



New trends in volunteering: Baby-boomer volunteering

By Pierre Morrissette, Executive Director of the Volunteer Center of Montreal

December 8, 2017

Like many social practices, volunteering has been changing for a few years now. Several social and demographic phenomena have a significant impact on the practice of volunteering and among them is the massive transition of baby boomers into retirement, which is already leading to substantial changes in the way of recruiting, motivating, supervising and recognizing volunteers.

From the outset, and it is important to repeat it, from the beginning and still to this day, regardless of the trends that affect society and the field of volunteerism, **people volunteer to help others and do good.**

In the past, we didn't insist very much on the benefits of volunteering for the self. We mixed volunteering with moral or religious considerations, notions of duty and Christian charity. There's nothing wrong with that, and there will always be people who will be motivated by moral or religious considerations. Nevertheless, even if we didn't talk about it, volunteering brought a form of personal gratification (the feeling of an accomplished duty), of spiritual appeasement (I am a charitable soul, I am doing good), of relief of guilt (sharing your wealth) and of guaranteed salvation (I'm earning my place in heaven).

However, times are changing and especially society and people are changing, and their motivations are changing too. Volunteering, is no longer a charitable act to give to help others: it is increasingly becoming a freely consensual exchange where there is no longer someone giving and someone receiving, but where there is a mutual benefit, that profits those who are involved, the community and society in general.

Volunteering is thus a free and voluntary act through which a non-monetary exchange is produced that contributes to the quality of life of the environment where it is exercised and that resembles a form of civil commitment, citizen participation even. It is also the exercise

of one's free will, an act of taking charge and of individual and collective empowerment. It is then becoming more and more a commitment for the collective wellbeing, a contribution to justice and social change.

I would even say, and there are many studies that confirm it, that volunteer action is an important economic force when we calculate how much it would cost to cover the millions of hours done every year by volunteers in Quebec by all types of associations, community organizations and the network of health establishments and social services.

Today, we are starting to have **scientific proof** for what we have intuitively known for several years: **helping others makes us feel good and makes us feel better physically and psychologically**. In fact, a recent European studyⁱ, published last March, concerning a sample group of 43 000 individuals in 29 countries demonstrates that people who volunteer have a significantly better general health than those who do not, **which translates to a gain of 5 years with regards to their age**, which isn't nothing.

According to this study, volunteering significantly improves **the feeling of self-confidence and the feeling of competence**. Volunteering also improves **the feeling of belonging** and by extension **access to support and information**, and all of this has a direct positive effect on global health.

So the new general trend in volunteering is that **we can do ourselves good while doing good for others and for our community. Also, the notion of pleasure is becoming more and more important in what motivates people, young and old, to volunteer**. For people recruiting volunteers, it's very important to understand this "paradigm" change amongst volunteers. It completely changes the way to approach them and interest them in volunteering. Also, when we're talking about the expectations and aspirations of baby boomers, we are full-on in the concepts of pleasure and benefits.

In the past, someone who wanted to volunteer would come to an organization and say, "tell me what I can do to help and I will do it".

Today, with baby boomers, it's a little more complicated! And I do not want to be mean to baby boomers, they also have qualities! ... As we know, baby boomers dominated and, in many ways, revolutionized many social practices of their time:

- They are more educated than the previous generation,
- They had a richer life, generally had better jobs, less difficult working conditions, used more complex skills,
- They have travelled and still travel a lot,

- They generally had a greater sense of control over their lives than the previous generation,
- They retire at a younger age with a significantly higher life expectancy than the previous generation,
- And their retirement is therefore generally more active.

So today, baby boomers are more demanding about their volunteer work. They often "shop" for a variety of considerations that are important to them;

- They have a **broader vision** of the "problems" and issues of societal,
- They see volunteering more as a **civic responsibility**, a contribution to the community and to society;
- They want to "**make a difference**", to see the concrete result of their involvement;
- And, once again, **they want to have fun**;
- They are more **concerned with a cause** than with direct assistance to the sick, disabled or in need;
- They want to **get involved for the common good** rather than make a charitable act;
- They want to **use their skills**, or **learn new ones** rather than just help.
- Their retirement will be busier so they are **less likely to engage in the long-term or in regularity** that the previous generation.

Moreover, the first reason why people say they don't volunteer is ... the lack of time. And the second? ... The fear of being committed.

So, **there is a lot of work to be done for organizations whose activities and services depend in part or totally on volunteers.** And they are numerous to apprehend the wall towards which they are heading. The managers of many of Montreal's oldest charitable organisations have been regularly reporting to us for several years their difficulties in "replacing" their supervolunteers, those who are loyal and hold strategic operational positions, giving several hours a week throughout the year, who almost never take a "vacation" and accumulate up to 300, 400 or even 500 hours of volunteer work per year.

The bad news is that there are very few candidates in the new generations to take over for these supervolunteers. It will probably take 2, 3 or 4 volunteers to replace these supervolunteers. **The good news** is that there are a lot of baby boomers, and as they retire younger and they are healthier, we can assume that with a little adaptation, there will be enough people to fill the departures of these supervolunteers.

So, **what should organizations do to adapt** to this new generation of volunteers and the following ones?

- Properly define its volunteer positions and make the stimulating, playful and relational aspects stand out;
- Pay more attention to the expectations and needs of volunteers when recruiting;
- Do not be afraid to give more demanding responsibilities to volunteers, which means more structured job definitions, a more in depth recruitment and selection process, etc;
- If the volunteer positions are boring, routine or not very rewarding, we must think about organizing fun recognition activities that will promote the feeling of belonging to the organization or recognize the volunteers' other skills;
- Provide skill development opportunities;
- Propose schedules and durations of commitment over more flexible, shorter periods. Sometimes breaking up a volunteer assignment into several segments, offering volunteer assignments that can be done at home (writing and reviewing documents, graphic design and layout, translation, etc.);
- Highlighting the cause behind the proposed volunteer work, the impact of the involvement in this cause;
- Involving volunteers in setting strategic directions and priorities is a good way to develop volunteers' sense of belonging and loyalty to the cause and the organization (ex. involve them in a strategic planning)
- For youth and families, increase opportunities to volunteer as a group with their friends;
- Multiply the opportunities for recognition and small gestures on a daily basis;
- Say THANK YOU in a personalized way, by a little word, a card, an individual attention, not just in a group;
- Reaching out to former volunteers who left can often pay off if changes to volunteer management practices have been made;
- Provide more training for volunteer leaders. Like human resource management, volunteer management is a job that can be learned on the job, but it requires more and more sophisticated and specific knowledge.

So, being well organized and structured and knowing and managing the cycle of volunteer involvement well are good ways to give confidence to volunteers.

Finally, remember that even though the context, needs and aspirations have changed, **"There is no harm in doing good by doing good to others!"** The best reasons for volunteering are that it's fun and that the benefits are immense for both the volunteers and those who receive their help.

The MVC, **founded in 1937**, is the first volunteer center in Canada. It is at the origin of the concept of volunteer centers in Canada and Quebec.

Its mission is to promote volunteerism in Montreal and to **reinforce the practice in the organizations** of its territory.

The MVC has **more than 400 members** and affiliate partners: community-based organizations and associations from a wide variety of intervention sectors with a dominance of health and social services, but also cultural communities, environment, sports and recreation, international cooperation, arts and culture (festivals), as well as institutions in the Montreal health and social services network.

The MVC **was behind the creation of meals-on-wheels** in the 1960s; today 40 Meals on Wheels and 20 Senior Community Meals are affiliated with them.

MVC's key services and expertise:

- **Volunteer recruitment and orientation** for its members;
- **Volunteer manager training** program: The essentials: 5 workshops of 6 hours and other useful trainings for members;
- **Personalized support** service (consulting services);
- **Services for employers** wishing to support the volunteer involvement of their employees in Montreal associations and organizations;
- **Awareness-raising and promotion of volunteer work** with different audiences: new immigrants, people in socio-professional integration, students, etc.
- **Internet search engine** to find a volunteer opportunity among the 600 to 800 offers available at any given time (220,000 visits per year).

ⁱ Detollenaere J, Willems S, Baert S (2017) *Volunteering, income and health*. PLoS ONE 12(3) :e0173139. Doi :10.1371/journal.pone.0173139

For further information :

Éric Gagnon et Andrée Fortin (2002). « L'espace et le temps de l'engagement bénévole : essai de définition », *Nouvelles pratiques sociales*, vol. 15, n° 2, p. 66-76.

Estelle Durand (2006). « Le bénévolat, un temps social au service de la solidarité », *Revue internationale de l'économie sociale : Recma*, n° 302, p. 83-90.

Blog du PhiLab, avril 2017 : "Québec: bénévoles recherchés?" par Diane Alalouf-Hall