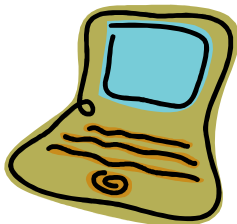


New report explores the attitudes, lifestyle and volunteering activity of the 50+ age group in Northern Ireland

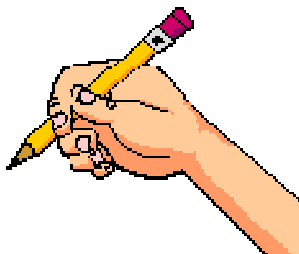
A new report published by the 'Unlocking Potential' Project, titled 'Making the Connection 2', has focused on understanding the 50+ age group in Northern Ireland in terms of their volunteering experience and attitudes towards it. It has also taken a broader interest in understanding volunteer and non-volunteer use of the internet, voting behaviour and health and well being. The findings are based on 350 telephone interviews with people aged 50 or over in Northern Ireland.



This survey found that older people are involved in a substantial amount of volunteering, whether that be at neighbourhood level (informal volunteering-59%) or through an organisation (formal volunteering- 36%). Patterns of volunteering tended to change with age; as people's age increased they were more likely to be involved in informal volunteering. ***This information challenges the view that older people are not actively engaged in their communities.***



Just over half of respondents claimed to use the internet (55%). There was a sharp decline in internet usage with age, 68% of people in their 50's said that they used the internet compared to 28% of those in their 70's. ***This tells us that it is important to use both traditional and more technology based mediums to communicate with the 50+ age group.***



Historically, research shows that older people and volunteers are more likely groups to be civically engaged, i.e. to vote, to sign petitions, this research supported this view. Respondents didn't feel that elected representatives understood older people's issues (58%); this supports other research in this area. ***It is clear that there is a need for all sectors of society to adjust to changing cultural and population changes i.e. older people becoming an increasing proportion of the population. Politicians have some way to go in terms of making NI a good place to grow older. The voluntary and community sector must also ensure that they are meeting the expectations, motivations and needs of older people as volunteers.***



Overall, irrespective of volunteering background, the people surveyed in this research were satisfied with their life (79%) and described themselves as being active (75%) and considered their health as 'good' or 'very good' (68%). The majority of respondents stated that getting involved in volunteering had increased their social interaction with people from different age groups (69%). Over a quarter of respondents suggested that their health would 'to some extent' prevent them from considering volunteering (28%). However, 88% of those who do not volunteer but would consider it stated that their health was not a reason. ***This suggests that having health problems can be a reason stopping some people from volunteering; however, it is clear that there are other barriers apart from health which are preventing non-volunteering groups from doing so.***



This research did explore the types of volunteer management practices that would encourage or discourage people from volunteering. Giving people the chance to try out volunteering (58%), having a chat with an existing volunteer or someone from the organisation were seen as encouragements. Respondents didn't like the idea of having to register online (47%), complete an application form (38%) or attend an interview (31%). ***However, part of the issue may be the formal language used to describe what can be a much more informal process. For example replacing the word 'interview' with 'informal chat' and the word 'application form' with 'registration sheet' may help.***

Overall, this report offers a valuable addition to the existing research that is available in Northern Ireland with regards to understanding the attitudes, lifestyle and volunteering activity rates of the 50+ age group in Northern Ireland. The report has offered information which can stimulate and inform future discussions of practitioners and policy makers, with regards to creating the environment for older people to be fully appreciated and utilised. There is much more for you to read on the findings from the study. Go to the publications section of www.volunteernow.co.uk to read the full report.

Thanks to The Atlantic Philanthropies for funding this piece of work. Charity (Inland Revenue) No. XT22896. Company Limited by Guarantee No. NI602399. Registered in Northern Ireland. www.volunteernow.co.uk