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## Perspectives of a Baby Boomer: What Boomers Will Do To and For Oregon Libraries

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# Perspectives of a Baby Boomer:

## What Boomers Will Do To and For Oregon Libraries

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The day the youngest of our four sons began university, my husband turned to me and said, “So, what are you going to do for the next thirty years?” I just looked at him, stunned, as I had no idea. I had volunteered for years in the schools and my community, and was ready to give others those opportunities. I loved knitting, but my family and friends were more than adequately clothed. I had made so many quilts my husband half-jokingly predicted that we would die in a quilt avalanche. I took up gardening with a vengeance, and began blogging. I organized all the drawers and closets. It was not enough to satisfy my need to be involved with my community.

I pondered my varied skills without finding a good fit or interesting option. Then, on one of my weekly trips to the library, I was chatting with the circulation clerk who commented, with a smile, “You come in so often, you should work here!” That remark resonated; maybe I could work in a library. I began researching what people did who worked in libraries all day, and I found that working with people, teaching, writing, and technology meshed with my interests. Finally, I discovered what I wanted to be when I grew up—a librarian.

As one of the oldest members of the newest Oregon Emporia State University cohort, I am also a Baby Boomer, a part of that generation constituting almost one third of the U.S. population. I am not alone in seeking a new career, either. U.S. Census data show 30 percent of Boomers are considering going back to school and changing careers. We also expect to live active lives well into our 80s and tend to be affluent, well-educated, and techno-savvy. I believe Boomers offer three challenges to Oregon’s libraries.

First, a new crop of librarians may be waiting in the wings who, like me, have come to realize that librarianship is a profession which can tap their experience and expertise, their enthusiasm, energy, love of social interaction, and fascination with new technology. I am not young, was not raised enmeshed with technology, and am not naïve about the work and the work environment. I may not be what you expect as a “newly minted” librarian. Boomers invented the term “over-achiever,” redefining the world in our own image, and influencing every trend for more than five decades. We are independent thinkers and delight in never doing what others expect of us. You can call us Boomers, Abbies, or Zoomers, but do not call us senior citizens or old. We are interested in trying new jobs and staying involved. The first challenge for libraries: will you hire new librarians who happen to be older, or should I say booming, and then integrate them successfully into the profession?


Another challenge, related to staffing, is the potential surge of Boomer volunteers. Boomers in general intend to continue having meaningful engagements with their communities, and expect to both design and manage activities. They bring myriad skills gained from years of experience ranging from organization to marketing, fund-raising to tutoring, and mentoring. Libraries will need to develop volunteer programs that can best utilize these talents.

The final challenge for libraries is addressing Boomers’ expectations for library services, space and resources. Those who retire or work part time will seek leisure activities that integrate education, technology, and social outlets. The library is the perfect place for them to congregate. Other Boomers will search for new



careers and will begin seeking information about career and educational opportunities which will impact both academic and public libraries. This challenge for libraries includes adapting traditional service models, changing their assumptions about older adults, and recognizing that Boomers will continue to be a vital political and economic force.

The physical changes Boomers encounter as they age will require more from libraries than just adding more large-print and digitized books to their collections. There will need to be changes to the physical building including brighter lighting, more comfortable seating, lower bookshelves, and fewer stairs (or more elevators). Library staff may need to adjust their attitudes towards older patrons or increase their awareness of different needs. Our parents, the Silent Generation, are far more compliant and cautious than Boomers, who enjoy learning for learning's sake and have high expectations for both themselves and others.

As the oldest boomers approach 60 and come closer to the traditional retirement age, we are intent on reinventing a new stage of life. The generation that once declared, "never trust anyone over 30" now proclaims "70 is the new 50." The realization that our time is limited pushes us to deal with unfinished business, fulfilling dreams deferred or delayed. Some of us will seek leisure activities involving self-improvement and education, others will look for challenging volunteer opportunities, and still others, like me, will begin new careers. All of these groups will have an impact on libraries. The times are indeed a-changing and libraries will need to adapt as Boomers continue to stir their vision and creativity into the mix for many years to come. 

## Resources

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