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# The Volunteer Generation Gap

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

July  
2000

I just returned home from the Points of Light National Conference on Community Service in Orlando. On the plane back to Philadelphia, I reflected on many of the things I heard during those four days-- many of which will undoubtedly find their way into future Hot Topics. Knowing that the deadline was looming for this July Hot Topic, I asked myself "was anything surprising?" That's when I recognized that I had witnessed several incidents completely separate from one another, but on the same theme: generational claims to the "most" civic engagement.

On one side: the twenty-somethings and younger. On the other: the sixty-somethings and older. In public and in private, from plenary speeches and workshop presentations to conversations in the exhibit area, I listened to variations on these two conflicting themes:

- Seniors are the ones who care about the broader community and are the backbone of volunteer programs and service organizations. Young people are selfish and don't want to make commitments.
- Young people are the true activists today. Older people may do nice, helpful things as volunteers, but cutting-edge work for social change is being done mainly by the young.

Both "sides" felt preached to by the other. Several people expressed end-of-the-rope frustration of the "if I hear this one more time, I'll scream" variety.

It is dismaying to see time and talent wasted on such silly debate. In trying to analyze what is going on, I thought about an intriguing question posed to me during my recent trip to Australia. A community there is considering the formation of a senior volunteer program, much like RSVP elsewhere. But the person involved in the planning asked: "Isn't there a negative reaction anywhere to the 'ghetto-ization' of age groups?" In surprise, I realized that we have all begun to assume that age-based volunteer programs are natural and inevitable. It never occurred to me before that, by definition, such programs foster separation that could have negative consequences. (See how useful it is to engage in international exchange? It's always valuable to question assumptions, if only to reconfirm our commitment to them.)

Obviously there are many good reasons for continuing the practice of youth-only and senior-only volunteer projects. And, of course, there are innumerable intergenerational opportunities everywhere. But do we collectively share some responsibility for the type of us-vs.-them mentality that surfaced in Orlando? For example:

- In recruiting for and recognizing volunteers in single-generation programs do we imply (or even say) that older/younger people are the most involved or are the best? For example, do we quote statistics that bolster this impression (since there are conflicting data and we will all, naturally, choose those figures that prove the point we want to make)?
- Do we determine goals and choose activities without any consideration for whether another age group is also involved in some way? And, even if younger/older volunteers want to tackle a need with different actions, do we encourage coordination? Do we even inform the “other” side what is being done?
- Do we confuse changes in volunteering with the demise of volunteering? After all, at the same time that Robert Putnam published “Bowling Alone” bemoaning the downfall of American associational activity, John McKnight published his discovery of the thriving collective organization of inner city poor neighborhoods. So seniors see the struggles of traditional service clubs to find long-term members as evidence of young people’s apathy, while young people point to what they see as the ineffectiveness of older folk’s organizations. Both are wrong conclusions, but the attitudes stem from generational separation.

It ought to be possible to identify and celebrate the best volunteer actions of both age groups--as well as to recognize that both old and young volunteers can be unsuccessful despite sincere attempts to have an impact. None of the speakers or conference participants who eloquently praised their age group meant to express prejudice. But they all believed what they said.

So...has this “volunteer generation gap” affected you in any way? Have you heard similar attitudes? What can we do about it?

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*Posted 7/26/00*

**Submitted by Pam THompson, Alabama Federation of Women's Clubs, Birmingham, AL, USA**

I thought this article was going to be about the people in the middle, the Boomers who have careers and no time for volunteering, like their mothers did. How can we reach them to replace the seniors when they are no longer here?

*Posted 7/26/00*

**Submitted by Kate Rhodes**

As a generation xer I have experienced this first hand. When I started volunteering with a local

women's charity I was all but ignored because I was the youngest person there. I felt that what ever I said was disregarded. I think many of the ladies there expected that I would eventually stop coming to the meetings. Fast forward 4 years later, I am still actively involved and chair of the volunteer committee. I still occasionally get the feeling that because of my age my opinions are not as highly regarded. But that's fine with me. My experience has taught me that no matter who the person is, if they are willing to volunteer and help you, you should make every attempt to work with them. Who knows, they may end up being an active volunteer with your organization!

*Posted July 22, 2000*

***Submitted by Elizabeth Paquin***

Last week, I downloaded information on my local American Red Cross while I applied for a volunteer manager position. As I 'edited' the web page, my reaction was just as you've addressed in your article. I wondered why they use the word "seniors" instead of "adults" in their many volunteer job descriptions. There are some positions applicable to youth and those could be explained better too. In my current position, I do have to remind volunteers that "it takes all kinds" and everyone has contributions to make. And that people are here because they are having fun so they need to get over their petty objections and accept each other. As volunteers who sort, price and arrange merchandise for a rummage sale, we need the various opinions because we are selling to a variety of shoppers...

*Posted July 22, 2000*

***Submitted by Helen Rusich, Volunteer Services, Terra Assn., Edmonton, Alberta, Canada***

I haven't seen much bias for generational volunteers. I agree that maybe as volunteer managers that we do tend to segregate ages for some programs. In my own situation we have a rocking grannies program that allows senior to hold, feed and play with babies in a child care setting. The child care, however is for parenting teens. Fortunately, not only seniors volunteer but other age groups as well. To my knowledge we haven't had any male volunteers. I would like to believe that we can get beyond the stereotypes of ages, cultures, genders, etc. when we think about people who volunteer and concentrate on what their skills, experience and talents are, as well as what they hope to gain from the experience. There is some truth to these stereotypes but I don't dwell on them. Thanks.

*July 18, 2000*

***Submitted by Sharon Brizendine, Manager, North Kansas City Hospital Volunteers, North Kansas City, MO USA***

I have read with interest all of the feedback received from members. I am working on a paper for my Senior Project that has focused on the aging issue of Boomers. Will they be willing volunteers? If statistics prove true and 80% of them continue to work past 65, will they have time to volunteer? It seems we will need to study the "Boomer lifestyle and really focus our energy/recruitment efforts on two things: 1) What type task will they be interested in and 2) how will we retain them if their interest are short term?

*July 18, 2000*

***Submitted by Rick Hyman, VolunteerGifts.com, Boca Raton, FL USA***

Interesting topic and one I have noticed as a vendor speaking to a large variety of volunteer groups (from some hospital V-organizations with the average age probably being 60 or older to AmeriCorps and AmeriServe V-leaders to corporate V-program leaders, usually "30-somethings".) I have noticed a consistent pattern in younger volunteers to tackle tougher issues and a wider range of social issues and cultural diversification.

As in the "old economy" and the "new economy", both entities are important but it's only natural (maybe even biological) that we 60 somethings just can't see it through the same eyes of the 20's and 30's group. But bad is bad and good is good. And Volunteerism is GOOD. As it takes new forms (more corporate emphasis, more government assistance and encouragement, etc.) it will probably get BETTER. I think it's just like video games or the Internet right now -- it's morphing!

*July 14, 2000*

***Submitted by Tina Branco, Director, Volunteer Support, Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society, Arlington VA USA***

The issue of generational diversity (and it IS a diversity issue) will become more important as demographics shift and our population ages. We will not be able to design volunteer opportunities or develop resources with only a single generation in mind. Exploring these differences now, training staff and volunteers to recognize, value and celebrate the strengths of each group will enable us to incorporate and retain volunteers who can work as a multi- and cross-generational team to provide services to our clients, who are themselves generationally diverse.

In the past year, we held several workshops on this topic for staff and volunteers throughout our organization. Everyone who attended has said "I never thought about that before." "I want to learn more." "This will really help me be a better member of the group." From these sessions have come much organizational food for thought:

*Training.* We must incorporate a variety of learning styles to meet the expectations and skills of different generations. For instance, the World War Generation and many Baby Boomers are comfortable in a traditional classroom, but are often uncomfortable with role-plays, small groups, and "touchy-feely" training. They require constant feedback if given self-directed training. On the other hand, Gen Xers and "Dot.comers" want much more interaction if in a classroom setting, enjoy computer based or audio/video training, and welcome instruction that is self-paced. This is the generation that grew up with Nintendo and the "reset" button.

*Recognition.* We know that meaningful recognition depends on a volunteer's motivation for coming to the job, but generational differences also impact the volunteer's perception of whether he or she is appropriately recognized. Generations raised to believe that sacrifice and duty are paramount want that aspect celebrated with formal awards, dinners, pictures and handshakes with board members, etc. Silent generation (the Depression era) volunteers often don't want anything expensive, and don't want donated funds used to purchase "trinkets." Those of other age groups, who put personal

development first, may want recognition in the form of more responsibility and recommendations to employers.

*Recruiting.* Studying generations quickly makes us aware of how different groups access and respond to information. The term "targeted recruitment" takes on new meaning when we realize that research has uncovered one generation who are "news junkies" and favor print media, while another wants everything in download format. It is reassuring to note that everyone still responds best to a personal invitation whether by phone or in person.

*Supervision.* Getting to know how each generation perceives the other, providing communications skills training, and fostering respect for generational diversity are imperative if our programs are to work. Busy staff cannot just be trained in "how to supervise." They need to recognize the very real differences among age groups in how they respond to directions from someone older or younger.

*Posted July 10, 2000*

***Submitted by Marsha Riddle, Western Carolina Center, North Carolina USA***

As volunteer program managers, we all have a responsibility to carefully create those opportunities which are not discriminating and age bias. We must be aware that service to others, is not about young or old. It is about meeting needs of others. As we all know, finding the match that is right for the volunteer and the recipient is much more important than the age of the volunteer or the recipient. As long as we and organizations foster the concept that there are senior programs that support the young or the frail elderly rather than giving the volunteer, regardless of their age, the supports they need to provide service to others, then we are not truly working to eliminate age discrimination and bias.

*Posted July 10, 2000*

***Submitted by Jayne Cravens, Virtual Volunteering Project, Austin, Texas USA***

A great topic! It's true that there are some conflicts between seniors and youth when it comes to volunteering -- but the generation sandwiched between those two generations (Baby Boomers) also have a lot of prejudices to contend with. Some research shows this generation as volunteering the most, yet I heard more than one person at the SeniorCorps preconference say this generation isn't "as dedicated" and that they don't want to work with them. I listened as two people condemned this entire generation as potential volunteers -- which is going to make it really tough for these folks when their current senior volunteers pass on and baby boomers become seniors.... I think all volunteer managers and volunteers need to realize that there's no one definition of any generation, and we are all defined by a variety of factors, not just age. I'll add this sad note -- I have heard things said about a particular generation/age group (all of them, at one time or another) that, were they said about an entire ethnicity, religion or region, would be considered outrageous and racist. Ageism can be just as nasty as racism.

*Posted July 6, 2000*

***Submitted by Dave Kneessi, Volunteer Coordinator/ Children's Resource Center, Ohio/ USA***

This is almost too easy, too simplistic to say. But it is true, I think, that there is a simple reflection of the general society differences in the two generations of volunteers. Basic worldviews are vastly different between the groups in terms of priorities and values. This has always been true and may be more so in a time when technologies seem to change quicker than most of us can keep up. The populations just don't have much interaction naturally with the possible exception of familial connections. If our fundamental goal is to get the two groups together in intragenerational work we need to define common interests and do our best to create an environment that emphasizes commonalities and not difference. The discussion of which group is more valuable reminds me of two hometown baseball team fans arguing over whose team is best - it is all bias with very little reason.

*Posted July 6, 2000*

***Submitted by Kathy Cunningham, Manager, Office of Volunteer Service, The Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore, MD USA***

The Office of Volunteer Service has an Advisory Council to address issues relevant to volunteers. On the Advisory Council we have one Junior Volunteer (high school), one College student volunteer, and a volunteer who is sponsored by Foster Grandparents. We make sure that all the members profit by having these groups report on their programs in the hospital. Older volunteers are amazed at the lab skills the high school students have and are using in the hospital during the summer program. "What is Foster Grandparents" was an agenda item at the last council meeting. This led to the council project of identifying other organizations in the community like Foster Grandparents. This process will certainly educate all members of the council about what seniors are doing in the community.

*Posted July 6, 2000*

***Submitted by Don Rhodes, Employers Advocate. Otago Southland Employers Assn., Dunedin. New Zealand.***

The observations you make regarding the generation gap, are a concern here in New Zealand as well. What I have been encouraging volunteer organisations to do, when we help them with personnel issues, is to actively pursue the people they want. In other words, Headhunt. In the process they identify the folk they believe will be of most benefit, and simply go and recruit them. As for any normal employment situation, it is vital to obtain a mix of skills and in the process they mostly end up with a good mix of ages as well as skills, experience, expectations etc.

The most difficult part of this process is identifying the specific skills they need, and keep the age thing out of the reckoning. Next, they are encouraged to identify those who have the capability to learn skills leaving them to concentrate of the characteristics. Here they must recognize it is easier to train someone into new skills if they possess the right characteristics, than try to train them out of old habits. Next, they must set specific performance standards for the tasks they are to perform. This enables the new volunteer to be shown exactly what will be required, and when they come on board their progress is much easier monitored and managed. Again, concentrating on performance helps lessen what can sometimes be an "overemphasis" on the age thing. Maybe some help.

*Posted July 6, 2000*

***Submitted by Michael Baker, Dorothy Garske Center, Arizona, USA***

I have worked in the field of aging for twenty years and now direct an outdoor volunteer program serving all ages. I notice the stereotyping of elders by youth much more than the reverse, though it is rarely malicious. We have all ages working well together, but our culture is so age stratified that conflict is unavoidable. Rather than make a big issue of it, just push on. Ignoring behavior is one way of helping extinguish it.

***Submitted by Phyllis Onstad, VRS Director, Volunteer Center of Sonoma Co., California, USA***

I was intrigued about this topic. During the Orlando conference, three staff members from our Volunteer Center - one in her 50's, one in her 30's and one in her 20's -- had a fascinating conversation about the differences in styles and outlooks among our different generations. This is a question that will have impact on volunteer management paid staff as well as volunteers.

*Posted July 6, 2000*

***Submitted by Sonya Watson, Co-ordinator of Volunteer Services, Winnipeg Child and Family Services, Manitoba, Canada***

Back to the notion of family volunteering: I'm thinking about a mom and her 16 year old daughter who visit two preadolescent sisters together, on a weekly basis. The daughter shares her "cool" interests with the girls, and mom brings the mature judgement needed. Positive family interaction is also modeled. It's a great way to help our teens gain an awareness of how to reach out to others, without overwhelming them.

*Posted July 5, 2000*

***Submitted by Gingie Hunstad, Student Vol Coord St Luke's Hospital, Cedar Rapids Iowa USA***

One of the most successful volunteer ventures this summer has been scheduling student and adult volunteers together during the busy shifts at our information desk. One of our elevators has been out of service during some construction which has necessitated escorting or taking patients in wheelchairs to Radiology, MRI and the lab. This entails lots of additional steps that could exhaust our older volunteers but provide our high school students with the activity they want. It has been a wonderful solution to a construction problem. I really think the adults will miss the students when school resumes this fall!

*Posted July 5, 2000*

***Submitted by Barbara Silvestri, Assistant Executive Director for Special Projects at the American Lung Association of Metropolitan Chicago, Chicago, IL USA***

In response to this month's Hot Topic, I submit the following information. I strongly recommend that those interested in volunteerism access Dr. Gambone's website for further information on the subject of intergenerational relationships and how it relates to volunteerism. In May 2000, I attended the Illinois Conference on Volunteer Administration where I heard Dr. James Gambone speak on Intergenerational Relations as it relates to volunteerism.

Dr. Gambone from Points of View, Inc. (<http://www.pointsofviewinc.com>) presented these four foundations to consider:

- 1) We need to accept our own aging.
- 2) We need to live a more balanced lifestyle. If we can't get people to do this, it will be very difficult to get people to volunteer.
- 3) We need to recapture the idealism that we had as younger people. Idealism comes with a new way of thinking about our own aging.
- 4) We need to live intentionally intergenerationally.

Each generation brings a different perspective, gifts and values. The more generations you can involve in your volunteer work in the community and create an intergenerational consciousness, the better volunteer program you will have.

*Posted July 5, 2000*

***Submitted by Alex Cofield, Assistant House Manager, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH USA***

One of our volunteer programs at the Wexner Center for the Arts is our usher corps. This group of 120 people run the range of ages, from a 16 year old high school student and many college students to many people over 60 years old. There are no distinctions in job duties based upon age. The only distinctions we see are availability and methods of socialization. Many of the retired people contribute more hours than the college students because they have more free time. Also, when we assign ushers to locations for events, we try to make an effort to mix older and younger ushers so that people get to know each other and to break down barriers. Before events, the college students tend to chat with their college friends and the older people tend to chat with the older people. This method of socialization is common among groups of people.

*Posted July 5, 2000*

***Submitted by Cheryl Morehouse, Manager, Volunteer Services Department, Nebraska, USA***

In the past, it seems the various volunteer "groups" at our hospital were somewhat divided. In an effort to bring these age groups together, recently we have begun to combine our recognition events to span all age groups: teens, college students, adults and senior citizens. I am endeavoring to create more opportunities for inter-generational interaction amongst our volunteers. Most of our older volunteers get quite a kick out of working along side, or interacting with our teen volunteers, and vice-versa. The teens bring a spark of enthusiasm and energy, and the retirees demonstrate and teach a rare work ethic. Some beautiful, enduring friendships have evolved. I am in the process of developing a Volunteer Advisory Council with representation from each volunteer age group and category to assist in tackling our recruitment and retention challenges, and to foster an even greater sense of "ownership" for our volunteer with their program.

*Posted July 3, 2000*

***Submitted by Naomi Chamberlain, Coordinator of Volunteer Services, Kaiser Diablo Service Area, California, USA***



I have a very divided program as the adults work in our hospital and clinics during the daytime hours and our students work after 4 p.m. During the summer months, we try to have students come in to work along side the adults to cover vacations and for the most part this seems to bridge the generational gap. I think some of our older adults are a little afraid of the high schoolers as they are so quick to learn and to do things. I think working along side of each other helps the lines of communication between both the parties.

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