

Factors influencing older adults' decisions to volunteer

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Towards a
**National Strategy
for Volunteering**



About the Volunteering Research Papers Initiative

The Volunteering Research Papers aim to capture evidence on a wide range of topics related to volunteering and outline key insights for policy and practice. The Volunteering Research Papers are peer reviewed, and insights will directly inform the development of the National Strategy for Volunteering.

The Volunteering Research Papers are an initiative of the National Strategy for Volunteering Research Working Group.

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Factors influencing older adults' decisions to volunteer

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Key Insights

- Australia's population is rapidly ageing, and many retired older adults have more discretionary time available for volunteering than younger people who are often working full-time and/or raising young children. Older volunteers not only make an important social contribution; research also suggests that volunteering is associated with better physical and mental health in older adulthood.
- Around 3 in 4 older adults do not formally volunteer with an organisation. To increase rates of volunteering among older adults, it is first critical to understand the factors that influence older adults' decisions regarding volunteering.
- Results of our own research presented here, and those of other recent studies, suggest that creating flexible opportunities for older volunteers is likely to be critical to recruitment efforts. Many older adults may be attracted to opportunities that can fit around their existing schedules and do not require a strict time commitment.
- Recruitment and retention of older volunteers may be supported by offering flexible volunteer opportunities, developing better coordinated online systems for matching prospective volunteers with available opportunities, and tailoring marketing strategies to the appropriate audience.
- Future research efforts may benefit from targeting diverse groups of older adults and using longitudinal designs to capture transitions into and out of formal volunteering roles.

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Introduction

Volunteering, defined as “time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain”,⁶ provides broad social and economic benefits. For individuals, volunteering promotes community engagement, increased social and human capital, enhanced well-being, and decreased health inequality.⁷ Volunteering in older adulthood has been associated with various positive outcomes for mental health, social functioning and physical health, including greater longevity.⁸ In 2019, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reported that one quarter (25%) of people aged 70 years and over engaged in formal volunteering within an organisation.⁹

Taken together, the evidence indicates that volunteering in older adulthood is good for both broader society and for older volunteers. This is of particular importance given that Australians are living longer, healthier lives than ever before. In 2016-2018, on average, men could expect to live another 20 years, and women another 23 years after retirement.¹⁰ We are also seeing significant ageing of the population; for example, the proportion of Australians aged over 65 was 15% in 2015 and is projected to increase to 23% by 2050.¹¹ Although the challenges of population ageing are well-documented,¹² larger numbers of healthy, high functioning and engaged older Australians has also created what the Advisory Panel on the Economic Potential of Older Australians referred to as an “unprecedented opportunity”.¹³ Indeed, the ageing baby-boomer cohort may have the potential to make an even greater contribution through volunteering than older cohorts due to their higher education and greater technological savviness broadening volunteering options as well as facilitating opportunities to identify suitable volunteering options.¹⁴ A key mechanism for harnessing the potential of older Australians and making the most of this opportunity is facilitating older adults’ participation in volunteering.

To create sustainable opportunities that support volunteering among older adults, it is first important to understand the factors that influence older people’s decisions about whether to volunteer. Previous Australian research has identified the perceived need for training, a greater flexibility in and diversity of options available to volunteers, and

6 Volunteering Australia, 2015

7 Jenkinson et al., 2013; Kragt & Holtrop, 2019; United Nations Volunteers, 2011

8 Anderson et al., 2014 ; Jenkinson et al., 2013; Jongenelis et al., 2022; Jongenelis & Pettigrew, 2021; Matthews & Nazroo, 2021; Morrow-Howell, 2010; Tabassum et al., 2016

9 ABS, 2019

10 AIHW, 2022

11 Ofori-Asenso et al., 2018

12 Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2013

13 Advisory Panel of the Economic Potential of Senior Australians: Australian Government the Treasury, 2011

14 Hansen & Slagsvold, 2020

more opportunities for intergenerational volunteering as key incentives identified by older adults.¹⁵ More recent Australian research identified the flexibility and variety of available roles and importance of feeling valued as a volunteer, along with opportunities for intergenerational and/or cross-cultural exchange, and ultimately, ability to derive meaning and sense of purpose as incentives. Barriers to volunteering include negative perceptions of volunteer activities, fear of ageism and concerns regarding increasing regulatory constraints on organisations,¹⁶ as well as out-of-pocket expenses (e.g., associated with transport/travel and telecommunications), and for most non-volunteers, being “too busy”.¹⁷

Reasons for older adults to commence volunteering

In this paper, we add to the existing knowledge regarding factors likely to shape older adults’ decisions to start volunteering, using data from an online survey of older South Australians collected in 2021 during the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were recruited using calls to participate circulated through online and Volunteer Involving Organisation networks. Results reported here focus on data provided by 75 survey respondents aged 70 and older (characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1). A report on the broader study outcomes is available.¹⁸

We provided participants with a comprehensive list of factors that might facilitate a decision to begin volunteering, based on the previous literature.¹⁹ For each factor, participants rated the likelihood that it would influence a decision to start volunteering within the next 12 months on a scale from 1 (‘Very unlikely’) to 5 (‘Very likely’).

15 Warburton et al., 2007

16 *Ibid.*

17 McDougall & Barrie, 2020

18 SA Health: Government of South Australia, Resources About Ageing Well. South Australia’s Plan for Ageing Well 2020-2025

19 Haski-Leventhal et al., 2018; Warburton et al., 2007

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Participant characteristics (N)	N or Mean (% or SD)
Volunteering status	
Currently volunteering	-
Temporarily paused volunteering due to COVID-19	12 (16%)
Permanently discontinued volunteering due to COVID-19	3 (4%)
Discontinued volunteering for reasons other than COVID-19	41 (55%)
Never formally volunteered	19 (25%)
Age M(SD)	74.3 (4.0)
Female (%)	37 (51)
Ethnicity – white/Caucasian	71 (96%)
Education	
Incomplete high school	3 (4%)
Completed high school	16 (22%)
Incomplete college or tertiary	25 (34%)
Bachelor’s or postgraduate	30 (41%)
Relationship status	
Married or partnered	44 (59%)
Single, separated, divorced, widowed, other	31 (41%)

Table 2 shows the numbers (with %s) of participants endorsing each factor as either ‘likely’ or ‘very likely’ to influence their decision. Considering the factors most strongly endorsed (e.g., by more than half of participants) points to older adults regarding flexibility around volunteering opportunities as a key factor in influencing decisions to volunteer. For example, around two-thirds of participants endorsed (with ratings of ‘likely’ or ‘very likely’) being able to fit volunteering into their schedule, finding roles that appealed and being able to stop volunteering when needed as influencing a potential decision to start volunteering within the next 12 months. Additional factors endorsed by a slightly lower percentage of respondents were similarly aligned with the desire for flexibility and convenience (e.g., being able to set regular times, not having to make a long-term commitment, freedom in terms of when to participate).

Some of the other factors commonly endorsed appeared to tap into the desire to do good for both the community (“see the good I was doing”) and for oneself (“It would make me feel really good”). Finally, additional factors commonly endorsed included considerations related to administrative requirements (free background checks) and the availability of training, issues of safety and respect (knowing skills would be used effectively, feeling safe and secure, not encountering age discrimination), as well as the knowledge of and access to opportunities close to home.

Table 2: Ratings of how likely various factors would be to influence a decision about volunteering

Item (n)	Likely/Very likely N (%)	Mean (SD) on 1-5 scale
It fits my schedule (72)	49 (68)	3.8 (1.26)
I could do specific roles that appeal to me (74)	49 (66)	3.8 (1.04)
I could stop at any time I want without consequences (72)	47 (65)	3.8 (1.17)
I could see the good I was doing (72)	46 (64)	3.7 (1.25)
I knew my skills and experience would be used effectively (71)	43 (61)	3.6 (1.27)
I felt safe and secure (72)	43 (59)	3.7 (1.25)
I could set regular times to volunteer (71)	40 (56)	3.5 (1.31)
I did not have to commit long term (72)	40 (56)	3.5 (1.33)
Someone asked me directly (73)	40 (55)	3.5 (1.21)
It was a well-known organisation/cause (72)	39 (54)	3.5 (1.29)
I could do it whenever I want (73)	39 (53)	3.4 (1.39)
Knowledge of opportunities near me (72)	38 (53)	3.4 (1.21)
It was close to where I live (72)	38 (53)	3.2 (1.07)
Training was provided (74)	38 (51)	3.6 (1.11)
It would make me feel really good (72)	37 (51)	3.4 (1.36)
Sure I would not encounter age discrimination (71)	36 (51)	3.4 (1.42)
Free background checks (73)	37 (51)	3.5 (1.33)
I could volunteer in my own language (72)	32 (44)	3.1 (1.57)
It would improve my health (72)	28 (39)	3.0 (1.41)
Volunteering was more flexible (71)	28 (39)	3.1 (1.35)
There were more opportunities involving both old and young (71)	28 (39)	3.2 (1.24)
Cultural diversity was welcome (71)	28 (39)	3.2 (1.28)
All my expenses were reimbursed (72)	27 (38)	3.1 (1.38)
It was scheduled for me (72)	24 (33)	2.9 (1.39)
My health was better (72)	24 (33)	2.9 (1.39)
I could do it online (72)	23 (32)	2.7 (1.44)
I could use/develop my leadership skills (71)	23 (32)	2.8 (1.39)
The volunteer organisation would be more accommodating to my needs (71)	21 (30)	2.9 (1.23)
The volunteering role was only for a short, defined period of time (71)	21 (30)	2.8 (1.34)
I could do it from home (72)	21 (29)	2.5 (1.50)

Background checks were not required (72)	21 (29)	3.5 (1.33)
If there were fewer rules and regulations (72)	20 (28)	2.8 (1.31)
I had more free time available (71)	20 (28)	2.9 (1.25)
Training was not required (74)	18 (24)	2.8 (1.26)
There was more recognition for it from society (71)	17 (24)	2.6 (1.35)
It was combined with another activity (e.g. leisure, work, time spent with kids) (72)	17 (24)	2.7 (1.33)
My friends volunteered (73)	17 (23)	2.6 (1.31)
There was more recognition for it from the organisation (71)	16 (23)	2.6 (1.29)
Transportation was provided (72)	14 (19)	2.3 (1.31)
I could do it with my family (72)	12 (17)	2.5 (1.23)
I could do it while I travel (72)	10 (14)	2.1 (1.31)
It would help me get a job (72)	9 (13)	1.7 (1.29)
I got paid for it (71)	9 (13)	1.8 (1.31)
It would impress people (71)	8 (11)	1.9 (1.23)
My carer responsibilities were reduced (71)	8 (11)	1.9 (1.26)
There was an app for it (71)	6 (8)	2.0 (1.22)
I could meet a partner while volunteering (72)	5 (7)	1.6 (1.07)

The factors least likely to be nominated as barriers were opportunities to meet a partner while volunteering, having an app to support their volunteering and being able to volunteer as part of paid work. Less than 10% of non-volunteers reported that these factors were likely or very likely to affect their decision to volunteer in the future.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Our results highlight the importance of volunteer opportunities and organisations being responsive to older adults' diverse needs, commitments, and capabilities. Flexibility is key; our findings are broadly consistent with those of a 2021 ABS survey²⁰ that found the most common reason volunteers stopped volunteering was that they could not fit volunteering in around paid work or family or caring commitments. Our participants also indicated that knowing where volunteering opportunities existed, what the commitments were and how they might fit into their schedule was important to assist them to decide about whether to volunteer or not.

²⁰ ABS, 2021

Taken together, our results align with the findings of previous Australian studies²¹ and emerging international research,²² suggesting that flexible volunteering opportunities that accommodate the diversity of skills and motivations of older adults are needed to increase volunteer engagement among this population. The value placed on tailored opportunities that fit with the interests and experiences of volunteers also maps onto the international view that societal motivations for volunteering are increasingly shifting from more “collective” forms centred around long-lasting organisational memberships, to more “reflexive” forms that involve looser commitments and the greater desire to fulfil personal interests and motives through volunteering.²³

Non-profit organisations are increasingly using marketing concepts to attract older volunteers, but there is more that could be done and currently limited consensus on the best approaches. Effective marketing should address older peoples’ motivations, capacity and availability for volunteering, and the accessibility and resources of organisations to support their volunteers. A key organisational resource is likely to be the cultivation of a participatory culture where volunteers are valued, clear and regular channels of communication are provided, and mechanisms for feedback are in place.²⁴ Older volunteers have different motivations, expectations and goals compared to younger volunteers,²⁵ and recruitment and retention strategies are likely to benefit from being tailored to specific target audiences. Finally, previous studies have highlighted the importance of word-of-mouth for recruitment of older volunteers.²⁶ Thus, marketing and recruitment strategies that empower older adults to act as champions or “ambassadors”²⁷ of the cause might prove particularly effective.

Researchers have begun to examine practical solutions for offering flexible approaches to volunteering that better accommodate the unique circumstances of potential volunteers. Obi et al.²⁸ proposed a framework for “flexible volunteering” that would allow volunteers to contribute in ways that are consistent with their own skills and interests, without needing to commit to a specific structure or timeline. For example, volunteers might contribute to an organisation’s goals through engaging with social media or organising their own fundraising event rather than participating in a model that more closely resembles traditional paid employment. Flexible volunteering models could be adapted, trialled, and evaluated in the Australian context as ways to enhance older volunteer retention and recruitment.

21 McDougall & Barrie, 2020; Warburton et al., 2007

22 Hansen & Slagsvold, 2020

23 Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003

24 Devaney et al., 2015

25 Hopkins & Dowell, 2021

26 Warburton et al., 2007; Devaney et al., 2015

27 Obi et al., 2019

28 *Ibid.*

Our findings support the importance of developing and evaluating such coordinated systems that can be used to match volunteering opportunities to the skills, interests, and resources of prospective volunteers. With this information, Volunteer Involving Organisations could more easily reach out to older adults with tailored opportunities. For example, a central electronic repository of volunteering opportunities and prospective volunteers, codesigned by Volunteer Involving Organisations and volunteers would provide a real-time volunteer-opportunity matching function while also facilitating 'offline' communication of volunteering opportunities to those without online access. Consistent with the preferences for flexibility discussed above, recent years have seen an increase in participation in episodic or "one-off" volunteering; however, the desire among many volunteers to take up more spontaneous opportunities introduces challenges for organisations to effectively match people's interests with tasks or roles.²⁹ Well-coordinated online systems are likely to have a central role to play in matching prospective volunteers with appropriate opportunities.

Additionally, developing a toolkit for organisations considering volunteer recruitment may help to support Volunteer Involving Organisations in identifying and defining flexible roles in ways that promote more attractive opportunities for older volunteers. Volunteers, Volunteer Involving Organisations, and regulators could also work to inform and develop pathways in volunteering that ensure that (i) necessary regulations and requirements are effectively streamlined and appropriately applied, (ii) training that meets regulatory requirements is provided and (iii) there is appropriate and standardised training for older volunteers facing difficulty with IT and accessing information online.

Gaps in knowledge and future research possibilities

A limitation of the findings from our own research reported here stems from the small, homogenous sample of non-volunteers. Ideally, future studies in this area would incorporate larger representative samples of older adults from diverse (including culturally and linguistically diverse) backgrounds and across different geographic areas of Australia. Furthermore, longitudinal data are needed to track older Australians' transitions into and out of different volunteering contexts to develop a better understanding of their motivations and the factors that promote or inhibit recruitment and retention. Targeted qualitative research is required to better understand the experiences of diverse older volunteer groups including those who have currently paused volunteering as a result of COVID-19 and may be concerned about re-engaging. Finally, in the Australian context research around strategic policies related to volunteering may benefit from considering the needs, expectations, and opportunities available to both young-old potential

29 Dunn et al., 2022

volunteers at or around retirement age (e.g., ages 60 to 70) as well as older (ages 70+) volunteers. Oldest-old adults who may lack the functional capacity to undertake certain volunteer activities, but who have time, motivation, and wisdom to contribute represent a particularly under-researched group.

Conclusion

Population ageing brings with it the unique opportunity to bolster the non-profit sector through the recruitment of volunteers from an increasingly healthy and engaged pool of older adults. To do this effectively, governments, policy makers and Volunteer Involving Organisations need to consider how to best support older people to become engaged in volunteering opportunities. Creating flexible, tailored opportunities for older volunteers, and effectively marketing those opportunities is likely to be critical. Developing a real-time, coordinated central system for recording and communicating volunteering opportunities could help match the skills and interests of the volunteers to volunteering opportunities and to facilitate 'offline' communication of volunteering opportunities to those without online access.

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