

FROM BABY BOOMERS TO GENERATION Z. HIGHLIGHTS OF THE INTERGENERATIONAL VOLUNTEERISM

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Abstract *One of the most up-to-date approaches to differences between people, especially in terms of their behaviour at work, is the generational analysis according to years of birth. This recently viral approach highlights changes that have taken place over time, changes that need to be considered to better understand the need for a personalised and age-biased approach. At the same time, these changes are also reflected in volunteering, with this article highlighting the differences between Baby Boomers and Generation Z, the generations at the extremes, being the ones who volunteer at the end and at the start of their careers. Thus, behaviours and benefits are discussed, along with the need for continuous adaptation of management style not only in the workplace, but also in the volunteer organisation.*

Keywords: *Volunteerism, Baby Boomers, Generation Z*

Introduction

In trying to understand how people change over time, in addition to the clear impact of technological, political, and social changes, there are also influences on the working environment, which undoubtedly has to adapt to the times. The intergenerational approach, which has recently gone viral on various media platforms, reveals through examples simple incompatibilities in the workplace between people of different generations, perceptions of task fulfilment, communication, and management that differ but need commonalities to function as a unified whole, such as the organisation. In terms of volunteering, the two generations mentioned, Baby Boomers and Generation Z, represent the extremes in terms of age and involvement, volunteering either at the end of their careers, even in retirement, or before starting a paid job. Therefore, the differences between what the two generations expect from volunteering are worth discussing to better understand what volunteer organisations have to offer as benefits. The differences in behaviour and expectations imply changes in management, changes that need to be linked either to the withdrawal from the labour market - in the case of Baby Boomers - or to the preparation for employment of Generation Z.

Highlights of the intergenerational volunteerism

Defining characteristics of the two generations

Defining the generations discussed is a first step towards a better understanding of the impact of time on their work behaviour. Baby Boomers, currently aged between 67 and 77, are those who are preparing to retire from working life or who are already retired. They have experienced many events over the years, from wars to continuous technological

change, and are always having to adapt, being dedicated to work to the point of workaholism (Muller, 2014). From this, one can deduce an inclination towards work addiction, prioritizing work over personal life, but with a high degree of stress that can lead to health problems (Grebot, 2013). As a work style, loyalty to the employer, goal focus, and lack of flexibility stand out (Muller, 2014). They also reported better person-organisation values fit with extrinsic values and status values than Generations X and Y (Twenge *et al.*, 2010). However, this is the generation that values delegation above all others, in addition to listening and helping others (Sessa *et al.*, 2007).

Generation Z, born after 1995, are those who have grown up in an era of ever-evolving technology and can function equally well online and offline. They appreciate the feedback they receive from those who assign them tasks, in connection with the feedback they receive on the social media relays they operate on. Also, in contrast to Baby Boomers, they are flexible, willing to change jobs frequently, which also reveals an orientation towards earning more than status or stability (Dolot, 2018).

Volunteering among the Baby Boomers

Volunteering seems to be cyclical, with a high potential before the beginning of professional life, which diminishes along the way with the commitment to work, family, various personal and professional challenges, but which seems to regain its potential with the retirement from work. Compared to previous generations, Baby Boomers do more volunteer work, and the trend is upward (Boom and Einolf, 2009). At the same time, in Norway, a significant proportion of this generation is volunteering, but sporadic activity has been noted and problems with motivation and skills have been reported (Hansen and Slagsvold, 2020). Another positive example comes from Denmark, with an almost 50% increase from 1997 to 2017 in the rate of volunteering among Baby Boomers, with the use of the Internet becoming an important factor in helping older people find the right organisation (Amilon and Larsen, 2021). Also in the United States of America, the same upward trend is noticeable, driven by higher life expectancy, better health in retirement, but with strong organizational support and meaningful volunteer activity (Tanga, 2010). From these positive examples, which can be inferred to be based on good practice in targeting older people, the importance they give to the cost-benefit ratio of volunteering is also noted (Seaman, 2012). As for the benefits, the main one would be the excellent health reported by some volunteers (Choi, 2003). Some studies even show a decreased risk of mortality among those who volunteer frequently, and even more significantly in the case of volunteering with friends or in the religious sphere (Harris and Thoresen, 2005; Lum and Lightfoot, 2005). The same positive effect is recorded in the UK, with reduced levels of mental stress and higher levels of health-related quality of life in older generations, which is also due to the way in which volunteering is promoted, geared towards improving society (Mak, Coulter and Fancourt, 2022). From these examples, we can deduce the beneficial impact of volunteering among people withdrawn from work, relying on a continuity of activity that keeps them busy, giving them meaning. The common good motivation seems to be significant for Baby Boomers, even if in sporadic activities, as they care about what they leave behind. With retirement from the labour market, many become caregivers for their families, often looking after spouses, children, grandchildren, but volunteering is the commitment they need to feel useful and valued in society. Maintaining a good level of health in old age is a desideratum of a society that values its members, and

voluntary organisations have an important responsibility in proposing personalised activities that can be successfully carried out by older people. In this case, the objective of the common good is a match between volunteers and the organisation, which represents an advantage for the organisational management.

Generation Z's Volunteering

Starting from one of the most significant differences between the two generations, the purpose of volunteer activity for Baby Boomers is the good of society, and for Generation Z is personal good (Mak, Coulter and Fancourt, 2022), it can be said that the aforementioned cyclicity comes with a change of meaning that requires an activity that ticks both boxes. Focused on personal benefits that they can use in their personal and professional development, today's young people find volunteering an escape from daily restrictions (Jardim and da Silva, 2018). Promoters of a change of direction initiated by Millennials (ERTAS, 2016), Generation Z is choosing health or civic institutions over religious ones. This was also relevant to the recent crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, with an encouraging study from Indonesia describing them as important agents of change (Rohmawati, Affandi and Anggraeni, 2022). However, in contrast to Baby Boomers, the influencing factors of Generation Z are not social, but only values, career, learning, and self-esteem. An important aspect of volunteer management is the emphasis they place on training and developing new skills (Cho, Bonn and Han, 2018). A generation that seems to have it all, with a wide access to information and education, the young Z are those for whom technology does not bring new, but only updates. Although they can learn anything, anytime, being flexible and independent, it seems that their focus remains on themselves, valuing personal balance, wellbeing, without depending on an organisation or a group of people. The advantages are obvious, but the major disadvantages seem to arise in their interaction with people from different generations who, as we have seen so far, seem to differ from one another. With the advantage of technology, innovation and flexibility are part of the impact they bring to management in the workplace, which has to adapt through modern procedures, promoting employee mental health and work-life balance. At the same time, independent and focused on their own well-being, Gen Z also poses major challenges in volunteer organisations which, in the absence of tangible rewards, must compensate more than ever. However, the main aspect they can use to attract volunteers is to provide opportunities that prepare them for the labour market, through appropriate training.

Discussion

A perspective on generational differences points to a focus on age-related needs and different life cycles rather than the creation of tailored management practices (Macky, Gardner and Forsyth, 2008). Another, slightly opposite, is to develop a psychological employment contract with practices adapted to generational changes, valuing the employee (Hecht and Allen, 2009). Comparing Baby Boomers with Generation Z, besides the individualism of the latter, one can identify needs that, if satisfied simultaneously, can be quite problematic. In volunteering, proposing activities that meet the needs of both generations without working through managerial procedures seems like a rather difficult task. However, the needs of the different age groups meet at a common point: health.

Although the focus is different, moving from the general to the individual in the case of young people, both in the workplace and in voluntary activities, the principles, values, and actions of the different generations are focused on finding a balance in terms of physical and especially mental health. Juggling between workaholism and flexibility, considering the needs of different age groups can mean constant attempts to provide them with a healthy environment, avoiding extremes, which allows life outside work to exist. Voluntary activities can make use of this space outside of work, to meet the needs of communication, socialising with friends, spending leisure time until training and providing opportunities to develop the skills of young people.

Looking at the second perspective, which involves management practices adapted to the different generations (Hecht and Allen, 2009), the scenario according to which in organisations these generations meet, communicate and work together must be considered. Thus, even in voluntary work, adaptation is more than focusing on the needs of an age group, it is about facilitating fruitful interactions that benefit all involved, responding to their specific needs. Even if in this article we have analysed the extreme generations working as volunteers in our times, the different management practices also incorporate trends of the intermediate generations, which imply different levels of shift towards individualism, prioritisation of personal life, valorisation of technology towards easing daily work. However, as we pointed out earlier, the main benefit of the activity, even if it is voluntary and does not involve financial reward, should be a significant contribution to the health of the individual, especially from a mental point of view in the case of young people. In addition to training, personal and professional development, management procedures in any organisation should include a focus on the individual and a greater attention to his or her needs.

Conclusions

The cyclical nature of volunteering brings challenges for organisations to provide the right contexts in which generations can work to achieve both their personal and organisational goals. Although values differ, there is potential for facilitating the entry of Generation Z into the labour market as well as the retirement of Baby Boomers. This is why volunteer organisations need to include in their management activities the study of the needs of the people they work with, not only at the level of beneficiaries, and the constant attempt to offer intergenerationally adapted benefits. Given the comparison between the two generations, volunteering should offer meaningful, flexible activities in contexts where retirees can connect with friends and feel that they are contributing to the good of society. At the same time, younger people need to be prepared for the labour market by being trained through flexible activities. But all this without forgetting empathy and caring for people first.

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