

## SENIOR VOLUNTEERS: DIFFERENT, NOT DANGEROUS

**According to Volunteer Canada** "Older adults have a lower volunteer rate than younger age-groups but they contribute, on average, more hours per year. This is likely due to health and mobility issues that increase with age, while availability tends to increase with age, due to fewer work and family responsibilities"

**Knowing that seniors can be a great resource** to any organisation leads to the question: What opportunities can we offer seniors that allow them to undertake valuable, interesting work, but work that is within their limitations and need for their safety and the safety of others?

Senior volunteers have much to offer in the form of every-day, practical knowledge of how to quickly assess tasks and opportunities to get things done while working in a team environment. This life-long experience is an excellent asset especially in a multi-generational workforce where exchanging skills and knowledge is beneficial to all participants.

**Managers know** that the first order of business is to promote the well-being of the organization. The means we begin by choosing tasks that are valuable to the organization and that will be successful in achieving the organization's goals. When working with adults and seniors with disabilities offering a variety of assignments lets individuals choose the one(s) they believe they can handle. The offer promotes their sense of self-confidence and independence and is more likely to have satisfied workers who will remain with your organization longer, reducing the risk of higher volunteer turnover.

While seniors are already a large part of the volunteer workforce we can't take it for granted that all seniors who want to volunteer already are. Many seniors do not volunteer because of real or perceived obstacles. These include poor health, lack of computer literacy or other skills, difficulty with transportation availability or cost, responsibilities such as caring for loved ones



*There is no age limit for volunteering. Working with senior volunteers isn't riskier – it's just different.*

or simply not knowing anyone else who volunteers. It could be your organization who benefits from this huge potential labour force.

**Encouraging volunteers to self-disclose** any debilities that may limit the type of work they can do or that may limit their length of working hours. A detailed task (job) description will let you decide together what possible changes can make the work safer and easier for the person to accomplish. Examples include: modifications to the work setting, process or schedule that will allow the potentially valuable volunteer to come on board.

Be sure to encourage all volunteers, especially those who self-disclose debilities, to provide information on special medical conditions (such as allergies, medications and dosage, and key contact information in the event of a medical or other emergency.

Finally, I've spent a lot of time in my book (*Volunteers: Asset or Liability?*) and newsletters preaching that it is critical to screen volunteers. Don't assume that just because someone is a volunteer that there is no need to subject them to a screening process. Use the same type of screening process that would apply to younger and/or able-bodied volunteers. Always screen (and supervise!) based on the risk analysis of the task – not on the individual.

## Conclusion

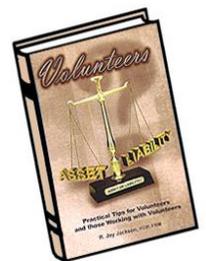
What to do? Remember that many seniors today have essential skills they acquired over several decades of work. Some will want to continue using their skills in a new setting while others are seeking something completely different.

With just a few adjustments to your recruiting and supervision procedures you can attract more seniors with a variety of work-related needs – and needed skills. More hands can achieve faster results – something we all are looking for!

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**Volunteers: Asset or Liability?** This handy guide has more than 200 pages of ideas describing effective and efficient methods to establish and maintain your volunteer program. You will learn:

- Simple, practical tips to help you further your efforts in working with volunteers.
  - Guidelines for screening volunteers that protect clients, co-workers and customers.
  - Ideas you can use to minimize effort and maximize your organization's results through volunteers.
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