

Resources, thoughts, and inspiration for– and by– non-profits

How To: Initiate a Project by Self-Directed Volunteers

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The self-directed (or self-led) volunteer is similar to a virtual volunteer in that his or her tasks are accomplished outside of the office. The difference is that a self-directed volunteer accomplishes his or her task *independently* of your organization. The *Lead – A Get HandsOn! Summit* in Washington D.C., sponsored by the HandsOn Network and University of Phoenix, introduced the idea of the self-directed volunteer and discussed how they can advance the social cause through innovation. Susan J. Ellis, of *EnergizeInc*, defined this type of volunteer as someone who:

- Sees a need or learns about a project

- Gets resources that are usually online with instructions, suggestions, and other material in order to take action

- Takes action to do the suggested activity on his or her own time, in his or her own way, for recipients she or he selects

A variety of community needs can be tackled through this approach. The goal is to mobilize volunteers by spreading the word through web-based tools like social media.

Self-directed volunteering is dependent on the capacity of the Web to reach hundreds of people (both those needing help and those willing to volunteer) quickly and at no cost, and to disseminate the necessary resources electronically. A key to this approach is to work through organizations that already have established relationships with prospective volunteers and with the people who need help. This type of volunteering is very effective because it puts your organization “out there” in the public eye and is able to efficiently organize community members. However, self-directed volunteers are not without their problems. Because they are rarely registered as “volunteers”, reporting may be difficult.

The role of agencies like yours is to initiate projects by publicizing the need, providing clear and useful resources, and loosely monitoring the impact of the volunteer work:

1. Address a widespread, evident need and offer defined work that has meaning
1. Suggest a helpful activity that is doable without special training or that can be accomplished by following instructions as provided
2. Provide the tools that are necessary to the volunteers so that the volunteering is done as properly as possible
3. Match volunteers to the people needing the services through already-established relationships in the community