

Giving and the 'baby boomer' generation

By Alan Hatton-Yeo, CEO, Beth Johnson Foundation



Alan worked in the field of special education for seventeen years with roles including College Principal and Principal Education Officer of the then Spastics Society for England and Wales. Following a period working with the British Red Cross he joined the Beth Johnson Foundation as Chief Executive in March 1998. The Foundation was established in 1972 to develop new approaches to ageing that link practice, policy and research. Currently its work includes specialist work around advocacy for people with dementia, health promotion for older people, mid life, volunteering, engagement and participation and intergenerational work. Alan has an international reputation for his work in the field of intergenerational practice and Ageing and his current roles include:

- Chair of the International Consortium for Intergenerational Programmes
- Strategic lead for the Welsh Assembly Government on Intergenerational Practice
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“No-one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime.” Kofi Annan

1993 was the European Year of Solidarity between Generations. The theme was identified in response to concerns over the 'demographic time bomb', at a time when people across the world were beginning to grapple with the implications of people living longer. Coupled with falling birth-rates and the population bulge of the 'baby boomers', these factors completely changed the shape of the demographic distribution curve across the Western world.

The debate was centred on widespread and growing concerns that we faced a potential generational war for resources. There seemed to be an assumption that older people would take more and more from society as they lived longer and the young would be starved of opportunities as a consequence. The focus of 1993 was to challenge traditional thinking about individuals as they age and to dispute the assumption that age automatically equated to dependency. Instead there should be a far stronger emphasis on the opportunities that a cohort of older people with experience, skills and time could present to wider society.

Almost twenty years on we find ourselves in a society where retired people and older workers make a massive contribution as volunteers, carers, citizens and donors: some 70 per cent of all volunteering in Health and Social Care is undertaken by people over fifty. Across the country organisations such as RSVP and AgeUK have massive volunteer workforces, many of whom make a significant contribution to supporting the younger generations. Older people form the backbone of many charity boards and resident's associations and where would our society be without the contribution of grandparents to the well-being of their families and their grandchildren?

At the same time the debate about older people, and particularly the boomer generation (born between 1947 and the mid 1960s) is revisiting many of the discussions of the late 1980's. Sadly the narrative has hardened and there is a discourse about the greediness and self interest of the boomers who, because of the time and circumstances they were born into, now hold much of the wealth of our country.

In this brief essay I am not going to address this debate, instead I want to revisit the purpose of the 1993 European Year and ask the question: 'How we can unlock and value the unprecedented experience, resources and skills of our active older citizens to the benefit of all?'

In considering the boomer generation, those approaching retirement or the newly retired, I also want to draw attention to their vital role as the 'pivotal' or 'sandwich' generation. They occupy an important and sometimes difficult place in the family and community, frequently finding themselves providing support and care for both younger and older members of their family. We should never forget that the most effective way of establishing a commitment to philanthropy is through the example of the older members of your family and that strong families are the essential glue to our communities.

How then do we create opportunities to unlock a greater contribution from the middle generations while at the same time acknowledging the contribution already being made? There are a number of practical things, which need to be more widely promoted, that can be undertaken to promote philanthropy. In parallel we also need to promote a culture that endorses and values the contributions that are already being made by this group.

The current debate about localism and control is very timely. Research shows that the motivation for this group of volunteers is about being able to use their skills and resources within their own communities or towards a cause that resonates for them. This is not a group of people whose members are necessarily going to be attracted to an existing volunteer workforce. The life experiences they have had mean they are characterised by their need to develop their own ideas and causes and to take on roles that affirm their own sense of identity. This is the generation that grew up challenging many of the existing conventions and who become impatient with restrictions that seem to make little sense. We need to make sure that we keep people safe but also have systems of regulation and protection that are designed to promote contribution and engagement not to make us risk averse.

We also need to give people the opportunity to explore models of philanthropy as they approach retirement. The emphasis on personal development in the last years of people's working lives needs to be a balance between their current roles and starting to use their skills in different ways. BT and Hanley Economic Building Society (based in Stoke on Trent) both recognise the importance a staged approach to retirement in both meeting their commitment to Corporate Social Responsibility but also in creating a healthy and effective workforce.

Hanley Economic Building Society encourage their staff to be involved in a wide range of philanthropic activity that can span fundraising for causes championed by staff, business mentoring and volunteering with local charities. Interestingly this commitment to supporting staff and giving people time has resulted in a healthier, better motivated workforce, an improved reputation for the company and improved profits. Equally importantly as people retire they have already constructed valued roles for themselves to continue to give of time, money, and experience into their retirement.

Models of volunteering within the workplace also need to be given more careful thought. We now have workplaces that include up to four generations that may have very different characteristics and companies such as Ford are already looking at how internal mentoring and skills exchange can create a better connected and effective work setting. These skills of mentoring and support can then be used to support other businesses or social ventures. Historically the Chamber of Commerce has promoted business mentoring to help support the growth of new businesses. In the current economic climate can look to examples in Europe that create support, coaching and training for the many young people who are finding it difficult to get into employment. Whether through coaching to become employment-ready, skills exchanges or mentoring to help people establish successful new businesses and social ventures it is vital that we engage with the contribution the middle generation can make.

Equally importantly the Third Sector faces the challenge of rethinking itself and how it works for the future. It will not be able to do this by itself and needs to engage increasingly with the private sector to bring in skilled volunteers as advisors and change agents who can then become part of a growing 'pro bono' partnership between the private and voluntary sector. Establishing the habit of philanthropy that acknowledges and speaks to people's skills is a key way to build that individual's future involvement.

This generation has also grown up as part of the technological revolution and there is a need to explore targeted use of technology to engage them and excite their interest. IT offers up whole new possibilities for e-mentoring, developing an increasing understanding of social needs and opportunities and identifying the skills and expertise people have to offer. People are less 'time-rich' than in the past and we need to make it easier for them to see the possibilities of valued opportunities to give of their time and resources.

Finally we must not lose sight of the importance of local support and networks, that essential bit of cooperative help that people give to each other in their neighbourhoods. The impact of the car, changes in housing and social habits have all led to decreased contact. However, there is a growing movement using street parties, and environmental projects to connect people to their neighbours. Alongside this the development of community managed assets provides great opportunities for this group which has been at the forefront of change through their lives to take on a new role as the community leaders for the future.

The challenge is for employers, older workers and people approaching or recently retired to recognize how the skills and resources they possess can be unlocked not solely to make a difference for others but to strengthen their own sense of personal worth and identity. For philanthropy to become a core part of the legacy they leave behind in supporting others.