

Retired Professionals Rural Volunteering Project

Linking Retirees with Professional Skills
and Rural Grassroots Agencies



Research Summary and Recommendations



Australian Government
Australian Research Council



Queensland
Government
Department of Communities



LA TROBE
UNIVERSITY

PROJECT BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE



In 2010, the Queensland University of Technology (QUT; School of Psychology and Counselling), in conjunction with La Trobe University (the John Richards Initiative—research and innovation in rural aged care), and the Queensland Government Department of Communities, launched the Retired Professionals Rural Volunteering project.

The overarching aim of the project was to consider the feasibility of engaging retired business professionals as episodic (short term, periodic volunteering for up to six months at a time), skilled volunteers in rural, grassroots agencies.

Funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant and the Queensland Government Department of Communities, the project addressed two key issues currently facing our nation. The first challenge is the concerning decline of many rural communities and the limited (yet desperately needed) access to business skills assistance experienced by a high percentage of rural grassroots agencies. Recognised for their innovative ideas and high level of enthusiasm and dedication to their cause, these smaller agencies and community groups often provide services and opportunities within rural communities which would otherwise be unavailable. Access to appropriate business knowledge and expertise, through skilled volunteering, may make a significant difference to their service delivery and, ultimately, to the sustainability and growth of their communities.

The second issue relates to the ongoing call to provide a diverse range of volunteering opportunities which match the interests and requirements of contemporary older Australians. In particular, the growing contingent of retired Baby Boomers, whose education and skill level exceeds that of prior older generations, are expected to hold correspondingly high expectations of volunteering experiences. Optimising their participation in volunteering is likely to depend heavily on the availability of interesting and challenging roles which allow the ongoing use of their skills. We anticipated that matching retired business professionals (based primarily in metropolitan areas) with skilled volunteering opportunities in rural grassroots agencies, that require only a short term commitment through either face to face and/or E-volunteering, would be one strategy to address this issue.

Essentially, the project had the synergistic goal of bringing needed capacity building skills to rural communities while also offering retirees a challenging and satisfying volunteering experience which would fit with their already busy and active lifestyle.

Our research involved both theoretical and practical components. In addition to exploring the range of psychological factors, barriers, and incentives which may influence retirees' participation in episodic volunteering in rural settings, we examined the volunteering process in action to determine the challenges and outcomes associated with this type of arrangement. To achieve this goal, the project incorporated a number of trial volunteering placements in rural agencies.

QUT is dedicated to ensuring that research findings are easily accessed by those who can use the information to guide practice. This report has been compiled to facilitate the dissemination of the research findings to those who are responsible for engaging older citizens in rural volunteering, who are interested in understanding more about the factors influencing older peoples' participation in skilled volunteering opportunities, or who may be considering innovative ways of addressing skill needs in rural communities.

We hope that readers find the report informative and useful, and that the findings and recommendations make a valued contribution to volunteering in Australia.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Patricia Obst'.

Dr Patricia Obst
Chief Investigator - Queensland University of Technology

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*"There isn't anyone in the town that they could turn to and say
'help me with this strategic plan'.
There is no one in the town that has that knowledge."*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



Many people and organisations contributed to the success of the Retired Professionals Rural Volunteering project.

- ◆ The project would not have been possible without funding from the Australian Research Council (ARC), the Queensland Government Department of Communities, and the Queensland Government Smart Futures PhD Scholarship Scheme. The ARC Linkage grant allowed the Universities and industry partner to work collaboratively in an area of research of significant social and economic value.
- ◆ We thank members of the Project Steering Committee, including representatives from the Queensland Government Department of Communities, Volunteering Queensland, the Public Service Commission—Queensland, and the Queensland Government Office for Volunteering, for their input into the strategic direction of the project, their assistance with the recruitment of research participants, and for their invaluable knowledge regarding volunteering behaviour.
- ◆ We also acknowledge the important contributions of members of the primary research team: Professor Katy White (QUT), Dr Ioni Lewis (QUT), Professor Jeni Warburton (La Trobe University), Dr Nancy Spencer (Queensland Government Department of Communities), and Dr Nadine Brayley (PhD Candidate and Project Coordinator), for their commitment to the strategic management and completion of the project. This primary team is also very grateful to Elizabeth Parr, our research assistant, for her proficient work at various stages of the project and, in particular, for her assistance with finalising this report.
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- ◆ The trial volunteering placements would not have been possible without the hard work and support of representatives from the Cassowary Coast Regional Council who assisted in the promotion of the research, the recruitment of rural agencies, and provided 'on the ground support' for agency personnel and volunteers during the placements.
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"I think for me for the right role, for anything say two weeks or a number of two week periods over six months or so, yeah I'd sort of pack my bags tomorrow. [Laugh], ask where it is first then I'm out the door."

A MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL PARTNERSHIP: RURAL GRASSROOT AGENCIES AND RETIREES

WHY GRASSROOTS AGENCIES?

The contribution of community members through volunteering is a key ingredient influencing the economic and social status of rural communities. Indeed, grassroots agencies (i.e. those agencies operating primarily through the hard work of volunteers with few paid staff) [1] can be a rich source of ideas for economic and social development in their region. They often initiate and provide services and facilities that would otherwise be unavailable to residents [2]. Unfortunately, the potential of grassroots agencies is frequently impeded by their lack of professional proficiency in areas such as planning [3], relationship building and marketing [4]; activities and skills which are necessary for sustainability and, very often, for the acquisition of funding. Grassroots agencies which are unable to access these skills through their membership must look elsewhere for professional support. Hence, while there may be a level of dedication within rural communities toward improving their economic and social status, the capacity of townships, in terms of the availability of resources such as relevant expertise, knowledge, and social networks, may not support this level of enthusiasm. The Retired Professionals Rural Volunteering project recognised the value of these smaller agencies and their urgent need for skill support.

WHY RETIRED BUSINESS PROFESSIONALS?

Contemporary retirees, in particular the up and coming Baby Boomer cohort (individuals born 1946-1965; [5]), some of who are now approaching and entering retirement, are expected to be more interested in volunteering roles which make a meaningful contribution to society. Reportedly, they will be drawn to volunteering experiences which are 'interesting, challenging, meaningful, temporary, and flexible' [6], and which allow the continued use of their repertoire of skills [7]. They are likely to look for a post work lifestyle which maintains 'a balance between work and leisure' [8]. Given this profile, it was anticipated that current day retirees may be interested in short term, skilled volunteering with rural grassroots agencies. Retirees with professional business skills are likely to have the expertise and experience to help these agencies to grow and develop, and to contribute to community sustainability.

There is also existing evidence, through the study of the Grey Nomad phenomenon, that retirees may be interested in this type of volunteering. Grey Nomads are those older citizens who typically engage in extended road trips, through rural Australia, in recreational vehicles (e.g., caravans and motor homes). Possessing a wealth of skills and experience, a large proportion of the Grey Nomad contingent is willing to assist rural communities through volunteering [9-10]. Recent research suggests that this group may be interested in a variety of volunteering roles, including those of a skilled nature, such as facilitating brief training programs on topics relating to their past vocation, and assisting with the development of local cultural, recreation, and historical facilities and events [9]. Leonard and Onyx (2009) identified that Grey Nomads who were more highly educated were more motivated to volunteer, suggesting that retirees with professional backgrounds (i.e. those targeted by the current study) may be interested in rural volunteering [9]. Overall, the interest in volunteering among Grey Nomads, along with the growing body of literature pertaining to the interest of retirees in challenging and interesting volunteering roles, provided the impetus for the current project whereby the feasibility of engaging retired business professionals (both Grey Nomads and non Grey Nomads) as episodic volunteers in rural grassroots agencies was examined.



In order to establish the feasibility of engaging retirees in episodic, skilled volunteering in rural settings, we needed to understand their attitudes to the specific type of volunteering and the factors likely to influence their engagement in the experience. This information could then be used to implement and evaluate a series of trial volunteering placements.

To achieve these aims, the project was completed in three stages:

- ◆ **STAGE 1:** Six discussion groups (involving 35 retired, semi-retired and pre-retired business professionals (based largely in Brisbane and the wider Brisbane area) were completed to gauge retirees' level of interest in and attitudes to episodic, skilled volunteering in rural settings. The range of factors (beliefs about the advantages (motives), disadvantages, incentives and barriers) impacting on their involvement in short term volunteering roles were explored in this stage.
- ◆ **STAGE 2:** The findings from STAGE 1 of the research were subsequently assessed on a larger group of business professionals (187 individuals) who were retired, semi-retired or planning retirement within 2 years. We surveyed individuals with past vocational experience in the following areas: business management/development, human resource management, information technology, marketing/promotions, finance/accounting, and public service administration. These skill sets were chosen given their association with strengthening the organisational capacity of rural agencies.

Characteristics of survey Participant—Stage 2

- ◆ Age range: 49—86 years (Mean age = 63.5 years; 55.1% male)
- ◆ 60.4% were fully-retired, 20.9% were semi-retired, 18.7% were working full-time but planned to retire within 2 years
- ◆ 59.4% had a university qualification
- ◆ 96.8% reported English as their first language

- ◆ **STAGE 3:** Information gained in STAGES 1 and 2 of the project was used to plan and evaluate trial volunteering placements during 2013.

"I've had a pretty scattered career in terms of range of industries both in private and public sectors ... and unless you're totally devoid of interest you're bound to absorb a fair amount of knowledge in that period. And if you can share that with people who need it I think that's worthwhile."

ARE RETIREES INTERESTED IN RURAL VOLUNTEERING AND HOW CAN THEIR INVOLVEMENT BE OPTIMISED?

RETIREEES' ATTITUDES TO EPISODIC, SKILLED VOLUNTEERING

- ♦ Retirees' attitudes to episodic, rural volunteering were positive. Survey respondents' mean score for attitudes was 5.73 on a seven point scale (where 1 refers to a very negative attitude to rural volunteering and 7 represents an extremely positive attitude to rural volunteering).
- ♦ When asked about their level of intention to volunteer with a rural agency on a short term basis, survey respondents reported an average rating of 4.75 on a seven point scale (where 1 refers to a very low level of intention to volunteer and 7 represents an extremely high level of intention to volunteer).
- ♦ Survey respondents who identified as Grey Nomads held higher intentions to volunteer within this context.
- ♦ 77% of survey respondents (*Total respondents = 187*) reported that they may be interested in undertaking one of the trial volunteering placements implemented in STAGE 3 of the research project.

This information suggests that Australian retired business professionals are interested in helping rural grassroots agencies, on an episodic basis, through skilled volunteering.

WHAT, WHERE AND FOR HOW LONG?

- ♦ 51.8% of respondents preferred to undertake a combination of face to face (i.e., at the rural site) and E-volunteering; 18.7% were interested only in face to face volunteering, 2.2% wished to undertake only E-volunteering and 27.3% had no preference.
- ♦ 42.2% of respondents would perform mentoring, 32.6% would perform coaching, 26.7% preferred hands on roles, 28.9% were interested in offering group training, and 20.9% had no preference as to the nature of their involvement .
- ♦ 13.2% of respondents would offer their services for up to one week at a time, 14.6% for one to two weeks at a time, 9.5% for two to three weeks at a time, 35% for up to one month at a time, 18.2% for two to three months at a time and 7.3% for more than 3 months at a time.
- ♦ 54.5% of respondents were willing to volunteer in inner regional locations, 60.4% in outer regional locations, 54.5% in remote locations and 34.8% in very remote locations.
- ♦ Self contained accommodation (e.g., caravan park cabin or unit) was the most preferred form of accommodation, followed by motel accommodation, hotel/pub accommodation, and billeting, respectively. Retirees enjoying the Grey Nomad lifestyle (e.g., travelling in caravans/motorhomes) noted a caravan site as their preferred type of accommodation.



- ♦ The Theory of Planned Behaviour (also termed the TPB; [11]) was used as a guide for understanding the key factors influencing retirees' decision to participate in episodic, rural volunteering. Although the TPB is comprised of several elements, it is the belief component of the model that was applied in this context. This aspect of the theory suggests that older people will hold key beliefs about this specific type of volunteering (i.e., episodic, skilled volunteering in rural settings) and these beliefs will influence whether or not they engage as a volunteer.
- ♦ As key beliefs may influence volunteering behaviour, targeting these beliefs within recruitment campaigns and when developing volunteering roles, may facilitate higher rates of participation.

Within the TPB, key beliefs fall into three categories:

1. Beliefs about the advantages (also likened to motives for volunteering) and disadvantages of volunteering;
 2. Beliefs about whether people who are important to the retiree want them to volunteer or not volunteer (i.e., whether they have support for volunteering);
 3. Beliefs regarding the factors which may enhance or stop their participation in volunteering.
- ♦ Within the research, we explored and measured retirees' beliefs regarding episodic, skilled volunteering in rural grassroots agencies. Within the next section, we outline these beliefs and highlight those beliefs which are likely to be more and less important to target within recruitment campaigns and when developing rural volunteering roles. Key beliefs were used to shape the trial volunteering placements completed in 2013 (i.e. Stage 3 of the project).
 - ♦ A more detailed description of this aspect of the project and the key beliefs is provided in the following thesis document:

Brayley, Mercia N. (2013) Modelling the salient factors influencing retired business professionals' participation in episodic skilled volunteering in rural settings. PhD by Publication, Queensland University of Technology.

"You can certainly quote me in saying that [our volunteer] was very professional in all her dealings with [our agency]. I would endorse [the volunteer] again for any projects that may come up."



KEY BELIEFS—RECRUITMENT TARGETS

- Within each belief category, beliefs which retirees indicated will have the strongest influence on their decision to participate in rural volunteering (and, therefore, may represent highly important targets for recruitment and role development), are noted with three stars (★★★), those of moderate influence are denoted by two stars (★★), and those of lesser influence are represented by one star (★).

Beliefs about the Advantages (likened to motives) and Disadvantages of Episodic, Skilled Volunteering	
Advantages (Motives for volunteering)	
♦ Skilled volunteering will provide intellectual stimulation and will keep my brain active	★★★
♦ By volunteering I will be helping others who genuinely need assistance	★★★
♦ Skilled volunteering will enable me to maintain my professional interests during retirement	★★★
♦ Volunteering will provide an opportunity for me to experience life in a rural community (as opposed to experiencing rural life from a tourist perspective)	★★★
♦ Volunteering will make me feel valued	★★★
♦ Volunteering will enable me to travel within Australia	★★★
♦ By volunteering I will be contributing to the growth and sustainability of rural communities	★★★
♦ Volunteering will add to my level of satisfaction with retirement	★★
♦ Skilled volunteering will help to offset the negative effects which accompany normal ageing	★★
♦ Volunteering will help me to adjust to retirement	★
Disadvantages	
♦ Volunteering may interfere with my family life	★
♦ Volunteering may incur costs that I can't afford	★
♦ Volunteering will interfere with my existing commitments	★

Important people likely to influence retirees' decision to participation in rural volunteering	
♦ Spouse/partner	★★
♦ Grandchildren	★★
♦ Children	★
♦ Friends	★

Beliefs about Barriers to Rural Volunteering (Factors which may deter engagement)	
♦ Incurring costs associated with volunteering (e.g., accommodation and travel expenses)	★ ★ ★
♦ Volunteering will interfere with my family commitments	★
♦ Volunteering will interfere with my other (non-family) commitments	★
♦ Health issues of family members	★
♦ Insufficient time to volunteer	★
♦ Extreme weather conditions in rural areas (e.g., extreme heat, cold, cyclones, floods)	★
♦ Leaving one's home unattended while volunteering	★
♦ Personal health issues	★
♦ Lack of interest in this kind of volunteering	★



Beliefs about Facilitators of Rural Volunteering (Factors which may increase the likelihood of engagement)	
♦ Appropriate insurance cover (e.g., professional indemnity insurance)	★ ★ ★
♦ Assurance of positive working relations	★ ★ ★
♦ Volunteering placements situated in safe environments	★ ★ ★
♦ Comprehensive information on the volunteering role so I know what I'm agreeing to	★ ★ ★
♦ A strong match between the retiree's skills, knowledge and experience and the volunteering role	★ ★ ★
♦ The opportunity to select volunteering roles of interest	★ ★ ★
♦ Readily available decision making support for the volunteer during placements	★ ★ ★
♦ Financial assistance for costs associated with volunteering (e.g. transport/ accommodation)	★ ★ ★
♦ Agreement (by both parties) on a clear exit strategy for volunteers should the arrangement not go as expected	★ ★ ★
♦ Being looked after by members of the rural community while on placement	★ ★ ★



Attracting retirees who are less likely to volunteer...

It is becoming increasingly important to tailor recruitment campaigns to specific segments of the volunteer market. Focusing on individuals who are less likely to participate in volunteering, along with those who are more eager to commit, will be vitally important for raising rates of volunteering.

The belief profile of individuals who are less likely to volunteer differs to the belief profile of those who are more likely to volunteer.

Using statistical analyses we were able to ascertain that the belief profile of individuals who are less likely to volunteer differs to that of those who are more likely to volunteer. Principally, retirees who reported that they would be less likely to volunteer with rural agencies held stronger beliefs about barriers to volunteering including, that personal health issues would stop them from volunteering (despite the health status of individuals who were less likely to volunteer being similarly good to that of retirees who reported higher intentions to volunteer), that family and other commitments would prevent them from volunteering, that they would be more deterred by extreme weather conditions in rural locations (e.g., extreme heat, cold, floods, cyclones) and having to leave their homes unattended, and that they lacked the time to volunteering. Retirees who expressed lower levels of interest in rural volunteering also believed more strongly that their partner/spouse, children, and friends would not support their participation in rural volunteering.

When developing volunteering roles and recruitment strategies, the participation of individuals who are less likely to volunteer may be increased through strategies such as:

1. Highlighting the episodic nature of the volunteering and the ability to pick and choose roles which fit with existing commitments;
2. Offering volunteer opportunities in locations with good medical facilities and breaking the volunteering placement into manageable time spans to allow volunteers to return home at regular intervals for medical or other appointments;
3. Emphasising the availability of E-volunteering opportunities;
4. Planning volunteer placements within the less extreme weather months of the year.

Work and leisure vs. work focused...

We found that while the leisure component of rural volunteering (i.e., the opportunity to combine travel in rural Australia with volunteering) was particularly enticing for some retirees, for others it was unimportant. It was evident that some retirees remained strongly tied to their professional identity and expected to undertake the volunteering role in a similar manner to a work commitment, their focus being solely on getting the job done. Recognising the different emphasis placed on the leisure component of rural volunteering by retirees, and structuring volunteering roles accordingly, will be important.

Grey Nomads...

Retirees identifying as Grey Nomads (individuals travelling for extended periods within Australia in recreational vehicles) reported higher intentions to undertake rural volunteering. Marketing to this group may be particularly fruitful. Notably, however, the retirees who participated in the trial volunteering placements for the project (STAGE 3) were not Grey Nomads, suggesting a high level of interest, also, within the non Grey Nomad community of older people.



- ♦ In addition to understanding the key beliefs/motives influencing retirees' participation in episodic rural volunteering, three trial volunteering placements were undertaken in Australian rural communities during 2013.
- ♦ The project team worked in collaboration with local council representatives to recruit grassroots agencies for the trial placements. The cooperative relationship between local councils and the research team was integral to the success of the project.
- ♦ Summaries of the volunteer placements are provided below, along with key recommendations for engaging older volunteers in episodic, rural volunteering in the future.

PLACEMENT 1

Ecotourism Venture: Agency one was an incorporated association striving to build an eco-tourism facility based around a wildlife species unique to the region. The new facility would focus on conservation, research, and education; these elements had both local and international importance in terms of understanding and managing climate change. The organisation had been in operation for more than 10 years and was managed by a committee comprised mainly of older community members. Although having exceptional knowledge of the animal species and enthusiastically supporting their cause by participating in local fundraising exercises, the group had failed to secure government funding for the project which would require between \$AUD11million and \$AUD13million to establish. The regional local government had informally agreed to provide land for the development but no formal agreement was in place. Letters of support for the project had been gathered from a range of key stakeholders within the community but no formal partnerships had been forged. The Association was eager to explore corporate funding opportunities and requested the assistance of a skilled volunteer to develop a sponsorship package.

ACHIEVEMENTS:

Although the Association's initial request was for assistance to develop a sponsorship package, the volunteer identified a number of preliminary steps that were pivotal to the acquisition of corporate funding. While the sponsorship package is still to be developed, the following outcomes were achieved, placing the Association in a much better position to secure financial support in the future. The volunteer has offered ongoing support to the Association.

- ♦ A plan detailing preliminary steps essential for sponsorship acquisition was established;
- ♦ The Association's governance structure was expanded to include a sub-committee with specific skills to support the project;
- ♦ A formalised land acquisition agreement with local government was established;
- ♦ A memorandum of understanding (MOU) with a notable university. The university partnership will bring needed credibility to the project.

Volunteer Profile

The volunteer (fully retired—non Grey Nomad) recruited for this innovative project had worked primarily within the television industry, wherein they oversaw the establishment of major television networks in Europe, the United Kingdom, and Asia. Their impressive portfolio included extensive experience in developing new and existing businesses along with the employment and development of executive teams, sales, sponsorship, and marketing initiatives. They resided in an inner regional city approximately 1700km away from the rural community. The volunteer made two visits to the rural township during the volunteering placement (i.e. air travel; each trip lasting approximately 3 days) and completed many more hours at their home residence.

"The volunteer's hard work has resulted in success!!!! We will be busy developing the MOU in the next few weeks and I have lined up our Council Community Director and a pro bono local lawyer to give their ok before the signing takes place."

PLACEMENT 2

Industry Taskforce: Agency two was a newly formed group comprising representatives from key industries and businesses within the region, including those from agriculture, transport, aviation, tourism, construction, and retail sectors. The taskforce was convened to encourage partnerships and, in doing so, to identify and implement solutions to skill shortages and skills gaps within the district. The group also aimed to provide support programs for local businesses. Ideally, achievement of these aims would result in economic growth within the region. At the time of requesting a volunteer, the Business Group had no funding and was desperately seeking assistance to develop a strategic plan to guide their activities in their initial year of operation. An executive committee had been established. The role required a volunteer who had knowledge of strategic planning, along with an understanding of the dynamics of industry and business within rural communities, and the challenges that regions face in terms of skills shortages. In light of the diverse range of industries and businesses involved in the taskforce, the volunteer also needed to have the confidence, skills and experience to balance the various agendas and differing opinions of the group's membership.

Volunteer Profile

The volunteer (fully retired— non Grey Nomad) had held a variety of senior management and financial positions within government, including roles focusing on re-building local business within rural and remote communities. She had extensive experience and knowledge around strategic and operational planning and was also a Chartered Practising Accountant. In light of her recent retirement, she had relocated from an urban centre to a small rural township approximately 150 km away from the placement site. The volunteer made two face to face visits to the town (i.e. via road travel; each lasting approximately 2 days), completing a large proportion of the work through electronic means.

PLACEMENT 3

Volunteer Profile

The third volunteer (fully-retired—non Grey Nomad) had extensive experience as a senior administrator within the education sector, along with high level voluntary involvement in management committees of sports associations. Based in a major Australian city (approximately 1500 km from the rural town), the volunteer viewed the placement as both an opportunity to assist the rural community and to explore the local area and its offerings. He made two visits to the placement site, during which time he gathered information and facilitated a number of strategic planning meetings with the management committee for the sports association. The volunteer's partner accompanied him on both visits to the rural community and they enjoyed travelling through the local area in-between volunteering commitments.

"As you'll see when I forward some of the other executives' comments... they do not feel that we would have achieved a strategic plan to this level without the volunteer's assistance. It's their skill set that has brought it to the quality level that it's at now."

Combined Sports Association: Agency three was an established incorporated sports association representing a variety of sporting clubs (e.g., soccer, cricket, rugby) within the region. The group requested a retired business professional to facilitate the development of their 5 year business plan. Association members lacked the needed skills, time and money to construct the plan which was deemed a necessity for obtaining funding. The group had notable vision and ideas in terms of boosting the economy of their region by hosting major sporting events. The development of a business plan represented a significant step in the attainment of this goal.

ACHIEVEMENTS:

Both placement 2 and 3 resulted in the production of high quality strategic/business plans for the respective agency.



The Retired Professionals Rural Volunteering project demonstrated that it is possible to successfully engage retired business professionals as episodic, skilled volunteers in grassroots agencies and that this arrangement can generate important and tangible outcomes for struggling rural agencies. Importantly, the experience is a positive and satisfying one for retirees also. The following recommendations have been formulated from interviews held with agency personnel, volunteers, and local government representatives, at several time points prior to and during volunteering placements.

R1. Undertake a formal recruitment process

- ◆ We attribute the appropriate matching of volunteers, and the subsequent success of the volunteering placements, to the employment of a formal recruitment process. Agencies completed a written application form and volunteers submitted an expression of interest and resume describing their suitability for the job. A voluntary panel of retired business professionals approved agency applications and interviewed potential volunteers (using a relaxed yet professional format) and, while it was difficult to decline applications, this rigorous process resulted in exceptional volunteer/agency relationships. Volunteers and agency staff were supportive of the diligent recruitment process, many indicating that they would have expected nothing less. Final say on the suitability of the volunteer lay with the agency.

R2. Ensure agency personnel have time to work with volunteers and provide guidelines on how to work effectively with skilled volunteers

- ◆ One major challenge when implementing a skilled volunteering program for grassroots agencies is that agency personnel are often working in a voluntary capacity also. Consequently, while their intentions are good, the time that they can dedicate to working with skilled volunteers can be limited. Ensuring that relevant agency personnel are available to liaise with the volunteers when required, to action tasks, and to facilitate the timely transfer of information is imperative to the success of skilled volunteering outcomes. Interviewing several agency personnel at the application stage (as oppose to just one representative) will provide a clearer understanding of the group's commitment to the volunteering arrangement, their understanding of the time commitment required, and the scope of knowledge and skills of group members.

R3. Prepare volunteers for the need to maintain a degree of flexibility and patience

- ◆ Despite the formalised agency application process and good intentions, volunteer roles, and/or time lines, sometimes strayed from what was initially described by agencies in their written application and, thus, from the task agreed to by the volunteer. Volunteers' willingness to adjust to role variations and the delays in progress was integral to the successes achieved. Ensuring volunteers have detailed discussions with agency representatives before fully committing to roles will also help to prevent this issue.



"It was interesting for me to self-examine my emotions when a meeting would be cancelled at the last minute, often the day before the scheduled meeting and after I had put considerable time into preparation. In my working life, I would have become frustrated, but as a volunteer this meant I had an extra day or two at home for dolce vita at the beach, so there was no frustration."

R4. Something in it for retirees...

- ♦ Although happy to help rural agencies who have a genuine need, retirees are unlikely to engage in the experience for purely altruistic reasons. Correspondingly, organisers of skilled volunteering should tailor roles and role conditions to meet the specific needs of the professional. It is also important to expect and respect their open rejection of roles which do not meet their interests and requirements. Some retirees will be looking to integrate with the local community, to attend local functions and to experience rural life as a resident, but others will not have this interest. We encourage agency personnel to understand the interests of their volunteer and to facilitate their participation in community events if this element of the experience is important to them.

R5. Several short visits may work better than long stays

- ♦ Although we had anticipated that volunteers would need to spend considerable blocks of time in rural communities to achieve outcomes, a large percentage of the work was completed from their personal residences. In many instances the office facilities available to volunteers in rural communities were limited and, as such, it was more convenient for the retirees to work from home, unless there was a specific need to remain in the rural town (e.g., to convene meetings with multiple parties for strategic planning). Initial face to face introductions were important, however, for building relationships which could then continue to develop through telephone contact and/or electronic means. The geographical distance between volunteers and agencies was not problematic and, at times, provided a needed opportunity to work through information, contemplate ideas, and draft documents.

"The volunteer swallowed it all up. I think they've got the skill to have swallowed it all up and take it back with them and mull over it in their own time at their convenience and I think they grasped the situation really well. I think perhaps the distance helped them do that when you think about it."

R6. Include but look beyond the Grey Nomad community

- ♦ Although Grey Nomads reported higher levels of intention to undertake rural volunteering, this type of volunteerism is of interest to both Grey Nomads and non Grey Nomads. Both sub-groups may represent an important resource for rural communities and should be targeted in recruitment campaigns.

R7. Work collaboratively with local government

- ♦ By working with local government authorities, we were able to promote the project to the large network of grassroots agencies in rural areas and identify those interested in (and suited to) working with skilled volunteers. Local authority representatives also offered on the ground support for volunteers and agency personnel during the trial volunteering placements and appreciated the significant value of the skill assistance being injected into their communities.

R8. Offer some financial assistance for volunteers

- ♦ Retirees reported mixed opinions regarding the importance of financial support for their participation in rural volunteering. Our research suggests that although some retirees would be willing to absorb expenses associated with their involvement, many would prefer the experience to be cost neutral. This is not to say, however, that they will not participate if expenses are not paid for. While some retirees simply cannot afford to cover the costs of rural volunteering, others viewed some degree of financial compensation as tangible acknowledgement that their voluntary contribution is valued.

FURTHER READINGS

A number of academic papers detailing various aspects of the Project are also available:

1. Brayley, M, N. (2013). *Modelling the Salient Factors Influencing Retired Business Professionals' Participation in Episodic, Skilled Volunteering in Rural Settings*. PhD by Publication, Queensland University of Technology.
2. Brayley, N., Obst, P., White, K., Lewis, I., Warburton, J., & Spencer, N. (2014). Exploring the validity and predictive power of an extended volunteer functions inventory within the context of episodic skilled volunteering by retirees. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 42(1), 1-18.
3. Brayley, N., Obst, P., White, K., Lewis, I., Warburton, J., & Spencer, N. (In Press). Examining the Predictive Value of Combining the Theory of Planned Behaviour and the Volunteer Functions Inventory. *Australian Journal of Psychology*.

MORE INFORMATION

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"On behalf of our association members please accept our gratitude and thanks for giving us the opportunity to be part of the project. We believe that the matching of the volunteer to our purpose was most productive and has certainly moved our project forward. The skills that our volunteer provided was something that we as a group could not achieve by ourselves or find within our community. The forward movement of our project that the volunteer provided has reinvigorated our members and given them hope that our project will succeed.

We hope that the University and sponsors of the project consider the program a success and establish the project as a permanent resource. The availability of such a program to Regional communities is paramount to the development and sustainability of remote areas" [Participating Rural Agency].

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