

Why Rotary needs young members and how to get them

I go to Rotary clubs, and I look at photos, and I think, “How did it happen that we don’t look like the young business people in Paul Harris’ first club?” says Rosemary Barker Aragon, regional Rotary International membership coordinator for Zone 23 (USA).

A recent study shows that most Rotarians are between the ages of 50 and 59. Rotarians under 40 make up only 11 percent of overall membership.

“If we don’t get enough young people into Rotary, then Rotary will die,” RI President Bill Boyd told the newest regional Rotary International membership coordinators (RRIMCs) at their training seminar in March. “We take young people and give them that Rotaract experience and then tell them, Go away — come back in 10 years.”

Youth program alumni rarely make the transition into Rotary, a pattern that many consider a missed opportunity. After all, participants in Interact, Rotaract, Rotary Youth Leadership Awards, Rotary Youth Exchange, and Group Study Exchange are selected because they represent the best of the best in their age group. Many are sponsored by Rotarians or The Rotary Foundation to travel abroad, where they learn about the organization and develop exceptional leadership skills. About 84 percent of current RI and Foundation educational program participants say they would like to join Rotary someday. Still, most of them are not invited to join.

“There are many clubs [in England] who say, ‘Why would they want to join us? We are not working, we’re older and set in our ways,’ rather than trying to make their club attractive to younger people,” says RRIMC **John Hockin**, of the Rotary Club of Woodhall Spa, England. And some Rotarians in Europe and Japan believe that young people don’t have enough professional experience to be Rotarians.

“There are clubs that say at age 25, you can’t be at the top,” says Argentine RRIMC **Modesta Genesisio de Stabio**, who hails from a region with a relatively high proportion of young Rotarians. “But you have to

know who are the young leaders in your community and invite them into Rotary.”

In 2001, the Rotary Club of Birigui, Brazil, did just that. After having little success recruiting younger people, the club’s members decided to establish a new club and looked to young community leaders to become its charter members.

Mauricio Barbeiro, a 28-year-old systems analyst, was courted because of his demonstrated leadership in Interact. “Today, we work in partnership with our founding club,” says Barbeiro of the new Birigui-Cidade Pérola club. “We can reach other levels in society by promoting something in places older people don’t go, like a dance club, for example. People in my city don’t relate Rotary to old people. They relate Rotary to service.”

Young professionals have become outstanding Rotarians

In other parts of the world, young professionals are actually reshaping the business landscape, which gives current Rotarians another incentive to recruit them. “In India, more and more youth are getting into business,” says **Ramachandran Ganapathi**, a member of the RI Membership Development and Retention Committee and the Rotary Club of Madras-T. Nagar, India. He notes that this trend, combined with the country’s rapid economic growth, means tomorrow’s leaders will be younger than ever before. “As the IT [information technology] sector booms, we try to make Rotary attractive to its leaders.”

Sam F. Owori, of the Rotary Club of Kampala, Uganda, says clubs in his district use Rotaract as a recruiting tool. “Many Rotaractors know more about Rotary than the Rotarians,” Owori says. Rotaractors around age 30 begin visiting Rotary clubs in their area to determine which one they would feel most comfortable joining. “They join [Rotaract] with their sights set on becoming Rotarians,” he says.

Although recruiting younger members is crucial to ensuring a strong future for Rotary, many RRIMCs point out that seasoned members are still the backbone of the organization. They bring both knowledge and resources to their clubs, and older members, especially retirees, often

have more time than younger members to devote to service projects, not to mention a wealth of business savvy to pass on.

Because demographics and cultural norms vary by region, there's no single best way to attract younger members. But if you're concerned about the future of Rotary in your area, take a look at your local business community and compare it with your club. Do they reflect the same picture? If not, raise the issue with club leadership for discussion. Your club might consider supporting one of Rotary's youth programs or keeping better tabs on youth program alumni for future recruitment. Also, stay aware of volunteer trends, and keep an eye on other organizations in your region. Is there a young professionals group that potential Rotarians flock to over your club?

Finally, try to picture your club 10 years from now. Who will be in charge? Will the club still be a pillar in your community? Get everyone involved in keeping your club relevant. After all, the next 100 years are up to you.