

# Older Workers and Retirees: An Untapped Resource for Corporate Volunteer Programs

Volunteering can serve as a source of workplace satisfaction and continued skill development for older workers. It can also act as a platform for older workers to transition from work life to retirement. For **Celina Pagani-Tousignant**, volunteer programs can provide participants with inspiring life-long learning, and targeting older workers can help companies expand the skill sets of their volunteer pools.

Despite this, only a few leading companies are taking a strategic approach to engaging older workers in volunteer activities. Most companies find themselves mired in old paradigms about retirement, post-retirement employment, and the volunteer options preferred by older adults. But a profound transformation is developing in the attitudes toward aging and employment. A new paradigm is emerging that acknowledges older adults as a demographic group with a significant amount of free time to dedicate to volunteer activities. Moving forward, there is a great opportunity to mobilize older workers and retirees for civic engagement.

## Corporate volunteering and trends in life expectancy

As the popularity of corporate volunteering rises, another trend has begun to unfold, one that impacts the workplace and society as a whole: The life expectancy of people is increasing, especially in developed countries. In Japan, Canada and Sweden, for example, people live 81.1 years on average, while in the US and UK they live to be 78. People in their 60s may retire or decide to continue working; but whether they stay or leave, these older workers have experience and knowledge to share.

It is surprising, then, that so few companies are actively addressing these demographic trends in connection with corporate volunteering and that even fewer are taking a strategic approach in this work. Most companies have age-neutral human-resources policies, and targeting employees by age is novel. In particular, their volunteer programs focus on engaging the population as a whole.

## **Transforming attitudes**

As these demographics change, so, too, do the attitudes of and toward older workers and retirees. Retirement today does not constitute the culminating point in a worker's life. It has now become more of a gradual process that means different things to different people. An individual may take steps toward retirement by reducing work hours, taking phased retirement, going back to school or volunteering. Growing old in the 21st century is not what it used to be.

The assumptions that being old means being frail and that people over the age of 65 do not belong in the workplace are passé. During the 1990s, the ideas of "successful aging" and "productive aging" emerged, followed by the concept of "meaningful aging" in 2000. Most recently, the notion of "engaged as we age" became popular in 2009.

Initially proposed by the Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College, a US organization that promotes quality of employment for a multigenerational workforce, the "engaged as we age" model emphasizes life-long learning as the key to successful aging. Its core components include education, caregiving and volunteer activities as well as paid employment, however the importance of other activities such as spiritual development and socializing are not discounted.

Yet few employers are responding to the changing aging process and retirement plans of older workers. The Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) reports that 45 percent of HR professionals in the US are just becoming aware of these changes. It goes on to report that 43 percent of SHRM members see a problem with the loss of talent associated with retiring baby boomers.

## **Understanding older workers**

Understanding what motivates older adults to work is critical. The Sloan Center has created a framework to help structure the conversation about perceptions of employment with today's multigenerational workforce. The framework focuses on eight key quality areas that workers focus on when seeking an employer: wellness, health and safety, opportunities for meaningful work, workplace flexibility, culture of respect and inclusion, promotion of constructive relationships at the workplace, fair compensation and career development.

In identifying what areas are most important to older workers, the Sloan Center found that older workers' answers were complex and varied. To account for the complexity in the individual responses to aging, the center created the concept of the Prism of Age. This model accounts for eight dimensions of age within a variety of contexts that influence employees'

experiences at work: chronological age, generational age, life-stage events, career stage and tenure as well as relative, social and physical age.

A manager might, for example, assume that an employee in his mid-50s is not interested in opportunities for development. In reality, though, the person may be looking to scale up because he started a second family, has a young wife and child and expects to work for at least 15 more years.

### **Volunteering trends among older adults**

A new type of older adult volunteer is emerging: A person with skills, know-how, experience and, above all, free time. This individual is looking for meaningful opportunities to enrich his or her life and is seeking volunteer opportunities. It is time to rethink our paradigms related to older adults engaging in volunteer activities.

Volunteering holds substantial benefits for older adults: Studies show that elderly volunteers suffer fewer diseases and live longer than those who remain at home. Volunteering offers a way for people to give back to the community without the constraints of paid employment. For some people, volunteering provides an opportunity to expand their skills and can serve as a stepping stone from one field of employ-

ment to another. For others, it is a way to ease into retirement, helping to meaningfully fill one's time and decrease depression.

Although older adults possess great experience and skills, their talent is underutilized. Several roadblocks can hamper older adults in finding their way to volunteering. The US-based NCA Center for Best Practices cites insufficient connections between older adults and potential volunteer opportunities, outdated models of volunteering, transportation and cost as the main barriers to volunteering among older adults. This population group has a hard time finding out about volunteer opportunities suited to their needs and abilities. Some volunteer databases exist, but they are not designed with the older adult volunteer in mind.

### **Older workers and corporate volunteer programs**

Corporate volunteer programs are a potential source of engagement for older adults. Studies conducted in the US show that some companies have strategies to involve retirees in their corporate volunteer programs, but none has made the effort to target older workers. A study conducted by the Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship titled "Expanding the Boundaries of Corporate Volunteerism: Retirees as a Valuable Resource" finds a lack of strategic connection between corporate volunteer pro-

grams and the changing nature of retirement in the US. The 22 companies surveyed had a significant number of older workers and represented industries such as financial services, pharmaceuticals, telecommunications and manufacturing. The study found that:

- Although almost half of the companies in the study included retirees in their corporate volunteer programs, few strategically targeted them. Half of the managers interviewed reported a low-level of interest in retiree volunteering and few viewed retirees as an untapped asset.

## Best practices for retiree volunteer involvement

### Boeing

Boeing has several retiree volunteer programs in the different regional areas where the company operates. The largest and most active retiree organization, Bluebills, was established in 1995 and engages 2,000 retirees and their spouses. A Bluebill signature project is its Kids in Need Initiative that provides school supplies to kids in need in western Washington state.

### Cargill

Cargill's retiree program, Senior Retirees Investing Career Expertise (SPICE), was established in 1985 and works in tandem with the company's corporate volunteer program, Cargill Care Volunteer Council (CCVC). Run by a 19-member steering committee, SPICE is open to all retirees and their spouses and receives administrative support from the public affairs department

at Cargill. The committee tracks the volunteer hours to help Cargill assess the program.

### IBM

In 2004, IBM extended its On Demand Community Volunteer Initiative Program to retirees. The program gives 160,000 retirees technical tools that can be used in schools or nongovernmental organizations as educational resources for classes or assessment methods for developing new technology.

### Johnson & Johnson

Johnson & Johnson established regional clubs to support retiree volunteering after noticing retirees' interest in active engagement. With some financial support from headquarters, the regional clubs sponsor events on the basis of its members' interests. Johnson & Johnson reaches out to

- Several companies expressed the importance of maintaining contact and goodwill with departing employees, who retain a status of “alumni”.
- Older workers and retirees prefer project-based rather than long-term volunteer work.
- Most companies stressed the importance of promoting volunteering early on and throughout the employment experience.
- Retirees do not want to be in segregated programs, so companies described efforts to integrate employees and retirees into inter-generational exchanges.

retirees to fully integrate them into other volunteer projects.

### **State Street Corporation**

In 2001, the company formalized its corporate volunteer program. Shortly after that, a separate volunteer program for retirees, the Spirit of State Street Alumni Volunteer Program, was created as the result of an expressed interest from retirees to connect with past colleagues. A council of dedicated retirees and company employees drive the program. The company provides additional administration and financial resources. Transportation issues and the physical limitations of retirees are considered when choosing projects.

### **Verizon**

TelecomPioneers has been in existence for more than 90 years. The group’s original

purpose was to preserve the history of the telecommunications industry, but over time the focus has changed to serving communities through volunteering. Verizon’s branch of TelecomPioneers welcomes all employees and retirees. The group has 30,000 members and 100,000 retiree members in chapters all over the US. The chapters focus on education and literacy projects.

### **Xcel Energy**

Xcel Energy helps retirees stay connected through the company’s volunteer activities. Retirees participate in the company’s partnership with the Salvation Army, but also have their own signature program, the Kitchen Appliance Marking program. In this program, retiree volunteers make appliances safer and more user friendly for visually impaired customers.

- Employees and retirees said that including retirees in corporate volunteer programs is good for the business. There is no hidden cost of release time, and retirees can help promote a positive image for the company.

### **Implications and conclusions**

As corporate volunteering becomes more popular, it will become increasingly important for companies to create a strong pool of volunteers

among older adults. The first step to achieving this is to understand how a multigenerational workforce can provide a competitive edge in the marketplace. Companies that offer older workers flexible work arrangements and opportunities for personal growth will have an advantage in recruiting and retaining older workers. By targeting older adults for corporate volunteer programs, companies are more likely to build lasting relationships with their older workers and retirees that translate into an increased desire to stay engaged and productive. ■

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