

Understanding What Rocks Their World: Motivational Factors of Rural Volunteers

Abstract

In almost any setting we can think of in 21st Century America, it is not unusual to have representatives from four different generations living and working side-by-side. This fact, and a declining rural population, is forcing Extension agents everywhere to struggle to find and engage new volunteers in county programming. Extension professionals are searching for new ways to recruit and retain volunteers from all generations. The research reported here considered both motivational and hygienic motivational factors associated with volunteerism across a number of generational cohorts during an 18-month leadership development project.

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Introduction and Review of Literature

The dual topics of volunteers and volunteerism are not new ones to the *Journal of Extension* (Culp & Schwartz, 1999; Fitz, Karmazin, Barbuto, & Burrow, 2003; Sinasky, & Bruce, 2007; Smith, & Finley, 2004). While always important to Extension offices across the country in economic good times, volunteers are of vital importance in times of economic uncertainty. Without our volunteers, the Extension service, as we know it today, would not exist. Volunteers are the lifeblood of who we are and what we do. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that we understand how to motivate them and how to retain them.

The United States was founded on principles of social and civic engagement. Industrialist and philanthropist Charles Stewart Mott believed that as people learn to live together effectively a "sense of community" would emerge. To be strong, our communities must develop a citizenry that is involved and engaged, willing to share time and devote energy to identify local needs and resources in order to expand solutions to direct positive change (Minzey & LeTarte, 1994). Extension professionals have always believed that the most effective solutions to a community's problems are

those devised locally, where individuals have the greatest stake in the outcome. In resource-strapped rural America, a necessary element of this form of civic engagement is the leadership and problem-solving abilities of local volunteers (Fritz, Karmazin, Barbuto, & Burrow, 2003). In the ongoing effort to address problems, every segment of the community must have an opportunity to be heard—from the very young to those in retirement.

At the heart of any substantive program dealing with community betterment is a well-organized effort by groups of committed local volunteers representing all walks of life. Since 2003, the Northwest Area Foundation has been serving as a catalyst for community involvement, betterment, and positive change across their eight-state service area in the upper Midwest and Pacific Northwest through an effort titled Horizons. In North Dakota, the Horizons program is delivered by the North Dakota State University (NDSU) Extension service and Sitting Bull College. Horizons focuses on community leadership and is aimed at reducing poverty in rural and Native American reservation communities with populations of 5,000 or fewer with histories of economic decline and significant population change.

The program's goal is to help communities understand poverty, help them commit to action for improvements, and then bring about lasting change. Ultimately, Horizons is about developing local leadership that can reverse a community's economic and population decline and move that community toward prosperity (Horizons, 2009). This leadership effort should be fully representative of the community socially, culturally, politically, economically, and involve all age groups.

In America today, people are living and working longer than ever before. Recently, we have seen a number of books, articles, and reports discussing the need to better understand generational differences and their impact on civic and community engagement. Each of us is a member of a generation—a group of people who experienced (and are bound together by) the same events and similar influences during our formative years. And, of course, many of us are also members of today's workforce, which is comprised of four distinct generations, each with its own label. A generation is said to come along approximately every 20 years. While the specific "born between" dates listed in Table 1 may be debated, the timeframes they represent are generally accepted as accurate for discussion purposes. The purpose of the study reported here was to see what, if any, generational differences influenced the motivation of volunteers who took part in the Horizons program across the state of North Dakota.

Table 1.

Common Generational Titles, Era Born, and Approximate Size
(Eisner, 2008)

Generation	Era Born	Approximate # (in millions)
Builders	Before 1926	25
Silent	1927-1944	45
Baby Boomers	1945-1964	80
Generation X	1965-1980	46
Millennials	1981-2000	76

Problem Statement and Research Questions

Extension professionals are searching for innovative ways to recruit and retain volunteers from all generations. However, a declining rural population forces Extension educators in North Dakota to struggle to find and engage new volunteers in county programming.

The research questions reported in this article are:

Research question 1: Are there generational differences between motivational constructs that foster volunteerism of rural residents?

Research question 2: Are there generational differences between hygiene constructs that foster volunteerism of rural residents?

Procedures

Research Design and Subject Selection

The cross-sectional survey research reported is descriptive and comparative in nature and was conducted utilizing a self-designed questionnaire (Creswell, 2005). The target populations for the study were adult volunteers recruited to be part of Horizons. Working with North Dakota Extension educators, the researchers drew upon a purposeful sample from 10 of the 20 participating Horizons communities.

Instrumentation, Data Collection, and Analysis

The questionnaire contained 41 items based on Herzberg's egoistic Two-construct Theory (1968). The primary assumption was that specific motivational constructs tend to produce satisfaction when gratified or present in a work situation. Five motivational constructs were chosen for inclusion in the study: 1) work itself (7 items), 2) achievement (4 items), 3) recognition (2 items), 4) responsibility (2 items), and 5) advancement (3 items). The theory posits that the second group of constructs (hygiene) do not motivate when present but serve to create worker dissatisfaction when absent. Five hygiene constructs were chosen for the study: 1) interpersonal relations (3 items), 2) supervision (4 items), 3) policy and administration (3 items), 4) working conditions (6 items), and 5) personal life (6 items).

Statements associated with the motivational and hygiene constructs were developed to determine the participants' level of agreement on a Likert-like scale from 1 (representing strongly disagree) to 5 (representing strongly agree). Means of generational groups were computed for each of the items within each construct. The Kruskal-Wallis one-way analysis of variance by ranks test was used for deciding whether the independent samples were from different populations with an alpha of .05 for statistical significance (Siegel & Castellan, 1988).

This portion of the instrument was assessed for internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha and was found to be reasonably valid at 0.87. Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to confirm the items were associated with the intended constructs (motivational or hygiene).

Five open-ended response items were included in the questionnaire. Participants' responses to these items were reviewed using the processes of chunking and color-coding to identify major themes (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The data was analyzed using constant comparative analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The identified themes were then peer reviewed to confirm the findings (Merriam & Associates, 2002).

Results and Discussion

Demographics

Of the 245 potential participants, 186 (76%) completed and returned survey instruments. Of those who identified their gender, 52 were men, and 120 were women. Eighteen were born during the years associated with the Millennials (born between 1981 and 2000), 36 were Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), 97 were Baby Boomers (born between 1945 and 1964), and 21 were born prior to 1940, (the Silent and Builders generations). Ninety-eight percent identified themselves as White, with the remaining 2% self-reporting themselves as American Indian.

Motivational Constructs

Research question 1: Are there generational differences between motivational constructs that foster volunteerism of rural residents? (Constructs that tend to produce satisfaction when gratified or present in a work situation).

Seven items addressed the motivational construct "work itself." This construct had the over-all highest level of agreement—that volunteering gave participants a chance to use their life experiences towards working for causes with volunteers of different age groups (Table 2). In addition, participants agreed that volunteering allowed them to gain new perspectives.

The motivational construct "achievement" had the second highest level of agreement—that volunteering provided a sense of pride, increased self-esteem, and allowed them to do things for causes they felt were important. Few differences were identified among the generational cohorts. However, the youngest group (Millennials) did report a higher level of agreement to the statement: "volunteering makes me feel important" (Millennial $m = 3.94$, Older generations $m = 3.34$, $p < .05$).

The two items for the motivational construct "recognition" had contrasting means. All four age groups expressed agreement that volunteering made them feel needed. However, all groups expressed only a slight agreement ($m = 3.1$) for the statement "recognition for the contributions I make as a volunteer is important to me" with the Generation X group reporting a level of disagreement ($m = 2.8$).

A similar difference in means was reported for the two items associated with the motivational construct "responsibility." While all age groups reported a high level of agreement ($m = 3.70$) for the statement "I enjoy volunteering because it allows me to be part of the decision making process," they expressed a neutral response ($m = 3.00$) to the statement "When volunteering I like being in charge of a project." The means of the responses based on age decreased for this item from a high of 3.40 for the Millennials to a low of 2.90 for the Silent/Builders age group.

There were differences ($KW = 7.5, p < .05$) between the youngest age cohort (Millennials $m = 3.61$) and the three older (Generation X $m = 2.92$, Boomers $m = 2.62$, and Silent/Builders $m = 2.43$) for the four items that addressed the motivational construct "advancement." The youngest respondents planned on using volunteer experiences to build their resume, increase their potential earnings, and advance their careers.

Table 2.

Motivational Constructs Leading to Satisfaction if Present (Means expressed by individual age group and total.)

Motivational Constructs	Gen				Mean	KW
	Mill.	X	Boomer	Builders		
Work itself	3.97	4.06	4.11	4.07	4.10	3.65
Achievement	4.10	3.81	3.93	4.01	3.96	4.65
Recognition	3.53	3.27	3.54	3.55	3.50	.71
Responsibility	3.56	3.37	3.32	3.19	3.40	.70
Advancement	3.61	2.92	2.62	2.43	2.90	7.50*

* $p < .05$

The qualitative responses support the quantitative data related to motivational constructs that foster volunteering. When asked what the most important factors were in retaining them as a volunteer, the majority of the responses for all of the generations except the Silents/Builders were egoistic. One Millennial responded that, "Knowing I am being recognized and that all volunteers are," was important. The Xers responded that they wanted to know they were accomplishing something and wanted the volunteer organization to show appreciation for their work. The Boomers responses mirrored the Xers, related to appreciation and accomplishment. One Boomer stated that the site's, "Values, progress toward quantifiable goals, and professionalism," were paramount to retaining them as a volunteer.

At the opposite end of the spectrum were the Silents/Builders. While some mentioned that being recognized was important, more were concerned that they were doing worthwhile things. One stated that they volunteered because of, "Concern for their fellow man."

Collectively, the four generations responded that they volunteered because there was a need and the work they were doing was for a good cause. One Boomer stated that, "My parents volunteered too. When the need came up and volunteers were needed, I volunteered." A Silent/Builder stated that volunteering is, "A way of helping out when needed. I enjoy volunteering." The Xers overwhelmingly responded that they volunteered because of the need displayed in their community.

The qualitative responses also supported the quantitative data related to the motivational construct "recognition". However, while the Millennials and the Boomers commented on the importance of recognition, the Xers were more concerned about being treated respectfully, which is a hygiene construct. One Xer stated that their volunteer site needed to, "Be nicer to the new people," and

another stated that the staff should, "Keep a positive attitude." There were not enough qualitative responses from Silents/Builders to determine themes for their group on this item.

Hygiene Constructs

Research question 2: Are there generational differences between hygiene constructs that foster volunteerism of rural residents? (Constructs that tend not to motivate when present but serve to create worker dissatisfaction when absent.)

The hygiene construct "policy and administration" had the highest level of agreement ($m = 3.80$). For two of the items, "When I volunteer it is important that the activities are planned and structured," and "It is important for my volunteer site to have consistent rules for employees and volunteers," the responses generally increased in agreement as the ages increased. However, for the third item the youngest respondents (Millennials) expressed a higher level of agreement to the statement: "It is important to feel safe to express my ideas/opinions at my volunteer site," than did the older respondents.

The hygiene construct "interpersonal relations" showed the second highest agreement ($m = 3.74$) for all generational groups (Table 3). All groups identified social relationships and the opportunity to make new friends who share similar goals and values to foster community service as important.

There were few differences among age groups for the six items associated with the construct "working conditions." Generally, all groups agreed that they volunteer because they can work at their own pace and that it was important to feel physically safe while on the job. One item, which stated, "When I volunteer it is important that I feel emotionally safe while on the job," was most important for the oldest group, the Silent/Builders ($m = 4.05$), than for the other generational groups.

Four items were associated with the hygiene construct "supervision." Obtaining proper training was more important for the Builders ($m = 3.95$) than for the other generational groups. The second item, "Being assigned work that is physically challenging," was reported to be steadily less important for each of the groups, with the Millennials ($m = 3.5$), Gen X ($m = 3.14$), and Silent/Builders ($m = 4.0$) reporting agreement and the Boomers ($m = 2.97$) reporting it was not important.

A higher level of agreement ($m = 3.84$, $KW = 18.4$, $p < .05$) was found for the youngest group for the hygiene construct "personal life." The Millennials felt volunteering enhanced their personal skills, provided an opportunity to pursue a hobby or personal interest, and provided an opportunity to experience solitude or a chance to reflect. For the Silents/Builders, volunteering was less about recreation, having fun, or relieving stress and more about making a contribution.

Table 3.

Hygiene Constructs Leading to Dissatisfaction if Not Present (Means expressed by individual age group and total.)

Hygiene Constructs	Gen				Mean	KW
	Mill.	X	Boomer	Builders		
Policy and administration	3.86	3.65	3.84	3.85	3.80	2.80

Interpersonal relations with peers	3.72	3.72	3.82	3.69	3.74	2.13
Working conditions	3.70	3.54	3.55	3.65	3.61	.53
Supervision	3.59	3.55	3.57	3.73	3.61	4.79
Personal life	3.84	3.51	3.42	3.38	3.50	18.4*

* p < .05

The qualitative responses added insight to the hygiene quantitative data. Like the quantitative data, the qualitative themes for the group centered on "policy and administration," "interpersonal relationships," and "working conditions."

When asked to describe anything that hindered the individual from volunteering at a specific site, the Millennials, the Xers, and the Boomers all mentioned program management. When talking about the employees at a current volunteer site, one Millennial stated, "They weren't very nice." One Boomer was concerned about, "Employees who don't treat volunteers equally." Another Boomer shared that he hesitated to volunteer, "When management doesn't know what they are doing." Finally, a Boomer responded that she was no longer going to volunteer because "gossip and negative conversation was allowed to continue."

All four generations viewed volunteering as a way to spend time with friends and family and to network with others in the community. A Millennial responded that, "I enjoy working with others and hearing what others think." One Xer shared that she volunteered for a specific organization because "(my) children are able to be involved with me." A Silent/Builder stated that he continued to be involved because of the "socialization, input of ideas, to learn and to share."

Along with "interpersonal relationships," flexibility in the volunteer position and the times they could volunteer ranked high on all of the generations' lists. All mentioned being more eager to volunteer for organizations that were able to be adaptive related to the times the individual volunteered and the volunteer role that individual played.

Finally, the Millennials and the Boomers mentioned fun and enjoyment as being motivators for them to continue to volunteer at their current site. The Boomers also mentioned that they stayed with their current volunteer site because it fit with the work they were doing or a certain interest they had. One Boomer said, "I enjoy interaction and feeding my creative appetite." Another stated, "I feel my talents are useful to the community."

Conclusions and Recommendations

In today's busy society, Extension professionals often face the challenge of finding individuals for their numerous volunteer opportunities. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, volunteers are the lifeblood of who we are and what we do. For this reason it is incumbent upon us as professionals to identify how to motivate and retain them. Once Extension professionals have recruited the volunteer to fit the job, they must work to ensure the volunteering experience is conducive to sustained involvement by the volunteer. While there were few differences found based on

generational cohort, qualitative and quantitative participant responses provided insight into working with generational groups. When working to motivate and retain volunteers, the following motivational and hygienic factors should be remembered.

Motivational

- Educators should let current volunteers know the work they do is vital and recognize volunteers who have made a difference in the community.
- Extension offices must focus on demonstrating a need for volunteers. Extension professionals should be vocal about the volunteer positions that are vacant and have position descriptions available.
- For the younger volunteers, offering opportunities to build skills that will enhance or advance their careers is essential.

Hygienic

- Educators should focus on making volunteering for Extension a social affair. Volunteers are interested in making connections with other individuals in the community. Extension offices have the potential to be the community's networking hub and can offer a great location for friends and family to come together for a worthy cause.
- Examining the climate in an Extension office to ensure it is welcoming to volunteers is crucial. Making sure that staff treat volunteers respectfully and eliminating interoffice gossip are a must.
- Providing flexible volunteer opportunities also assists in volunteer recruitment. Offering numerous times or ways an individual can volunteer for Extension alleviates issues such as work and family conflicts that may arise.
- Finally, carefully evaluating Extension volunteer opportunities and assuring they contain a level of fun and enjoyment is crucial. Celebrating the work accomplished ensures continued participation.

As a part of the partnership with the NDSU School of Education, the NDSU Extension Service, and Horizons communities, the findings of the study reported here reinforce prior literature and have been shared to provide further recommendations to assist Extension professionals with volunteer recruitment and retention.

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