

Joachim Burmeister, Ph.D., Prof. at Neubrandenburg University of Applied Sciences

Senior citizens as volunteers

A learning and practising approach towards a new role of responsibility in Germany

Voluntary Work in Germany has a long tradition within German welfare organizations. Since the 1980's, a new type of voluntary work has emerged, changing from traditional long-term voluntary service towards an overall more short-term, flexible and modern form of civic engagement. During the last decades, a continuing debate on volunteering has, amongst other results, led to the establishment of local volunteer agencies with a nationwide volunteering infrastructure.

In 2004, a total of 36% of the German population was engaged in volunteer work. Compared to 1999, this means an increase of 2%. During the same period, the willingness to volunteer has increased from 29% to 32% of the total population. Especially older people between the age of 55 and 74 are more willing to volunteer compared to 1999. Senior citizens in Germany generally show a high interest in political and public life. Voluntary work and community-oriented activities performed by older people have increased significantly.

All this led to discussions for new concepts of fostering senior citizens towards voluntary commitment in Germany. The most important programme to this was (and still is) the EFI- Programme (Experience for Initiatives).

Global description of the model programme

This concept for using the know how gained through experience created responsibility roles for older people in local communities. The aim is to open up new perspectives and ways of incorporating knowledge and experience gained at work, in families and in voluntary work in the community. As qualified "seniorTrainers" and in local "senior expertise teams" older people take up needs in their local communities, set up new projects, launch initiatives and support existing organizations and institutions in the volunteer sector.

The concept for the use of the experience of older people is aimed at older people who are not (only) involved in traditional volunteer work, but who want to contribute their expertise and skills flexibly, shape their involvement for themselves and act as multipliers. SeniorTrainers want to help to correct outdated images of old age and to redefine the role of older people in society. The age range of the seniorTrainers extends from 55 to 70 and older. The 'young old people', aged between 60 and 65, with a higher educational status feel particularly addressed by the concept of the use of knowledge gained through experience of older people. Those

who worked in leading positions as managers, civil servants or who were self-employed are especially strongly represented. Slightly more women (56%) than men (46%) take part in the courses to be seniorTrainers.

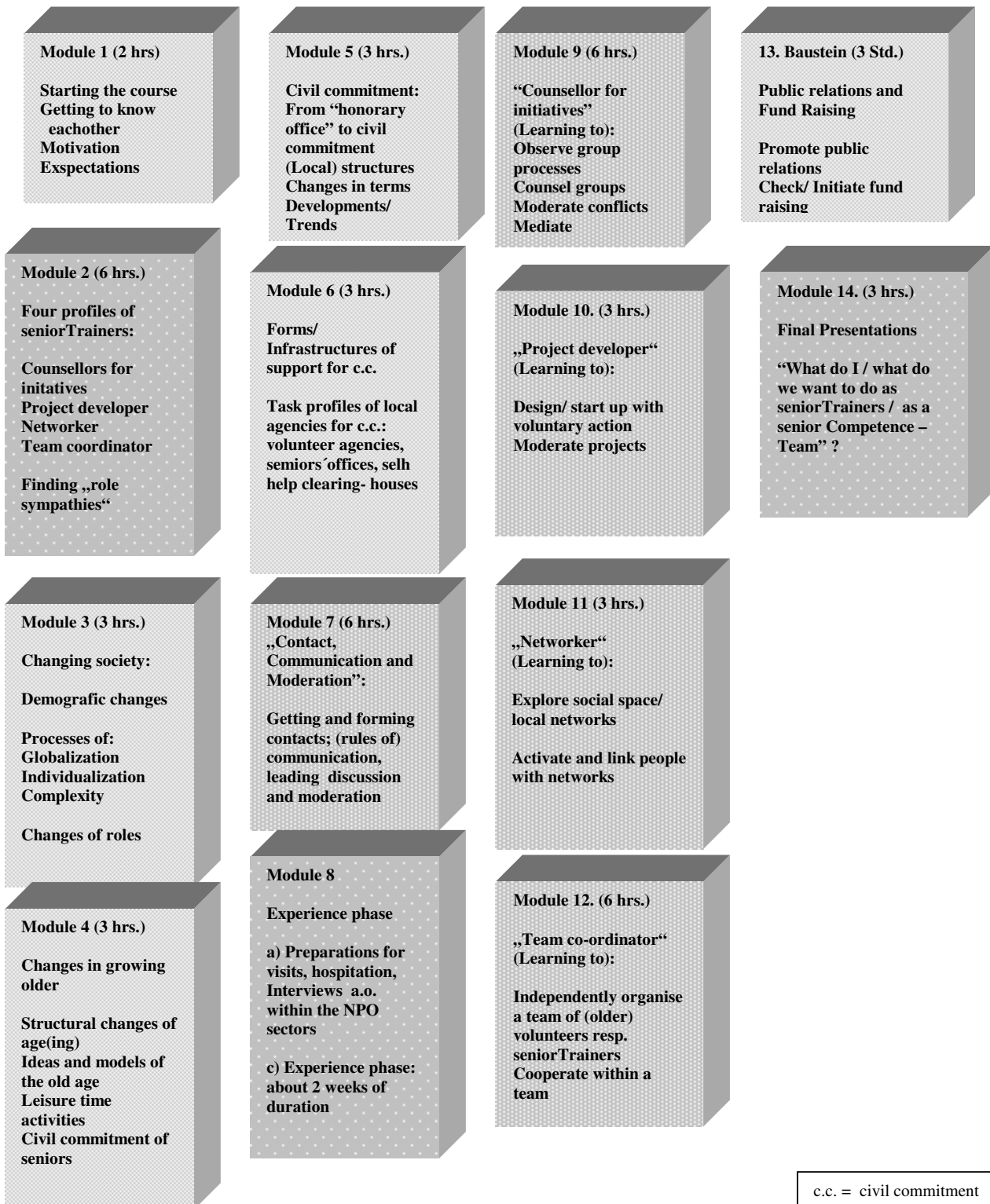
The target group for seniorTrainer services is broad and varies depending on the local conditions. In general, the programme aims at all kinds of NGOs: small and medium sized initiatives as well as semi-corporate welfare organizations and the local community as a whole. There are multiple benefits for the voluntary sector: seniorTrainers provide support in networking, sponsoring/fundraising, project development and management and PR/marketing strategies and give legal advice and financial consultancy based on their expertise.

A curriculum for a new role of responsibility

The insights gained from the 1999 and 2004 surveys entitled, "Volunteering in Germany" on changes in honorary offices and interest in volunteering in Germany, on the expectations placed on volunteering and its potential, as well as in seniors' interests in further education in the phase after their professional life not only show that, at present, just under one-third of all 60-year-olds *volunteer* for the most diverse functions. What is additionally important is that the generation that retires or has retired from professional life shows great interest in receiving information on the possibilities for doing volunteer work; many of them would very much like to pass on their experiences and knowledge, and **approx. 40% of them are still interested in further education.**

The EFI Programme assumes that there will be an increasing number of people prepared to volunteer, who can and wish to provide society with the competence they have gained from their profession, family, daily life, hobbies, etc., and this applies especially to smaller societies, active initiatives and groups. Therefore, the EFI Programme sees itself as a means of **finding their new role for those seniors who wish to initiate new things as senior trainers** and for all kinds of groups that are generally also volunteers, accompanying and guiding on a voluntary basis.

14 modules to become a "seniorTrainer" – a further education concept for networks on local levels



Researches and discussions about a suitable involvement of seniors as seniorTrainers has resulted in **four roles** of responsibility:

- a. supporters and counsellors;
- b. initiators of new projects;
- c. networkers in community life;
- d. team coordinators and moderators.

To learn more about these roles and to enhance some needed competences for the voluntary sector the seniors participated in a training course (duration 50 hrs/ several weeks)

The self-organization of the seniorTrainers is very important. Therefore, seniorTrainers are brought together and cooperate with each other at local level in senior expertise teams. There, they exchange information and experience, develop new projects and jointly conduct public relations work.

Results

Within the Federal Model Programme a nationwide network of seniorTrainers and senior expertise teams was established in order to enable continuous exchange of experience and networking, e.g. by internet communication.

The central achievement of the concept lies in attracting older people, in training them, in their deployment as seniorTrainers and in setting up senior expertise teams. In total over 1.000 seniorTrainers launched over 4.000 volunteer projects in their local communities since 2002.

For four out of five seniorTrainers the transition to practice goes smoothly: following the training they start a specific activity as a seniorTrainer. On average, the seniorTrainers are actively involved for seven hours per week, mainly in social and educational work. Other activities concentrate on leisure groups, political involvement, involvement in the health sector and on work with children and young people. Many seniorTrainers are active in several roles at the same time. Initiating new projects and groups as well as supporting and advising existing organizations and initiatives are among the most frequently selected tasks. Their own experiences and skills acquired in the course prove to be very helpful in practice. Particularly good use can be made of their professional skills.

Bibliography

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