

Newest Recruits

Questioning the Baby Boomer effect on volunteerism

It seems that hardly a week goes by without another report, press release, or speaker exhortation to prepare for the consequences of ever-increasing waves of Baby Boomers entering their 60s. In the interest of full disclosure, I'm a Boomer myself, born in 1948. So all my life I've been aware that my particular age cohort is the big population bubble – wherever we are in our life cycle dominates social policy, marketing and the economy, and politics.

As fascinating as many of the studies and predic-

tions are, we need to apply some critical thinking about how such information is being interpreted in planning for the future of volunteerism. We need to guard against viewing the data selectively, possibly misinterpreting the data, and missing the forest for the trees.

Selectively viewing the data

Most researchers agree that the Baby Boomers are defined as those born between the post-WWII years

of 1946 and 1964. Less frequently reported, however, is the growing agreement that this 18-year span is too long and diverse to affect those born at the start or at the end of the cohort in the same ways. Note, for example, that the following "Generation X" is dated as births from 1965-1978, only 13 years.

The most current thinking divides the cohort into "Early" and "Late" Boomers, with the demarcation point ranging from 1954 to 1956. One author crystallized the division like this: The year the Beatles came to America in 1964, the first Boomers were screaming in the audience; the last Boomers were crying in their cribs.

Unless we are clear about whether we are targeting people now in their 40s versus those turning 60 this year, few characteristics will be equally applicable to both ends of the artificial Boomer scale. As one example, Early Boomers learned to use email while in their 40s; Late Boomers never knew a work environment without it.

Most pundits conclude that Baby Boomers are more highly educated than any generation before, and so it is, especially for women. In the United States, the Census Bureau reports for 2004 that 36 percent of the population older than age 65 has had some college education or higher, while for ages 45-64 that figure jumps to 58 percent. Interestingly, the population aged 25 to 44 comes in at only 55 percent for some higher education.

Note, however, that these figures still indicate a whopping 42 percent of the Baby Boomer population with a high school diploma (30 percent) or less (12 percent). So why do we talk only about "professionals" and higher socio-economic groups? Baby Boomers include workers at every level of the economy, not all of whom are managers nor crave entrepreneurial challenges.

Further, nearly one-third of Late Boomers are minorities: Asian, Hispanic, or African-American; even in the Early Boomer group, the proportion of minorities is about 25 percent. Angela O'Rand, co-author of *The Lives and Times of the Baby Boomers*, a study analyzing the 2000 Census sponsored by the Russell Sage Foundation of New York and the Population Reference Bureau of Washington, said: "We didn't expect so many of the Baby Boomers to be minorities and foreign-born. Nowhere was that image there." O'Rand further noted that the level of immigration during the 1990s was the highest since the turn of the 20th century, and immigrants usually are between the ages of 30 and 50; 12 percent of Early Boomers and nearly 15 percent of Late Boomers are immigrants.

Volunteer-involving organizations today continue to be weak in their recruitment of blue-collar volunteers, poor and minority participants, and New Americans. Clearly these challenges are not going away with the aging of the Boomers.

Finally, we need to see Boomer statistics in a wider context. This is also the age

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cohort with high divorce rates, fewer children, greater obligations to aged parents, and all the other socio-economic trends swirling about. So, in terms of their own needs, Boomers are more likely to be alone as they move into their 80s and 90s, having fewer family support mechanisms while having greater personal needs. This will pose as great a challenge for new volunteer roles for younger people to help aging Boomers as opportunities for Boomers to serve others.

Possibly misinterpreting the data

The emphasis on Boomers as highly educated leads to assumptions about economic level that are questionable. For the "Silent Generation" preceding the Boomers, a high school diploma was vital to job security. Today, as entry-level, low-level, and manual jobs disappear, there is far less financial gain from only a high school diploma.

Having some college credits is increasingly mandatory for any career mobility and the sheer number of people with such credits has driven down the rewards (and possibly the standards). So there is a difference between holding a credential and being truly educated.

Further, we are always cautioned against confusing correlation with causation. All the research today shows that volunteering rates are greater for people with some college than for those without, and therefore many conclude that education increases community service. This might not be the correct interpretation of the data. Another perspective is to consider that the staff of nonprofit organizations are most comfortable with volunteers who

are similar to themselves – and so recruitment efforts are targeted from the start at the middle class and higher. Less-educated people, especially those in blue-collar trades, are simply not invited as often to become volunteers. This merits further study, but also suggests taking care in extrapolating the Boomer data.

Boomers also have the highest wage inequality any recent generation – the data show that one in 10 Late Boomers lives in poverty at middle age and they are far less likely to be homeowners than the previous generation. Couple this with the expectation of living longer – usually seen as a good thing – and it means many Boomers will struggle economically for many more years.

In fact, while well-off Boomers may choose to engage in their careers well past what earlier generations would have considered "retirement age," a large proportion of this cohort will find it a necessity to continue to earn money simply to survive. What might this imply for volunteerism?

Missing the forest for the trees

In volunteering, most discussion of Baby Boomers seems preoccupied with them doing volunteer work when they retire, if they do. Why is this the emphasis? Boomers are the mainstay of the current paid workforce now and, in reviewing the current Census Bureau data for the past few years, is already the largest group currently volunteering, not the seniors of the Silent Generation. This is why AARP wants to involve members starting at age 50 and why RSVP (Retired and Senior Volunteer Program) lowered its eligibility age to 55 the same year

that the age for Social Security benefits was raised to 67. Talk about mixed messages.

The real challenge to organizations is whether and how they engage people who today are aged 45 to 60 as volunteers. Are we giving these middle-age volunteers the sorts of assignments they want? Are we building their interest and loyalty now so that they will want to continue their volunteering if and when they retire and may have more hours to give?

The Boomers are also disproportionately the age group employed by our organizations and most likely to be the supervisors of today's volunteers. Since tension between employees and volunteers continues to be the number one obstacle to effective volunteer involvement, how do we reconcile the paradox of the differences in attitude between one group of Boomers and another about the value of volunteer service?

It hardly seems cause for special attention when organizations recruit Boomers now. In fact, the true challenge is rarely mentioned: how to work with volunteers who are in their 90s today – the fastest growing age group, proportionately, in the country. Many are physically unable to serve, but others are still capable of wonderful contributions. Are we figuring out how to tap this resource in meaningful ways? Or, in our rush to find 50-year-olds, are we ignoring those who are left out? *NPT*

Susan J. Ellis is president of Energize, a Philadelphia-based training, publishing and consulting firm specializing in volunteerism. She can be reached via email at susan@energizeinc.com. Her Web site is www.energizeinc.com



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