



Retaining Boomer Volunteers

Quick Tips for Boomer Volunteer Retention

The best way to increase your volunteer base is to retain your current volunteer leaders. Retention is a matter making your volunteers feel successful in the work they are doing and the impact they are helping to achieve. Keeping volunteers engaged will take work throughout the entire volunteer process, and will result in more invested, committed volunteers.

- **Recruiting and marketing:** From the beginning, your message should be arresting but not overly detailed. Keep it concise.
- **Before they begin:** Allow for everyone to be involved and informed about the scope and details of the tasks they are about to embark upon.
- **During the experience:** Keep volunteers stimulated and challenged. An idle volunteer is one that is unengaged and less likely to want to participate in future projects.
- **Throughout:** Allow for open communication with volunteers - ongoing assessments addressing what's working and what's not regarding their assignments and roles - will ensure that you and your volunteers are on the same page about the goals and needs of all parties involved.
- **After they've completed a volunteer project or role:** Report to volunteers the impact they've made and the results achieved, they will appreciate honest and clear assessments.
- **Leading into future projects:** Reference the specific successes and accomplishments of previous tasks, projects, and assignments to keep morale boosted. Ask for feedback about ideas they might have in the future or areas they'd like to take more leadership on.

Creative Ideas/Activities to Keep the Momentum Rolling:

- Get back in touch with interested volunteers within 24 hours of your initial contact. Be professional and organized with the details of upcoming training dates, projects, etc.
- Don't spend an excessive amount of time trying to re-connect with volunteers who drop out early or don't respond after the initial contact. It's better to simply ask them if you can put them in touch with another volunteer issue they'd be more interested in working with. The creation of this positive relationship will make them more likely to recommend your organization or open positions to their friends and colleagues.
- Invite volunteers to planning and general meetings to let them know their input – and not just their labor - is important.
- Organize several low-pressure mixers with light appetizers and plenty of printed information about your organization, the issues and goals of the organization and the community, etc. This is a good time to partner with other organizations or businesses, and your volunteers will appreciate the networking opportunities you are offering.
- Keep the work challenging and impactful but do allow flexibility to these adults who are experienced and general capable of their own time management.
- Ask them if they'd be interested in organizing lighter, team-building activities like lunch outings, etc, or if they have ideas of their own.
- Set up follow-up meetings within a couple days after the work or major milestones have been completed, to allow for reflections and celebrations.
- Have an on-going semi-formal evaluation process available. Set aside time to evaluate the volunteer and allow them to evaluate their experience and the organization.
- Work with volunteers on how to improve the project and/or volunteer roles for next time.

Recognition

Recognition is a key component of volunteer retention. If volunteers feel appreciated for their efforts, they are more likely to want to volunteer again. Understand your volunteers so you know how best to keep them motivated and engaged.

Individual volunteers have a variety of reasons for volunteering and thus are motivated in a variety of ways. It's important to be aware of what has motivated a volunteer to work with you so that you can best identify how to appropriately thank and recognize them for the work they've contributed. This in turn will allow them to know how important they are to your organization and will keep them coming back. The following is just a sampling of reasons an older adult may get involved (adapted from an article at www.casanet.org):

- To gain knowledge of community problems
- To maintain skills no longer used otherwise
- To spend "quality time" with members of the family by volunteering together
- To get out of the house
- To make new friends
- To be with old friends who volunteer here
- To gain new skills
- To pay back
- To assuage guilt
- To feel useful
- To make business contacts
- To be part of a prestigious group
- To make a transition to a new life
- To fulfill a moral or religious duty
- To have fun
- To help those less fortunate
- To try out a new career
- To have fun
- To meet a challenge
- To improve the community
- To work with a certain client group
- To be in charge of something
- To be part of a group or a team
- To gain work experience to help get a job
- To meet important people in the community
- To gain status with an employer
- To get community recognition

You can use this list or add to it and allow your volunteers to individually rate these possible reasons for why they volunteer depending on how big of a motivator these factors may have been. This will serve as a scale for how you will begin to recognize your volunteers.

Rewarding Volunteers

Boomers are not likely to be overly impressed by pizza luncheons or free trinkets, so when considering how to recognize them with rewards keep in mind the types of volunteers you are dealing with. Here is a listing of suggestions:

- Cross-training: allow a tenured volunteer access to learn about other areas of your organization
- Conference or organizational event participation
- Names posted in newsletters, on flyers, on honor pieces of art or wall plaques
- Invitations to fundraisers, publicity galas, etc
- Requests for further assistance in other areas
- Gift certificates, tickets to sporting events, etc

Reflection

Helping volunteers to see the connection between their service and a community issue is called **reflection**. Reflection is probably the most important part of service and volunteerism. The better able you are to connect the volunteer with the overall impact and broader meaning to the work your organization and they are doing, the more likely they are to feel a connection and make a commitment. Through effective use of reflection, you can greatly increase your volunteer retention rate.

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How to get them talking:

Here are some sample questions for reflection discussion, which can and should occur at any time during the volunteer experience:

- What did you learn today – about the issue, your fellow volunteers, the service recipients or yourself?
- How do you feel about the project? Was it worthwhile? Was it time well spent?
- What would you change about the task or project you spent time on?
- Do you plan to take further action related to this issue? In what way?
- What other ideas or opinions can you offer this program or project?

Sometimes an open forum may seem strange and overly touchy-feeling, so allow for one-on-one discussions or less structured conversational settings with guided discussion topics if it seems more appropriate.