National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre.

Background

Volunteers play an important role in the social and economic life of Australia, and are increasingly recognized as a valuable resource for communities, organisations and individuals.

Volunteering is not confined to any particular age group although the extent of volunteering does vary over the lifespan. Until recently, however, little information has been available on the extent or experience of volunteering amongst seniors.

In conjunction with the National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre, researchers at the University of Queensland have compiled a preliminary report into the involvement of the over 50s in volunteer activity.

The report, *Volunteering and Productive Ageing* looks at volunteering in terms of its value as a later life activity that is both economically and socially productive.

Definitions

Formal volunteering is defined as those activities that take place in not for profit organisations or projects. The main points concerned with volunteering are that the volunteers undertake activities that:

- are of benefit to the community;
- undertaken of the volunteer's free will without any form of coercion;
- carry no financial payment; and
- involve the participant in designated volunteer positions only.

Informal volunteering can be defined as all those non paid activities not included in the formal definition above. Informal volunteers tend to undertake voluntary work by:

- giving time and resources to their families;
- providing support for their friends;
- involving themselves in their neighbourhood; and
- contributing to the wellbeing of their community.

There is some crossover between the two volunteer types, and both are included in the notion of social capital. Most of the data collected refers to formal volunteering, which shows that formal volunteers tend to be:

- white collar workers;
- employed rather than unemployed;
- from a professional, management or clerical background;
- from an English-speaking background;
- from a rural rather than a city area.

By contrast, informal volunteers are more diverse and more likely to include:

- Indigenous groups;
- those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Social Enterprise Model of Volunteering

Changing patterns in volunteering in Australia and overseas have created the need for new models of volunteering. A key factor underpinning this need is the move away from seeing volunteering as a purely altruistic activity towards looking at it from a more business oriented perspective.

The social enterprise model provides a new framework for conceptualizing volunteering. The purpose of this model is to use business practices to maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of volunteers. Whilst the usual business model is there to maximise profit, the social enterprise model is adopting business practices and applying them to achieve social objectives. The model emphasises a more professional rather than ad hoc approach to volunteering.

A second factor which has been driving the change in perspective is the increasing pressure on the not-for-profit sector to comply with a range of policies and regulations aimed at the protection of volunteers. Occupational health and safety, risk management and legal liability are all an integral part of the new volunteering culture.

An unfortunate side effect of these changes is the need for organisations to identify 'high risk'

volunteers. Due to factors including declining health, there is a real potential for this process to indirectly lead to discrimination against older volunteers.

The change from the *laissez faire* approach to volunteering in more formalized social enterprise models has some likely benefits for both volunteers and organisations. As organisations implement more business oriented models, retirees may be able to undertake contract or short term volunteer opportunities which provide greater structure and leave them with more freedom to undertake other activities. However, it is important that those less able to take advantage of such opportunities are not neglected or discriminated against.

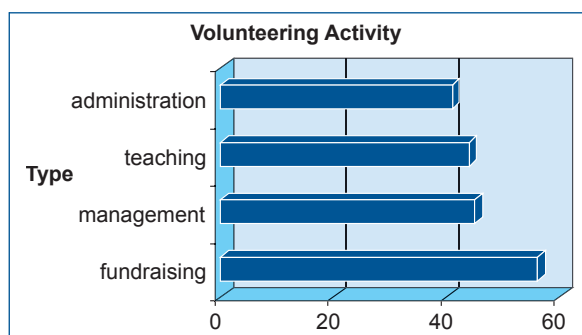
General Volunteer Information

Information on volunteering in Australia has been very limited until the first Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) report, *Voluntary Work Australia* was published in 1995. A second study was published in 2001 and the third is due out in 2005-06.

The age group at which volunteering peaks in Australia is 35-44 when parents become involved in their children's activities. As people age and their families no longer require support in extra curricula activities, involvement tends to drop off.

Although fewer older people are involved in volunteering, those who do remain give greater amounts of their time. In terms of volunteering patterns, women tend to be more involved during their working lives and men more so after they retire. Volunteering is not confined to any one sector or profession. The types of activities undertaken in volunteering are as diverse as those undertaken in the paid workforce.

The top four volunteer activities are summarised in the following Figure.



As social enterprise models become more common, the type of activities engaged in by volunteers are becoming more skilled and less physical than traditional volunteer activities.

Previously it was assumed that the over 50s and retirees had significantly more 'spare' time than younger people and hence would become more involved in volunteering. This view is inconsistent with the self assessed experience of the over 50s who report that they actually have less spare time than those in mid-life.

The reasons that individuals give up their time

to work as volunteers tends to vary over the lifespan. Those in the 55-64 age group, as well as those aged 65 and over, cite helping others and personal satisfaction as of paramount importance. International studies also show that older people are motivated by a desire for social interaction.

The Nexus between Volunteering & Paid Work

Another reason cited for 35-44 year olds being more involved in volunteering is that a number of work places encourage staff to become volunteers. Retirees are less able to take advantage of these opportunities.

Paid work is an important component of many people's adult lives. Much of what has been written about volunteering and the older adult describes volunteering as a replacement for paid work when people reach retirement.

Some businesses are implementing their social responsibility plans by creating flexible arrangements to encourage older employees to combine paid employment with volunteer work. The intent is to set up a pattern of volunteering prior to retirement.

Some businesses encourage all their staff to volunteer, or allow their employees to be seconded to work on community projects. They also provide support to community groups, either by providing financial resources or by allowing use of their infrastructure.

The emphasis in these programs is on the potential for a company to contribute to the community. Consequently most opportunities are available to all employees and do not imply that companies have any specific responsibility towards older employees as they move towards retirement.

Volunteering as a Response to Mature Age Unemployment

The Voluntary Work Initiative established in 1997 allows unemployed people to do up to 32 hours of volunteer work per fortnight without a loss of benefits with the expectation that volunteer work experience and training will lead to paid work.

The Australian government has viewed volunteering as a response to mature age unemployment because it has the potential for providing training and skills development and returning older people to paid employment and continued economic productivity.

One interesting study based on a sample of income support recipients demonstrated that people aged fifty years or older were the age group most likely to participate in volunteer work and that they contributed more hours on average than any age group with the exception of the 18-24 years age group.

However, the fifty plus age group were also the least likely group to participate in paid work. This suggests that volunteer work is not a significant pathway into employment for older people but

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may have value for older people as a method for remaining productive and involved in their communities.

Barriers to Older People's Involvement in Volunteering

There is a need to develop organisational cultures and volunteering tasks which are inclusive of older people and create opportunities rather than barriers to older peoples' participation as volunteers. Barriers to participation include:

- negative stereotypes about ageing
- discrimination against older people
- fewer economic resources
- perception of older people as a burden on society

Another factor which plays an important part is the organisation itself. It is important to manage and support all volunteers, and organisations that fail to do so will lose their volunteers.

In summary, older people need to be attracted to volunteering and be supported, managed and recognized in these activities, as they provide a rich resource for voluntary organisations.

Human Resource Issues

As discussed previously, everyone has different needs. Good volunteer recruitment practices should take into account the diversity of the older age group. Not all volunteers want to interact with the needy or use the experience to make new friends.

As a general rule older people tend to give more time and stay longer as volunteers. Putting time and money into training this group is cost effective and can prove a good social investment.

Baby Boomers

With the ageing of the baby boomers there will be a major increase in the numbers of retired people. Encouraging the baby-boomer generation to volunteer will be an important aspect of volunteer recruitment and management in the near future. However, it can't be assumed that baby-boomers will take up volunteering as they reach retirement.

Studies relating to baby-boomer volunteering are still predictive. But they do suggest that changing trends in volunteering by baby-boomers will relate more to the type of volunteering rather than the amount of time given. It is also possible they will make different choices of organisations, for example preferring youth related volunteering over religious volunteering.

Intergenerational Framework for Volunteering

Intergenerational programs are an emerging trend in volunteering, particularly in the United States. These programs are based on the belief that this form of volunteering is beneficial for both older and younger people.

The most common form of intergenerational programs is mentoring. This activity is understood

to have benefits not just for older and younger participants but can also assist in promoting a sense of community.

In the United States two programs which have met with success are Experience Corps, which matches older volunteers with young people to assist them with tutoring, mentoring and personal relationships and Across Ages which involves older volunteers mentoring teenage to prevent substance abuse.

These programs have been found to meet their original aims and provide a method of building stronger local communities and meeting the needs of changing family structures.

Contemporary Issues

There are a number of contemporary volunteer issues which emerge in the context of productive ageing. These include concerns about the diversity of volunteers, the relationship between volunteering and health in later life, the extent to which older volunteer's expectations are being met and the need for increased government policy development to support older volunteers.

Diversity in Volunteering

The challenges to involvement in formal volunteerism are greater for older people who were born overseas, are Indigenous, have poor health or are living with a disability.

However, older people who are not involved in formal volunteering may still be productive and contribute significantly to their communities. This form of voluntary work occurs outside the not-for-profit sector amongst families, friends and communities.

This is particularly true for those from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds who have more tenuous links with mainstream society, include mainstream formal volunteer organisations. Greater recognition of informal volunteering is needed to ensure that the full contribution of all volunteers to national productivity is appreciated.

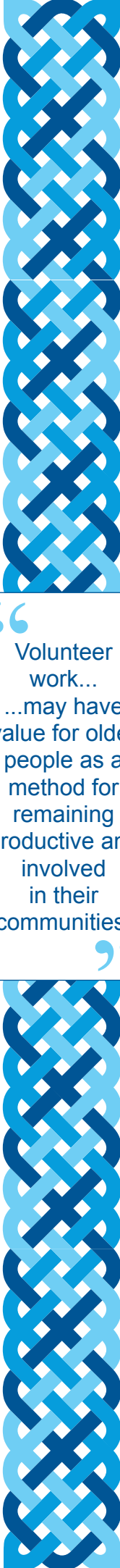
Volunteering and Improved Health in Later Life

The research on health and volunteering suggests that people who stay active and productive through volunteering are likely to benefit through improved psychological and physical health. The evidence also suggests that volunteers live longer. Thus, continued involvement in volunteering in later life not only benefits the community but also the volunteer.

Organisations can support their older volunteers by adapting job descriptions and increasing flexibility so that older volunteers who experience health issues can continue to volunteer and do not feel excluded.

Where to next? Developing Government Policy for Older Volunteers

Australia does not have a national policy on



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older volunteers. Some States have developed policies on volunteering and provide some funding for volunteer resources. In particular, there are a number of volunteer centres that match volunteers up with community organisations and help to promote volunteering and the contribution made by volunteers.

Unlike the USA and the UK, Australia has very few programs exclusively for older volunteers, and does little formally to encourage volunteering in later life.

With the ageing of the Australian population, the development of a national policy on older volunteers is important. Some specific issues that require further policy, practice or research attention are highlighted in this final section:

- volunteering and its contribution as a productive ageing activity;
- development of government policy; attention to older volunteers;
- programs for the Australian context;
- corporate programs;
- issues of diversity;
- baby-boomer research.

Many older Australians continue to contribute to society when they leave paid work. In their roles as volunteers, many contribute both socially and economically, and this needs to be recognized in government policy. As the babyboomers age, there will be increased numbers of older people. With this, and associated changes to societal norms, it is clear that volunteering will continue to change and evolve. The one certainty is that without the contribution of volunteers there would be a very large gap that would be difficult, if not impossible, to fill.

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.

