

# Civic engagement: Volunteering dynamics and flexible work options

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# CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: VOLUNTEERING DYNAMICS AND FLEXIBLE WORK OPTIONS

John Havens and Tay K. McNamara

## Introduction

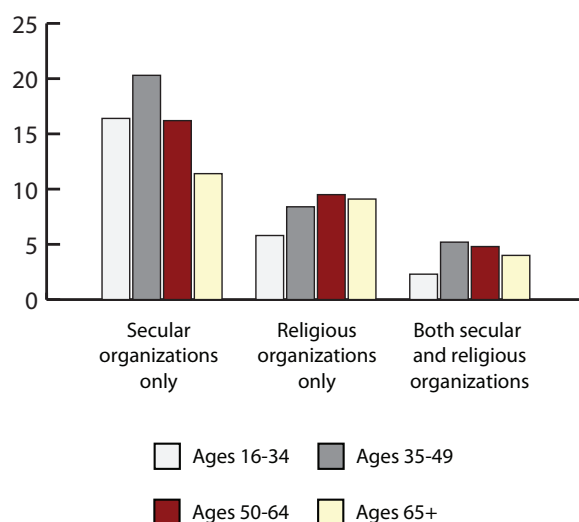
Volunteering, both formal and informal, is a widespread form of civic engagement in the United States.

Although informal volunteering (helping others directly and without pay as part of daily life activities)<sup>1</sup> is a prominent part of many people's lives,<sup>1</sup> the focus of this Brief is on formal volunteering through organizations.

This Brief both describes volunteering behavior among older adults, compared to volunteering behavior among the adult population as a whole, and considers the possibilities for workplace policies to encourage or discourage volunteering in this subset of the population. Questions addressed include:

- Why is volunteering among older adults important?
- How much do older adults volunteer? For what organizations? Doing what type of tasks? Financially, how much is volunteering worth?
- What factors affect the chances of volunteering for older adults? Does workplace flexibility at work play a role?

**Figure 1: Volunteering by Age and Organization - Percent of Volunteers**



Source: Center on Wealth and Philanthropy and Center on Aging and Work at Boston College based on data from September 2005 Current Population Survey.

This Issue Brief addresses the dynamics of civic engagement and workplace flexibility among older adults, since:

- The annual value of volunteer labor is estimated at \$129 billion, with volunteers age 50 and older accounting for \$89 billion.
- The activities and types of volunteering that older adults favor differ from those of younger adults.
- The most commonly cited reason for not volunteering is lack of time, so time flexibility policies for employees may indirectly affect the supply of volunteer workers.

Much of the information in the Brief was developed from data analysis performed by the research staff of the Center. The Brief draws on a wide range of sources, including: The 1992-2004 Health and Retirement Study (HRS), a longitudinal survey of the United States population ages 50 and older; the September 2005 Current Population Study (CPS), a nationally representative survey of the adult noninstitutionalized population; a review of previous literature on voluntarism; and Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reports. Older workers are considered from various standpoints, such as the 50 plus population, the 65 plus population, and the birth cohort (1931-1941) that has recently transitioned through the years when people typically retire.

## Why is volunteering among older adults important?

Understanding voluntarism among older adults is increasingly important as the population ages.

Older adults are currently one of the demographic groups with the greatest amount of free time that could potentially be donated to volunteer organizations, and the number of potential older volunteers will continue to grow over the next few decades. A better understanding of voluntarism among older adults may be able to balance the interlocking interests of older adults, employers, and non-profit organizations.

### 1. Why is understanding volunteering important to older adults?

Volunteering offers a way for people to give back to their community outside the constraints of paid employment. There is evidence that, under favorable conditions, older adults seek out volunteering opportunities. For instance, according to a recent Conference Board study, 68 percent of older adults said that a desire to contribute to society was a reason for their retirement from the paid labor force.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, an AARP survey found that the two most commonly given reasons for volunteering among adults ages 45 and older were to make life more satisfying (58 percent) and out of a sense of personal responsibility to help others (65 percent).<sup>3</sup>

Volunteering can also be a pathway from one field of paid employment to another. For some workers,

it allows them to build experience and skills that they can use in their current field of work or a new endeavor.

Another important but less tangible benefit of volunteering for older adults is that it smooths the pathway out of the dominant roles of middle age. Older adults often find that their family and work roles are changing or declining in terms of time required, and while some may welcome the chance for more leisure time, others find themselves missing the identity that those roles provided them. By providing an alternative role, volunteering can help to fill and restructure those gaps. Hence, volunteering is associated with lower rates of depression and lower rates of physical decline among older adults.<sup>4,5</sup> People of all ages can benefit from the sense of identity and community that comes along with civic engagement, yet older adults are one of the groups most likely to have absences or adjustments in other roles.

### 2. Why is understanding volunteering important to non-profit organizations?

There are over 1.4 million non-profit organizations in the United States. They employ approximately 8 percent of the paid civilian labor force<sup>6</sup> and rely on more than 61 million volunteers to augment their paid staff to achieve their missions.<sup>7</sup>

Demographic and economic changes are leading to a change in the composition and availability of volunteers. A disproportionate number of the millions of volunteers in the United States have traditionally come from certain demographic groups. For instance, middle-aged and younger women have been a major source of volunteering in the past. With the mass entry of women into the paid labor force over the last fifty years, this source is waning,<sup>8</sup> placing increased emphasis on other demographic groups, such as older adults.

In the coming decades, older adults may volunteer at different rates and for different reasons, and donate their time to different activities and causes, than the typical volunteer of the past. Hence, understanding the dynamics of volunteering for older adults has implications not just for the recruitment of volunteers, but also for the structure of non-profit organizations and the type of tasks that the typical volunteer will want to pursue.

### 3. Why is volunteering important to employers?

While volunteering can be beneficial to non-profit organizations and the individuals themselves, large numbers of retirements over the next few decades may cause a shortage of experienced labor in certain industries.

The challenge posed by mass retirement is significant,<sup>9</sup> and falls heavily on certain industries. Some industries tend to have older demographic profiles than other industries, making the retirement of the Baby Boomers of more immediate concern. Economic conditions create further differences among those industries, with shrinking industries anticipating little to no labor shortage while stable or growing industries (such as education) expect to be hard hit by turnover rates. Specifically, the high turnover in managerial and professional occupations in these industries is of particular concern because of the accompanying loss of talent, experience, and institutional knowledge.<sup>10</sup>

Employment policies that take account of motivations for volunteering and/or the managerial and professional skills practiced and honed by older volunteers in non-profit settings could increase the pool of labor in industries experiencing or expecting labor shortages.

### How much do older adults volunteer?

Older adults may have more free time as they move away from paid work, but they also may have greater barriers to volunteering, such as being in poor health. Data from the 2005 CPS indicates that, while people over age 50 already account for a substantial proportion of donated time, their volunteering rates are slightly lower than adults from younger age groups.

**1. How many volunteer?** 65.4 million Americans (28.8 percent of the all civilian adults) volunteered from September 2004 to September 2005. Of these, 15.5 million were ages 50 through 64 (30.7 percent of their age group), and 8.7 million were ages 65 and older (24.8 percent of their age group).

**2. How many hours are volunteered?** If all donated volunteer hours were replaced with full time (35 hour a week) workers, they would account for 4.5

million full time workers, with people ages 50 to 64 accounting for 1.2 million workers and people ages 65 and older accounting for 0.8 million workers.

**3. How many hours does the average volunteer donate?** Volunteers donated an average of 3.6 full time (35 hour) weeks of work a year— 3.9 full time weeks by volunteers age 50 through 64 and 5.0 annual weeks per volunteer by volunteers age 65 or older. Overall, older adults are slightly less likely to volunteer than their younger counterparts, but average more hours per volunteer.

### For what organizations do older adults volunteer?

Older adults are more likely than younger adults to volunteer for religious organizations (church, synagogue, temple or mosque) as opposed to secular causes. Also, when older adults do volunteer for secular causes, they tend to choose different organizations than do younger volunteers.

**1. How many volunteer for religious organizations? For secular causes?** In 2005, 26.9 million adults (11.9 percent) volunteered at a religious organization, while 46.9 million adults (20.7 percent) volunteered for one or more secular organizations. Among adults age 50 through 64, 7.2 million (14.2 percent) donated time to religion, and 10.6 million (21.0 percent) contributed their time to one or more secular causes during the same period. 4.6 million adults ages 65 and older (13.2 percent) volunteered to religion and 6.4 million (15.4 percent) volunteered to at least one secular cause.

Within secular causes, most volunteering is concentrated in two categories: (1) children's education, sports, or recreation and (2) social and community service. More than 60 percent of secular volunteers donated time to one or both of these groups from September 2004 through September 2005. Among older adults, the proportion of secular volunteers who donate time to education and youth services declines, and the proportion of secular volunteers who donate time to social and community organizations, health care organizations, and civic and cultural organizations increases.

**2. How many hours are volunteered to religious organizations? To secular causes?** The number of hours donated to religion in 2005 was equivalent to 1.7 million full time employees; the number of hours

donated to secular organizations was equivalent to 2.8 million employees. Adults age 50 through 64 contributed 497 thousand annual full time employees worth of time to religion and 657 thousand annual full time employees to secular causes. Adults age 65 and older donated 342 thousand annual full time employees' worth of time to religion and 500 thousand annual full time employees' worth of time to secular causes.

**3. How many hours does the average volunteer donate to religious organizations? To secular causes?** Volunteers to religion and to secular organizations average similar annual hours per volunteer, but more aggregate hours are donated to secular causes than to religion because more people volunteer to secular organizations than to religion. Overall, religious volunteers donated an average of 3.3 full time weeks per volunteer; secular volunteers donated an average of 3.1 full time weeks per volunteer to secular causes. Volunteers age 50 through 64 contributed an average of 126 annual hours (3.6 full time weeks) per volunteer to religion and 113 annual hours (3.2 full time weeks) to secular organizations. Volunteers age 65 and older donated an average of 134 annual hours (3.8 full time weeks) per volunteer to religion and 167 annual hours (4.8 full time weeks) per volunteer to secular groups.

At older ages, the average time volunteered increases both for hours volunteered to religion and hours volunteered to secular causes, but the increase is larger for secular causes. The major activities of secular volunteers are fund raising (34 percent); collecting, preparing, distributing, or serving food (22 percent); and general labor or providing transportation for people (21 percent). Older secular volunteers are disproportionately supervising, advising, managing, or otherwise running secular non-profit organizations as compared with younger secular volunteers.

### Financially, how much is volunteering worth?

The financial value of volunteering amounts to billions of dollars worth of time donations each year.

Over 61 million Americans volunteer through or for an organization each year.<sup>11</sup> Using the CPS, the value of an hour of volunteered time can be estimated based on the average hourly pay rate of all employees (\$16.32). If all volunteers were paid at

an average wage rate, the total wages would amount to \$134 billion a year, with adults ages 50 and older accounting for 44 percent of that amount (or, \$59 billion). Even if volunteer labor is valued at the lower average rate that non-profits pay their employees (\$15.74) an hour, the financial value of volunteering still totals \$129 billion a year — \$49 billion for religion and \$80 billion for secular organizations.

### Voluntarism's Worth - Dollars and Hours

**What if non-profit organizations paid volunteers at the current market rate?**

	Under 50	Ages 50 +
Dollars	\$40 Billion	\$89 Billion
Employees	✓ 2.5 Billion	✓ 2 Billion

Higher wage rates, linked to more experience and time in the organization, suggest that attempts to boost volunteering among older adults could be as valuable, if not more valuable, than similar attempts among other demographic groups. For instance, in non-profit organizations, employees over age 50 average \$17.48 an hour, substantially more than their younger counterparts. Once the differences in experience and time (as measured by wage rate) are taken into account, about 69 percent of the \$129 billion value of all volunteering is accounted for by volunteers ages 50 and up. Of that 69 percent (equal to \$89 billion), \$37 billion goes to religious causes and \$52 billion to secular causes.

### What type of work do older volunteers do, compared to their younger counterparts?

Older adults currently tend to do different types of tasks in their volunteer jobs, as compared to younger volunteers.<sup>12</sup>

Among the youngest volunteers, volunteering tends to mean general labor or fundraising. Among 16 to 19 year old volunteers, 11.7 percent reported that their primary volunteer activities were general labor or supplying transportation to people. The percentages of volunteers who focus on these activities tends to

drop off, reaching a low around the ages of 35 to 44 (6.0 percent), and then increasing slightly for older age groups.

For volunteers between the ages of 20 and 45, the most common tasks undertaken were teaching and tutoring, with the trend being particularly strong among volunteers in their twenties. 14.6 percent of volunteers ages 20 to 24 taught or tutored as their primary activity, compared to 13.7 percent of those ages 25 to 34 and 13.4 percent of those ages 35 to 44. The emphasis on teaching related work drops off at older ages, with only 6.8 percent of volunteers over the age of 65 naming teaching or tutoring as their primary volunteering role.

The most common tasks performed by adults ages 55 to 64 are managerial, including both general oversight and serving on boards and committees. 12.7 percent of volunteers in this age group reported that their primary volunteer activity was managerial or professional, compared to 10.2 percent for volunteers ages 45 to 54, 7.2 percent for volunteers ages 35 to 44, and still smaller percentages of volunteers under age 35.

The types of tasks that people prefer to do can peak at different points in the life course, due in part to the leadership skills and practical experience built up over a lifetime, but also to numerous other factors such as shifts in interest over time and generational differences. Figure 2 shows how selected main

volunteer tasks vary by age groups. Some tasks, such as mentoring youth or tutoring, peak in the twenties or early thirties, then decline among other age groups. Other tasks, such as coaching sports, peak in middle age. Volunteering time to managerial or professional tasks tends to peak in the early retiree years (55 to 64), while tasks such as collecting food or providing general office assistance continue to increase with age.

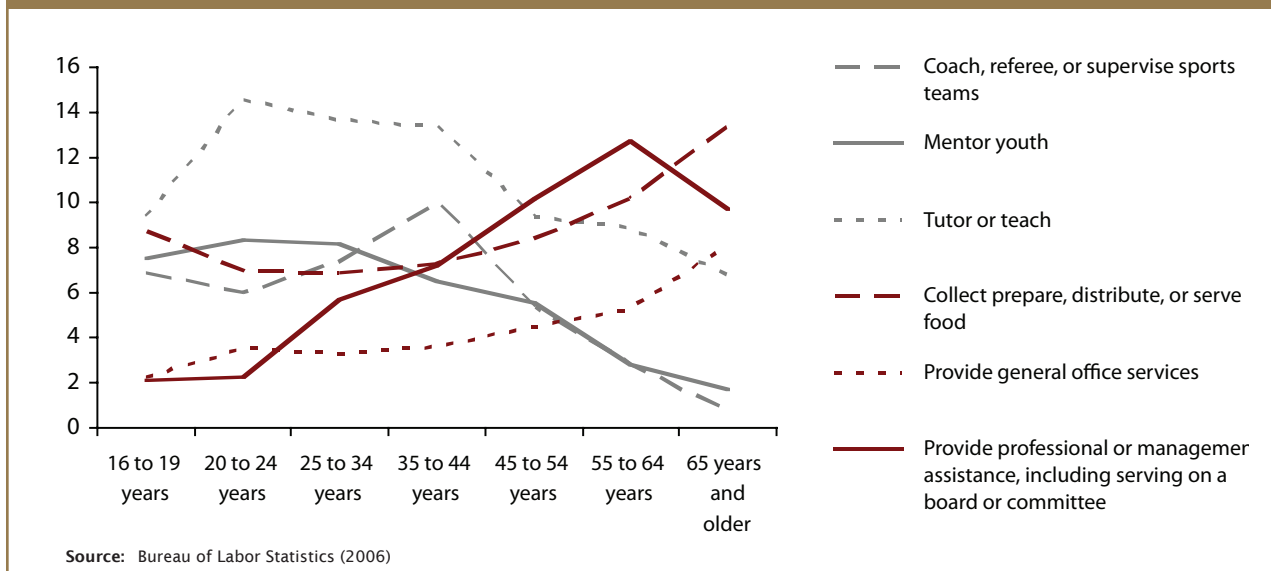
## Which individual factors affect whether an older adult will volunteer?

Why do some older adults choose to volunteer while others do not? Many factors play into the volunteering decision, only some of which are within the control of employers and non-profits. Understanding the specific reasons for volunteering, however, can help individuals and organizations plan.

### 1. What demographic characteristics play a role?

Within the retirement age population, men are somewhat less likely to volunteer than women, and households with a married couple are more likely to volunteer than single person households. Statistics from the HRS indicate that, among households with at least one person born between 1931 and 1941, 18 percent of single men, 26 percent of single women, and 45 percent of married couples volunteer each year.

Figure 2: Main Volunteering Task by Age Group, Selected Tasks - Percent of Volunteers





**2. What is the role of financial resources?** The greater the resources of the individual in terms of financial capacity (income and wealth), education, occupation, and social networks the more likely a person is to volunteer and the more annual hours such persons do volunteer, on average as compared with persons with fewer resources. According to the 2005 CPS, among adults ages 50 and up, 19.2 percent of volunteers had family incomes greater than \$100,000, compared to only 10.0 percent of non-volunteers.

**3. How does time spent with family and friends affect volunteering?** The greater the social engagement in terms of hours spent with others, whether at work, in the family informally with relatives, friends and acquaintances outside the family, or formally through religious and secular organizations, the more likely a person is to volunteer and to volunteer more hours.

**4. Do industry and occupation affect volunteering?** Due to both cultural norms and reference group affiliation, persons in professional occupations and selected industries are more likely to volunteer than persons not subject to these work-related cultural norms and affiliations. For example, of older workers (ages 50 and up) 16.6 percent of volunteers but only 9.5 percent of non-volunteers worked in education or health services. Similarly, almost one-third of older

employed volunteers (31.1 percent) said that their primary job was in management, business, financial, or professional occupations, compared to about half as many of the non-volunteers (14.3%).

Understanding the occupations and industries from which older volunteers tend to come should help in shaping volunteer activities.

### **Do workers with access to workplace flexibility tend to volunteer more than those without time flexibility?**

There is evidence that employers can influence whether and how much older workers volunteer. For instance, a 2005 study by the Center for Corporate Citizenship and Volunteers of America found that 72 percent of employees and retirees said that they were at least moderately interested in pursuing volunteering activities through the workplace in retirement.<sup>13</sup> In part, employers have a strong effect on volunteering because they have an influence over workers' schedules. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the most commonly cited reason for not volunteering is lack of time, with poor health being a key reason among older adults. As more workers reach the typical age of retirement in good health, workplace flexibility policies - particularly those that allow workers more control over the time spent at

### **How is employment related to volunteering?**

Do older workers volunteer more or less than retirees of the same age?

Unfortunately, the precise relationship between time spent working and time spent volunteering is still unknown, with research supporting both the idea that retirement leads to more volunteering and that retirement discourages volunteering. For example:

- A 2000 analysis of the Cornell Retirement and Well-Being Study found that retirees spent more time volunteering than workers, suggesting that one activity is substituted for the other.<sup>14</sup>
- A cross-national study in the same year found that in the United States, volunteering and working tend to go hand in hand, with older adults who are active in one area of life tending to be active in other areas as well.<sup>15</sup>

While many of the factors predicting voluntarism are well-established, the effect of retirement is less clear.

work - may indirectly affect the supply of volunteer workers.

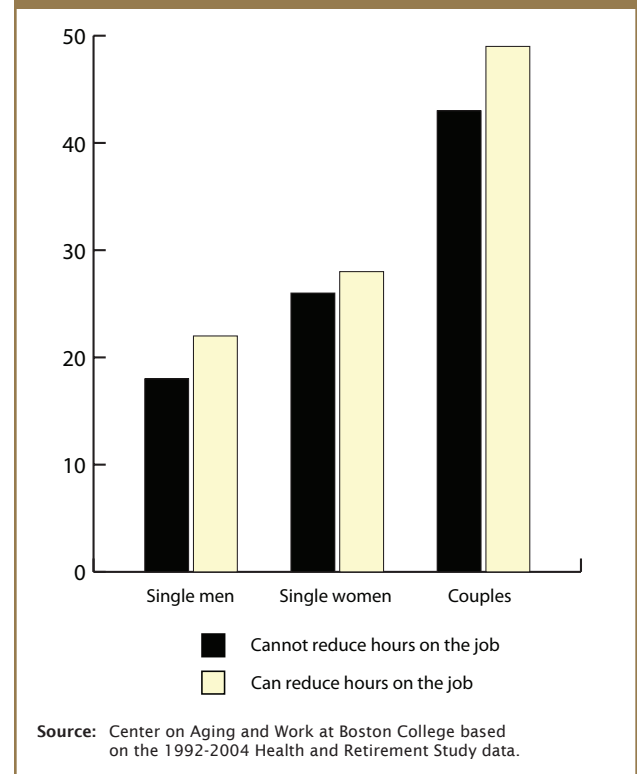
Analysis based on the HRS data indicates that for employed adults born between 1931 and 1941, availability of time flexibility is far from universal. Thirty-four percent of single men and women reported that they could reduce their hours on the job. However, only 11 percent of married couples report that both spouses had access to this type of policy. An additional 41 percent of dual-earner couples said that only one spouse could reduce their hours.

Employed older adults are both more likely to volunteer and likely to volunteer more hours if they have access to these policies. For example, 18 percent of employed single men without access to these policies reported being involved in a civic organization, for an average of 122 hours a year. However, 22 percent their counterparts who had access to these policies volunteered, for an average of 130 hours a year. Similar patterns emerged for single women and married households.

Time flexibility - the ability to reduce the number of hours at work - is one aspect of workplace flexibility, and in addition to encouraging volunteering these policies might also help to stem high turnover rates in certain industries. Offering workers the ability to work less than full-time has been identified as an important strategy to attract and retain older workers.<sup>16</sup> Hence, workplace policies that allow people to reduce their hours on their paid job may

help to create a synergy between employers trying to retain experienced employees, workers who want more time to contribute to society, and civic organizations reliant on volunteer labor.

**Figure 3: Volunteering by Availability of Time Flexibility at Work - Percent of Households**



## Conclusion

Due to demographic shifts, encouraging volunteer behavior among older adults is an important component to maintaining or increasing overall volunteer time donated. By better understanding voluntarism among older adults:

- Employers can encourage volunteer behavior and discourage turnover, using their workplace flexibility policies as a key element.
- Non-profits can shape their recruitment and placement of volunteers with a better understanding of both the tasks that older adults favor and the background of the typical older volunteer.
- Public policy debates can consider the effects of workplace policies during paid employment on the future viability and growth of the non-profit sector and its impact on strengthening communities.



**The Center on Aging & Work/Workplace Flexibility at Boston College**, funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, is a unique research center established in 2005. The Center works in partnership with decision-makers at the workplace to design and implement rigorous investigations that will help the American business community prepare for the opportunities and challenges associated with the aging workforce. The Center focuses on Flexible work options because these are a particularly important element of innovative employer responses to the aging workforce. The studies conducted by the Center are examining employers' adoption of a range of flexible work options, the implementation of them at the workplace, their use by older workers, and their impact on business and older workers.

The Center's multi-disciplinary core research team is comprised of more than 20 social scientists from disciplines including economics, social work, psychology, and sociology. The investigators have strong expertise in the field of aging research. In addition, the Center has a workplace advisory group (SENIOR Advisors) to ensure that the priorities and perspectives of business leaders frame the Center's activities and a Research Advisory Committee that provides advice and consultation on the Center's individual research projects and strategic direction. The Center is directed by Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes, Ph.D., and Michael A. Smyer, Ph.D.

**Michael A. Smyer, Ph.D.**, is Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and a Professor in the Department of Psychology at Boston College. A licensed clinical psychologist, he received his Ph.D. in personality and clinical psychology from Duke University and a B.A. in psychology from Yale University. Dr. Smyer was awarded the M. Powell Lawton Award for distinguished contributions to clinical geropsychology, sponsored by the American Psychological Association and the Retirement Research Foundation.

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**John J. Havens**, a Senior Research Associate and Associate Director of the Center on Wealth and Philanthropy at Boston College, is currently working on a range of projects focusing on an expanded and refined estimation of wealth transfer over the next half century.

**Tay K. McNamara, Ph.D.**, is a Senior Research Associate at the Center on Aging and Work, with current projects focusing on using the Health and Retirement Study to evaluate the interaction between workplace flexibility and both paid and unpaid work and the relationship between work and leisure time.

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**Issue Brief 5:** One Size Doesn't Fit All: Workplace Flexibility

**Issue Brief 6:** Down Shifting: The Role Of Bridge Jobs After Career Employment

## Research Highlights

**Research Highlight 1:** Context Matters: Insights About Older Workers From the National Study of the Changing Workforce.

**Research Highlight 2:** The Diverse Employment Experiences of Older Men and Women in the Workforce.

**Research Highlight 3:** The Benchmark Study, Phase I of The National Study of Business Strategy and Workforce Development

**Research Highlight 4:** The National Study, Phase II of The National Study of Business Strategy and Workforce Development.