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Building a Multi-Generational Volunteer Base: Understanding How Human Development Impacts Volunteer Service

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Abstract: Extension professionals seeking to recruit multi-generational volunteers face several challenges, including understanding human development across the life span, recruiting different age groups for volunteer roles, and developing volunteer roles for people with different developmental needs. Engaging an age-diverse volunteer pool will benefit the organization, its clientele and volunteers. Extension professionals should consider creating specific roles for multi-generational volunteers. This should yield a broader cadre of recruits who are likely to be retained as they move through different developmental stages across the life span.

Introduction

Many organizations have developed methods to effectively recruit and engage one particular type, generation, or group of volunteers. Hospital auxiliaries, for example, are primarily composed of retirees, especially women. Rotary and Lions are both civic organizations comprised largely of men working in professional fields. 4-H leaders and troop leaders for scouts consist largely of members' parents.

Most non-profit organizations rely on volunteers to carry out their mission (Brudney, 1994). Non-profit organizations depend upon volunteers to fulfill their mission, provide direct service, and reach clientele who would otherwise be unserved. The challenge facing many volunteer organizations and their Extension professionals, therefore, is determining how to involve and retain a multi-generational volunteer base.

Review of Literature

Youth Development as a Component of Volunteer Development

Farkas and Johnson (1997) determined that volunteers are an important component of American society and are a critical component for implementing youth development programs. Youth most frequently learned about volunteer activities through teachers or school, by being asked, through a family member or friend's involvement, or because they had previously engaged with the organization (Independent Sector, 1996). Youth were three times more likely to volunteer when asked than when they sought out their own volunteer or community service opportunities (Kahne, Jonig, & McLaughlin, 1998).

In a survey of American youth, Prudential (1995) found that 71% of students thought their communities would be better places to live if more adults volunteered. Additionally, they found volunteer levels to be higher among white students and highest among students in households where the chief wage earner had a post-graduate degree. Westat and Chapman (1999) found that 32% of urban high schools have a community service graduation requirement. Additionally, 64% of all public schools, including 83% of public high schools, had students participating in community service activities recognized and arranged through the school (Westat & Chapman, 1999). Finally, 57% of all public schools organized community service activities for their students (Westat & Chapman, 1999).

Weis, Gantt, and Tobertson (1997) found that reaching out to address community needs through direct experience was critical to personal development. Volunteering appeals to the esteem needs of people (Mesch, Tschirhart, Perry, & Lee, 1998). Auck (1999) and Brudney (1994) found the most common motive to initiate volunteering was the desire to do something to help others. Half of all Americans would be more likely to volunteer to help kids if they could involve them in an activity in which they were already involved with their own children (Farkas & Johnson, 1997).

Engaging an age-diverse volunteer pool is beneficial to the organization, its clientele, and also to the volunteers, particularly over time. Experiences during adolescence help shape lifelong values; early service results in long-term payoffs (Conrad & Hedin, 1987). Adolescents engaged in volunteering become less concerned with their own careers and more concerned with the social and altruistic rewards of work. Additionally, they place a greater value on being involved in their communities than do adolescents who do not volunteer (Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer, & Snyder, 1998).

Youth who engage in service activities continue to help their communities as they mature and are more likely to see service as an obligation of all people (Wade, 1997). Adolescents whose parents are involved in the community are more likely to be involved than are their peers whose parents are not involved. Volunteer service can stimulate volunteers to think about the political and moral dimensions of society and their role in making that change happen (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997).

Several challenges face Extension professionals who seek to recruit or retain multi-generational volunteers. These challenges include understanding human development across the life span, engaging volunteers of different age groups in similar activities or volunteer roles, and developing different volunteer roles for people with different developmental needs or characteristics.

Human Development Across the Life Span

Three researchers in human development have identified seven different stages of human development. These seven stages include infancy, early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, middle adulthood, and late adulthood (Craig, 1976; Kotre & Hall, 1990). Additionally, Ellis (1996) further divided late adulthood into three subcategories. These subcategories include early seniors, middle seniors, and late seniors. Each developmental stage is described by unique differences in physical, cognitive, emotional, and social characteristics.

Extension professionals who take these developmental characteristics and differences into account when planning for volunteer involvement will create specific roles for multi-generational volunteers. This should yield a broader cadre of recruits who are likely to be retained as they move through different developmental stages across the life span. An understanding of these developmental differences, therefore, is a critical first step in recruiting and retaining multi-generational volunteers.

Although infancy is the initial stage, the first developmental stage to be discussed in the context of volunteer service is early childhood. Early childhood begins at age two (when infancy ends) and extends through age six. During this stage, a child learns behavior and attitudes through modeling. Motor skill and cognitive development are intertwined during early childhood. Children in this stage need security and stability in family and relationships, while language skills are acquired and undergo tremendous growth (Craig, 1976; Kotre & Hall, 1990).

Middle childhood extends from age six through 12. During this stage, children develop skills and foster social patterns. Gross motor skills are developed, while fine motor skills are practiced and refined. Children in this stage begin to move away from the security of the family and start to exert independence. Adjustments to school and formal education are made, and close ties are formed with people outside of the home and family unit. Work and play habits, and new interests are developed. During middle childhood, youngsters learn about cooperation, fairness, competitiveness, and respect for rules and authority. Informal peer groups are also formed during this stage (Craig, 1976; Kotre & Hall, 1990).

Adolescence is defined as "the ten year lag between the biological and social clocks" (Kotre & Hall, 1990). In modern culture, this may be interpreted as the delay between physical and intellectual maturity. Adolescence has traditionally been defined as ages 10 - 20. However, this stage is growing in duration. Previously, it was commonly accepted that adolescence ended with high school graduation. Today it is commonly accepted that adolescence extends until formal education ends and the individual enters the full-time work force (Craig, 1976; Kotre & Hall, 1990). More physical, cognitive, and psychological changes occur during adolescence than during any other period. Reasoning and logic are developed during this stage. Critical decisions are made about lifestyle that will have life-long implications. If an individual will enjoy or tolerate noise at any time during their lifetime, it will be during adolescence (Craig, 1976; Kotre & Hall, 1990).

Early adulthood has traditionally been defined as the 20's and 30's. Today, however, early adulthood begins when adolescence ends (i.e., when an individual enters the full-time work force) and lasts through age 39. Early adulthood is known as "the season of fertility and physical ability." It is during this time that most people have children and achieve their peak physical strength, fitness, and abilities. Individuals will engage in full-time employment during early adulthood and are likely to marry, begin parenting, and have family responsibilities. This age group enjoys group activities and social events.

The American workplace is still largely geared to a man in a traditional marriage (Craig, 1976; Kotre & Hall, 1990). Three stark demographic changes have occurred with this age group during the past half century that have had great impact on both the American workplace and the volunteer sector. These three changes include: the number of working mothers, the unwed birth rate, and the divorce rate.

In 1960, 19% of mothers with children under six years of age worked outside of the home. This had increased to 57% by 1988 and further escalated to 67% by 1990 (Craig, 1976; Kotre & Hall, 1990). By 2000, this percentage had increased to 71.5% (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005). In 1950, only 4% of all births in the United States were to unwed mothers. In 1986, this had increased to 23% (Craig, 1976; Kotre & Hall, 1990) and jumped to 36.9% by 2005 (Martin et al., 2007). The American divorce rate was 4% at the time of the Civil War. From 1980 through 2000, the divorce rate was 50% (Hurley, 2005). America leads the world in the percentage of marriages that end in divorce (Craig, 1976; Kotre & Hall, 1990). These statistics (the "American uglies") have greatly changed American society, family structure, and the workplace and have clear implications for volunteer roles.

Middle adulthood begins at age 40 and extends through age 59. Life-style choices made during early adulthood begin to show an impact during this stage. For example, smoking a pack of cigarettes isn't likely to kill anyone. However, smoking a pack of cigarettes every day for 30 years is much more likely to cause lung cancer or heart disease. Physical functions begin their gradual "slow down" during middle adulthood; however, individuals in this stage still retain 90% of the physical abilities displayed during their 20's. Social losses are expected during this stage. For many middle adults, this stage begins as "the sandwich generation," with time being devoted to parenting or care-giving to both children and parents. The end of this stage is characterized by children leaving home and parents dying. Three-quarters of all women in this stage are married.

Late adulthood was previously defined as beginning at age 60 and lasting until death. However, late adulthood has been reclassified into three subcategories by Ellis (1996). The primary reason for this re-classification is a longer life expectancy. For example, in 1900, the average American could be expected to live 47.3 years (National Vital Statistics Report, 2002). Subsequent life expectancies were 68.2 years in 1950 and 76.7 years for individuals born in 2000 (National Vital Statistics Report.) These subcategories include: early, mid-, and late seniors (Ellis).

Early senior, a stage that lasts through the 60's (Ellis, 1996) is characterized by the early retirement years. Individuals in this stage are "retired but far from incapacitated." Children have moved out, but most parents still live in "the big house" (the house in which the family was raised.) Early seniors are financially independent, physically healthy, active, and busy. They enjoy being on the go and may experience some visual and hearing impairment. For healthy adults, early senior is physically and socially an extension of middle age/adulthood (Craig, 1976; Kotre & Hall, 1990).

Mid-seniors, those individuals in their 70's (Ellis, 1996), often move into a smaller home, usually provide their own transportation, and are likely to begin restricting travel to daylight hours. Health and physical abilities become a greater concern for mid-seniors. Eighty percent of all widows live alone. For widows, their quality of life depends upon their ability to fill their need for companionship. Obviously, volunteer service is a good outlet for companionship and provides the opportunity to affiliate and form relationships.

By age 75, one-quarter of all women and three-quarters of all men are married (Craig, 1976; Kotre & Hall, 1990). This disparity is due to three major factors. First, women outlive men by 5.4 years (National Vital Statistics Reports, 2002). Second, men aged 55 and over are twice as likely as women to remarry, while men 70 and older are nine times more likely to remarry than are women (National Advisory Council on Aging, 1993). Third, men are particularly more likely than women to remarry a younger spouse.

Late seniors are individuals who are 80 and over (Ellis, 1996) and are most likely to live in an apartment, condominium, retirement village, or assisted living complex. Late seniors may not have personal transportation and prefer smaller, quieter gatherings. This is due, in part, to greater limitations on physical abilities (especially hearing). Loss of short-term memory also becomes a concern during this stage. Cognitive abilities that rely on knowledge or past experiences are still generally good. However, an intellectual decline in the processing of information or learning new tasks is noticeable. Those over 90 years of age now constitute the fastest growing segment of the population and need to be considered when developing volunteer roles.

Discussion and Implications

Involving Youth in Developmentally Appropriate Activities

Youth (those in early and middle childhood) need structure and assistance in carrying out details of projects and activities. Youth are interested in participating in activities and not in planning. They are happy to have their parents and family members involved. Youth involvement, therefore, is a good way to recruit parents and family members for a volunteer project or activity. Extension professionals should design short, activity-oriented volunteer sessions for this developmental stage.

Adolescents, conversely, aren't interested in joining an activity in which their parents are involved. Successful Extension professionals will capitalize on the strengths of this developmental stage. These strengths include energy, enthusiasm, passion for a cause, and personal interests. Adolescents are more likely to respond to an appeal to help a cause or fill a need. They are most interested in participating in activities in which they have had input or helped to plan or organize.

Schools provide the best opportunities for recruiting groups of adolescents. Therefore, if you want adolescent involvement, ask for it! Adolescents are the most social of all developmental stages and enjoy group activities. Extension professionals should collaborate with teachers, principals, corporations, etc. to develop Service Learning projects and recruit clubs to adopt service projects.

Recruiting Adults for Volunteer Roles

Early adulthood, which includes singles, young couples, and families, is the most diverse developmental stage. Virtual

volunteer opportunities will often appeal to early adults. Some young parents need opportunities to volunteer at home, while other stay-at-home parents seek opportunities to get out of the house and interact with adults. Young professionals seeking to establish themselves in a community and occupation may be interested in volunteering or performing pro bono service. Extension professionals should consider providing childcare as an incentive to engage young parents. (With proper screening and orientation, the childcare providers could be volunteers as well!)

When planning volunteer opportunities for young families, it is important to plan activities in which children can participate. Extension professionals should consider developing roles that are recreational as well as service oriented. Activities should be planned with the entire family in mind, realizing that some activities could involve the entire family while others could be divided into age groups based upon physical abilities, skills, and risk management concerns.

Many professional early adults choose to delay having children, while other early adults are divorced single parents. These two groups have very different needs and therefore also need different volunteer roles. All early adults need opportunities to interact with others, especially those of similar age. However, many early adults can also benefit by interacting with late adults, who have significant life experiences to share and who also have a need for companionship and belonging.

Recruitment efforts for early adults will be more fruitful if the prospective volunteer understands how the service role will benefit his/her family, neighborhood, or community. Using a volunteer to recruit other volunteers is also an effective recruitment method with this group.

When recruiting middle adults, Extension professionals should appeal to the talents, interests, and skills of prospective volunteers. Focusing on addressing a local issue, cause, or need and capitalizing upon the motivation to help someone appeals to this group.

Planning for Senior's Volunteer Involvement

As a greater percentage of our population moves into the late adult group, Extension professionals will need to develop volunteer opportunities in order to retain current volunteers as well as serve and attract prospective recruits. Early seniors will seek mobile, flexible, independent volunteer schedules. They are also likely to use e-mail and the Internet; therefore, virtual volunteer roles may be appealing. Middle seniors are more likely to want to volunteer only during daylight hours, as impaired vision (especially night vision) becomes a concern. Therefore, Extension professionals who seek to engage this group should not expect them to come out at night. Late seniors are most likely to want to volunteer at or near their home. Extension professionals may want to develop service opportunities that may be performed at home, such as rote or clerical tasks, or one-on-one activities. Materials may need to be picked up or dropped off, because fewer late seniors will be willing to drive to the Extension office or be physically capable of picking up or carrying materials.

Finally, it is important to remember that mid- and late seniors may be motivated to volunteer to fill a need for companionship. Extension professionals should, therefore, provide service opportunities involving small groups of people. Recruiting individuals at a retirement community or assisted living complex may be an effective way of introducing volunteer opportunities to ready-made social groups and also provide an outlet for individuals to interact, volunteer, and serve their community.

Conclusion

Extension professionals who seek to involve multi-generational volunteers need to be proactive in planning for their continued involvement. As the needs and abilities of individuals evolves over their life spans, so too must the volunteer roles for which they are being recruited. One strategy that may be used is to divide large volunteer opportunities into smaller activities. These activities may be designed for different groups of people with different developmental needs and varying ability and skill levels. Extension professionals who plan for the involvement of multi-generational volunteers will be rewarded with higher retention rates, increased community recognition and visibility, and a satisfied volunteer cadre.

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