Virtual Volunteering:
Get Involved by Getting Online

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Technology has changed every facet of our lives. As soon as we incorporate a new gizmo or gadget into our computer system, it is already obsolete. The same goes for our thinking on how we use technology and how the computer can best serve our community. First, you no longer have to leave your house or office to get information, do your banking, go shopping, and communicate with others. People feel the need to connect with others, so much so that surfing the Internet is fast becoming the most popular hobby for all ages. For example my five-year-old son comes home from kindergarten and asks whether he can see his favorite characters on the computer. We are no longer isolated by geography, a telephone or even voice mail. We can do just about anything via the computer including helping others. Let's put this theory to practice.

A GROWING TREND

Volunteering as a concept has always been to call up an agency and ask whether you can help out. Historically, after being accepted as a volunteer you go to a site to do your volunteering. Now take this concept and consider using the computer as a way of volunteering. This new category of volunteering was not even imaginable a few years ago but has evolved as a direct result of computer technology and the need to interact in cyberspace. This is called "Virtual Volunteering." We can go one step further and consider the situation of a gentleman, no longer able to travel due to a disability, who would love to volunteer for you but cannot get to your location. He explains that he is computer literate and fully linked to the Internet and could do something via e-mail. Does this not create a whole new way of thinking of your traditional volunteer positions? Can we now incorporate volunteers who have special needs with

greater ease?

Technology provides an excellent opportunity to enhance a volunteer program, including recruitment, orientation, assignments and recognition. It allows people to volunteer who may not be able to participate in the traditional way. Online volunteering will never replace traditional volunteering but does provide some excellent ways of using people's skills while accommodating any special needs. Some people find it easier or more comfortable communicating via e-mail. For example, someone who has a speech impairment may have difficulty using the traditional lines of communications but would not have any issues with a computer. People who have concerns over being in public could feel comfortable with the anonymity of the computer. Basically, Virtual Volunteering could allow people to participate who may find on-site volunteering difficult. The main reason to consider Virtual Volunteering is that it is already happening.

A WORLD OF OPPORTUNITIES

Virtual Volunteering is an educational process, and in a constant state of change. Virtual Volunteering means that volunteer tasks can be completed in whole or part via the Internet and computer. It is also known as online volunteering, cyberservice, and telementoring to name a few. Many organizations are combining online volunteering with traditional on-site volunteering. For example, you could have a friendly visitor spend time with a homebound person once a week and have follow-up communication during that week via e-mail. Your agency could send out orientation packages via e-mail, submit progress reports, communicate with your volunteers while removing transportation barriers.

There are two main types of Virtual Volunteering.

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Technical Assistance:
- Online research
- Professional and consulting expertise
- Translating
- Designing marketing tools, databases
- Online outreach and advocacy
- Volunteer management assistance

Direct contact:
- Electronic visits with someone who is homebound
- Online mentoring
- Tutoring
- Chat rooms
- Phone support network
- Distance learning
- Writing articles
- Linking volunteers from different agencies for support

FIRST STEPS

There are a few basic points to consider when coming up with assignments. You need to evaluate the task primarily by qualitative results. The assignment should not involve high security measures. The project must require a computer and should be focussed on an individual rather than a team approach.

For the first time we have a powerful tool to include people with special needs. For many years we have made people with hearing disabilities accessible in cyberspace with TTY. Most of the obstacles of disabilities can be in the attitude of others and not considering job descriptions prior to even recruiting volunteers. Everyone should have the right to volunteer. Anyone who can make a contribution should be able to volunteer and be encouraged to do so. Diversity provides a rich resource that can be used in many ways to accurately reflect the community that you serve.

Those interested in virtual volunteering need to have computer accessibility as well as the appropriate technical support based on their need for accommodation. The cost and availability of hardware for the computer is a temporary problem. There are many Internet companies and nonprofit agencies that have free e-mail access. The public library has computers that allow their patrons to go

online free, colleges and universities have accessibility, some nonprofit agencies may have computers available for their clients. The future holds the integration of telephone, television and Internet technology. Linda Graff in *By Definition* (1955, p. 44) states, "Attempts are being made to integrate various 'special needs' populations in volunteering. This trend is a function of at least two movements:
a) Organizations attempting to be truly representative of their communities and consumers
b) Integration of various populations in mainstream community life."

There are many vocational rehabilitation programs and other nonprofit agencies that are looking at integration through a variety of programs. Some agencies that may be of service are Canadian Institute for the Blind, March of Dimes; Job Accommodation Network, rehabilitation hospitals, and Human Resource and Skills Development Canada. Another organization involved in Virtual Volunteering is Impact Online: its Web site lists volunteer positions that can be done online, as well as other information regarding Virtual Volunteering.

Before looking at Virtual Volunteering you need to assess the volunteers' capabilities to use a computer, look at the agency they are going to support, and access the types of accommodations necessary to do the job required. A volunteer's disability should only be considered in the context of deciding what accommodations will work. There are many options such as web browsers that read aloud what's on a web page, web pages that have been simplified. Augmentative communication devices enable those who cannot speak to use touch- or light-activated keyboards linked to synthetic speech systems. Screen reading programs and screen magnification systems are available for those with low vision. Braille computer systems are available as well as Braille software translators and embossers that enable users to print documents from the PC. Many adaptations are available to assist those with impaired mobility use the computer. For many people, speech, language and learning impairments

are a barrier to volunteering. Computer programs have been designed to improve speech and language capabilities of those who need assistance. Among those adaptations are vehicles for speech therapy and word prediction software programs.

THE FUTURE OF VOLUNTEERING

It is important to understand that the technology for the computer user is enlarging everyday, new opportunities for accommodating users such as students will eventually reach out to all facets of the community. For example, a university student who has used assistive devices for education will use those technologies to support their work environment as well as their community involvement.

Virtual Volunteering is a collaborative process including agency staff, board of directors, vocational and rehabilitation counselors, and the volunteer, all working together. Virtual Volunteering has little to do with technology and everything to do with people.

In summary, it is important to realize that Virtual Volunteering is a growing field. Technology, community involvement, education, just to name a few are constantly changing. The growth of all these industries is rapid, and our way of thinking of the traditional volunteer needs to shift with the times. Virtual Volunteering can extend the resources of many agencies by enlisting help from people who otherwise could not help. Prepare a written plan, redesign a position description, start talking to staff about the potential for Virtual Volunteering and get other community resources involved. To use the phrase "thinking outside the box," Virtual Volunteering is a perfect opportunity to get involved by adding a new dimension to volunteer programs.

RESOURCES

Graff, L. (1995). *By definition: Policies for volunteer programs.* Dundas, Ontario, Canada: Graff and Associates.

Impact Online [www.impactonline.com]

Virtual Volunteering Project [www.serviceleader.org/vv]

JANCANA [http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu/english/homecan.htm]