Turning a Gift into a Powerful Tool: The Internet-related's Impact on the Volunteer Field

By **Susan J. Ellis**

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The volunteer world has been given a gift – unexpected but extraordinary. The gift is the Internet. Some of us have eagerly ripped open the wrapping and have been playing (quite seriously) with all the possibilities of this present. Some have taken everything out of the box and are still trying to assemble the pieces, finding the instructions hard to interpret. Others are admiring the package but haven't quite brought themselves to pull on the bow and look inside. And still others, possibly warned to be wary of gifts from strangers (or feeling burned after an unsuccessful start a few years ago when the technology was much slower and cumbersome), are refusing delivery completely.

Before I wear out this metaphor, let me explain why I'm so certain we should all be grateful for the introduction of cyberspace, and most especially the World Wide Web (introduced in 1991 and truly of value only in the past eight years or so), as a resource for our field. Think about a few key problems volunteerism has always faced and how the Internet offers new solutions (at least potentially):

- **Lack of money**

  In the past, underfunding was a major obstacle to professional development, both limited volunteer program budgets and low salaries for practitioners. We always had the excuse of "we can't afford that," whether the item in question was a book, a workshop fee, or conference travel expenses. The Internet has given us FREE resources beyond our wildest imaginations.

  Web sites are hardly no-cost to those who create them, but site visitors rarely pay anything for literally a world of information at their fingertips. When there is a charge, the costs are always substantially lower for electronic resources than for traditional ones, whether the savings come from not having to print an actual book or circumventing travel and hotel expenses. (This is why Energize has transformed its Online Bookstore to offer electronic publications.)

Without having to spend any money, practitioners can use the Web to recruit volunteers (free postings on directories of volunteer opportunities are available in dozens of countries now), engage in all sorts of information exchanges with colleagues, find materials to share in volunteer training sessions, and grow professionally and personally. Similarly, our field's professional associations can now communicate with members at will, provide a wide array of "benefits" online, and advertise their conferences much more widely – without raising dues.

- **Lack of visibility and lack of information**

  The work contributed by volunteers and by volunteer program managers has too often been invisible. In the past, we have had to hope (or agitate) for inclusion of volunteer-related thinking and decision making in such things as government legislation, academic programs teaching about philanthropy or nonprofit management, grant proposal requirements for foundations and other funders, mass media publicity, etc. It also took a great deal of recruitment effort to make the public aware of volunteer opportunities.

  Times have changed! I just did four "searches" on Google, and found the following number of items on the Web for these topics:

  Volunteer: **8,770,000** (found in **0.23** seconds!)
  Volunteer Management: **1,940,000.**
  Volunteer Administration: **1,310,000**
  Volunteerism: **272,000**
  Even allowing for a goodly number of extraneous references, anyone asking a volunteer-related question today can find at least some information. And the better you are at using search engines such as Google, the more possible it is to find both generic and setting-specific answers or suggestions.

- **Isolation of practitioners**

  We all know that one of the challenges of this profession is being the only person on staff designated to coordinate volunteers. A publishing house once described volunteerism to me as being a field exceptionally broad and incredibly thin! Volunteers are everywhere, but the people who are concerned with leading them are few and scattered under different job titles. This was also the perennial problem for individuals entering the field: How to find colleagues? The Web has given us online discussion groups, places to post questions and give answers, chances to exchange information on job openings, and calendars of volunteerism training events. Sites can be local, national or international. No matter where you are physically, you are not alone in cyberspace.

Still Underutilized

The trouble is that we are not yet grabbing the potential of the Internet to transform our work and our profession. For every colleague active online there are dozens limiting their involvement to e-mail only. For every posting to a listserv or online discussion there are literally hundreds of "lurkers" who are not participating fully. As one example, the dialogue that occurs in response to my monthly

Hot Topic is often provocative and always interesting. But even the hottest of the topics rarely elicits even twenty postings. Yet we know from our Web records that upwards of 500 people visit the Hot Topic page EVERY DAY! That's phenomenal but disturbing. Why do so few of our colleagues join in the discussion? The same question applies to CyberVPM, UKVPMs, OzVPM, and any other listserv in our field.

The Internet offers us a level playing field with other professions and with everyone we have always wanted to "reach." It gives us a voice, individually and collectively. The power is there to use, but for the most part we are not taking advantage of it. Why? Is it technophobia? Is it due to overwork and too little time? Is it disinterest? We must find some way to bridge our field's own "digital divide."

In the United States, the most useful Web sites right now are those produced by consultants (and, yes, I include the Energize site as one example). Our professional organizations have improved their sites over the past two years, but still have not grasped the significance of the medium. This is NOT a matter of money! Paying a competent Webmaster with technical know-how to design a site is the least important part of the process. What's most important is having a vision for the site: whom does it serve (there are both internal and external audiences to consider) and what do these audiences need to know?

Let me offer this list of ways each of us can make use of the gift of the Internet:

- Recruit volunteers as "cyber deputies" both to teach our organizations (and us personally) how to use the Internet well and to spend time doing the online research necessary to tap all the resources.
- Maximize all the free ways you can post volunteer opportunities, advertise a conference, and do other outreach online.
- Sign up for one or more of the many listservs in the field (see /directory/onlinec/discussion) and CONTRIBUTE at least occasionally.
- Make sure you are taking advantage of your organization's own Web site (see my Hot Topic from 2000 on this subject, /hot-topics/2000/august) to publicize the work of volunteers well.
- Share materials. Today all written work is done by computer. If you have a word processing document, you can turn it into a Web page with almost no effort. Here's one way that DOVIAs and other local associations can help members to help each other: post sample volunteer application forms, handbooks, evaluation surveys, etc.
- Find and bookmark sites that are worth re-visiting for updated information.
- Copy and distribute this Hot Topic to your own network (on paper, if you have to) and challenge the hold-outs.

We simply must overcome any fears and dislikes and learn this technology! Of course I'm preaching to the choir in this forum, right? You are obviously already online! So the questions this month are:

1. How do you see the Internet transforming our field? (If you see some negative effects, please share those, too.)
2. What ways have you found to make the most of what's available online?
3. Why do you think so many volunteerism practitioners are still not making use of cyberspace? What can we do to convince reluctant colleagues to log on?

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Submitted on January 15, 2007 by Carl Bromley, Volunteer & Entrepreneur, Armstrong HFH and Local4All.com, Kittanning, PA USA
Kudos for this article. Several years ago I put together a website to help more volunteers and volunteer coordinators self-publish on the Internet (local4all.com). Without the 'event page' for the Crooked Creek Triathlon (cc.local4all.com), I wouldn't be able to be their volunteer race director because there are so many questions that athletes have. The power of the internet for me is to LEVERAGE my time... answers to questions can be TYPED once and available to all.

Susan, thanks for all your informative articles.

Submitted on 15 July 2005 by Julie Brunette, Church, Volunteer, St. Louis/MO USA
I was encouraged and inspired to use the Internet more effectively after reading the article. When I read the questions at the end of the article however, it was clear to me that I haven't used the Internet much up to this point because the personal touch is missing. In my experience, the personal touch is a huge part of the package.

Submitted on 31July2003 by Tawanna Ward, Manager, Volunteer Services, SEM Chapter, American Red Cross, Detroit, MI, USA

At first people refuse to believe that a strange new thing can be done, then they begin to hope that it can be done, then they see that it can be done--then it is done and all the world wonders why it was not done centuries ago.--Francis Hodgson Burnett
This quote reminds me of the evolutionary use of the Internet to support our volunteer programs. The Internet transforms how we do business & links us to opportunities to harness the power availed to us through this communication medium.

One of the barriers discussed has been how our supervisors value our time on the Internet. This can definitely be a barrier to exploring online opportunities. Executive management buy-in is important and comes through continuous education, powerful praise and progress reports on the benefits of using the Internet. One way to break down that barrier is communicate the value of our time online and the link it has to our mission goals & financial bottom line. Some examples would be postage, printing and collaborating time saved, the ability to do more in less time translating into more service for the same dollar, etc.

I am a big proponent of using the Internet to strengthen our service to the community and support our volunteer programs. This is a great topic!

Submitted on 30July2003 by Karen Clark, Volunteer Coordinator, P.O.W.E.R., Pennsylvania, USA
I have a couple thoughts about why volunteer coordinators may not be taking full advantage of the Internet. People in our field obviously like to work with people. They may be tempted to think of themselves as "people" people who are on the opposite side of a dichotomy from "technology" people. That thought can sabotage self-confidence in their computer abilities.

Non-profit budgets may also contribute to the problem. When I took this position I worked one year before my computer was put online. Now I share a line with a co-worker, so we both can't be online at the same time, and we also can't stay online when we're not using it because that would prevent the other person from getting on. Waiting to get online for each use can take up a lot of time.

My own personal experience was my daughter was born in 1991. While I was home raising her, the use of computers was booming and I was growing more and more intimidated because I was getting no computer experience. When I went back to work I was pessimistic about my computer abilities, but once I started using my computer it got easier and easier. I was at a volunteer conference this month at which Susan Ellis spoke. Her presentation was so good that I was sorry I'd missed a workshop she'd done earlier about the Internet. But now I've found her website and her essay on this topic as well as many more--and now this once-isolated volunteer coordinator is reading messages from counterparts around the world--it's VERY exciting.

Submitted on 15July2003 by Joyce Conner, Consultant, Ohio USA
Although I am now retired, I still like to keep in touch with my profession that I love and the Internet allows me to do that. I do a little consulting and serve on volunteer boards and committees so I think it is imperative for me to keep up-to-date with current issues and the latest trends in our field. Before the Internet, I subscribed to newsletters and magazines and read books. I feel these are still valuable, as well as personal interaction through local networking groups and attending workshops and conferences--but the Internet is instant--and that is exciting.

Although I enjoy reading the comments of others, I don't often post because someone has already stated my thoughts and I hesitate to repeat. Maybe others feel the same way.

Submitted on 10July2003 anonymously
As soon as I got Internet access at work I was on it. I downloaded copious amounts of materials, collected website addresses, and made use of graphics. I have on a limited basis posted some volunteer opportunities. And I have loved how easily it is to access information this way. It saves precious training dollars and it is a fun way to access information. I am in the process of updating our own webpage to make it more user friendly and interactive. I am looking forward to using our site this way. And I am always amazed at how many inquiries I get through Workopolis. While I am still not

what I would consider computer savvy, I find the Internet has boosted my confidence in using the computer.

Submitted on 8July2003 by Karen Payne, Program Coordinator, CASA, Utah USA
I manage a volunteer-only program in rural central Utah. The resources available to me on the Internet have mostly been educational--and they have been invaluable!

The budget for my program is woefully small, making trips to many seminars and conferences impossible. In the "old days," that would mean that I would be late getting industry news and access to volunteerism resources. With the Web at my disposal, I am able to read or research most anything I need/want to as it fits my situation or available time.

I am a more effective, informed manager because of the Internet, and encourage anyone who has not tried it to be brave, jump in and "Just do it!"

Submitted on 7July2003 by Sam Elliston, President, Elliston Enterprises, Ohio, USA
What an interesting topic. I guess I am one who has usually voiced an opinion on a hot topic but when I didn't, it was usually because I worried about the leadership of my organization wondering why I was "wasting" my time. At the same time, for the last six months at the Volunteer Center, I managed the development of our matching data base on Volunteer Connections.org so I was teaching agencies how to recruit over the internet every day.

As a consultant in Volunteer Program Management, on my own, now, I budget time to read the different sites and feel the internet is the best way I can stay up-to-date with the field.

I love the opportunity to visit with colleagues around the world and I learn from them all.

My hunch is that the organizations still learning to use the internet have management who is still worrying about the "time it takes away from the job" the internet will require; not seeing that the internet connections ARE very much now part of the job.

Submitted on 4July2003 by Dawn Lasby, Manager, Volunteer Services, Volunteer Calgary, Calgary, AB
Technology, from a Volunteer Centre's perspective is the most important tool we use to effectively promote over 1,000 volunteer opportunities for people in the city of Calgary. In a recent summary report created on our website, www.volunteercalgary.ab.ca, we were able to track which pages of our web that were viewed more frequently than others. Although we have over 800 pages on our website to view, the section on volunteering/ volunteer opportunities accounted for 75% of all pages viewed!

Last month, Volunteer Calgary was able to collect and share what others have learned with our member organizations by hosting a Recruitment Day with the focus on technology. One of the main points that came across to participants was the need to promote volunteer programs on our own websites, even on the home page, to make it easy for people to find out how to volunteer in an

organization. Those organizations that have on-line application forms, job descriptions, links to other websites, success stories and photos of their own volunteers attract more volunteers with higher level, technological skills. This is what we need to continue to attract leadership volunteers that will assist us in achieving our goals, our mission, and plan for succession.

Submitted on 3July2003 by Caroline Buchanan, Director of Volunteer Services, Dallas Retirement Village, Dallas, Oregon USA

The use of the Internet for our long term health care facility's volunteer program is in its infant stages. The facility has a webpage (dallasretirementvillage.com) and volunteers may contact me in that way, but we have not utilized it fully with information/opportunities (yet.) We utilize VolunteerMatch.com and it has opened up the possibilities for even little things like "Virtual Penpals" to encourage our seniors. Believe it or not, the supply exceeded the demand on that opportunity!

I agree that the information is there on the Web and it's exciting! I still feel I need to somehow justify the time spent on the computer, so there is somewhat of an evolution of thinking that needs to take place where we realize that the time is spent well, either for education or for actual recruiting. The ways I have saved $$$$ is ordering clearance supplies online, sending e-cards for volunteer birthdays, sending quarterly newsletters via e-mail attachment and submitting press releases to the local newspaper online.

E-mail definitely beats the telephone in scheduling, recruiting and simple thank you's. I also utilize a volunteer in his home to handle e-mail to residents from family or virtual penpal communications. He prints the notes, hand delivers and often reads them to the residents.

Submitted on 3July2003 by Therese Caldwell, Volunteer Services Liaison, North Kitsap School District, Washington State, USA

Our school district is actively working to make our web site extremely user-friendly. After a lot of discussion, our community relations coordinator is now responsible for content and our technology department is in charge of implementation, troubleshooting, training personnel on how to properly create content, etc.

This summer, we have one of our talented students working to revamp the district website so that we are making full use of this valuable resource. An ongoing challenge will be to make sure that all of our schools have quality sites that are kept up-to-date.

All staff have the opportunity to take a Front Page class (at no charge) so that they know how to create and maintain their own pages. I'll be taking it as a refresher as well. The possibilities for volunteer recruitment are endless and with a more attractive and understandable layout, we will all feel more comfortable referring the public to our web site. It's interesting that it has taken us this long to finally give this tool the priority it warrants!

Submitted on 3July2003 by Nancy Hughes, VON Durham Region Branch, Ontario, Canada

All I can say is- if you are not using the internet to promote your program- GET WITH IT!!! There is no better way to reach people that through plastering your program information on anybody that will take you! I presently have our volunteer programs listed on over twenty sites, and I am always looking for more to list on. Some people are not internet friendly yet - you need to take some courses and start learning your way around this valuable tool.

Submitted on 3July2003 by Carol Dunn, Volunteer Coordinator/ Boise Rescue Mission Ministries, Idaho/USA

Since we have gained access to the Internet and e-mail, we are able to list opportunities on various websites and thus have tremendously increased the volunteer database. It also makes it so much easier to contact volunteers without the phone tag and more and more volunteers are being plugged in. We are now exploring some virtual volunteer opportunities that will be beneficial to us. I love being able to network with other missions/agencies and able to avail ourselves of the extensive information out there including this site. To those who are nervous I'd love to help them not be so nervous about joining the web.

Submitted on 3July2003 by Nancy Thompson, Volunteer Memphis, Tennessee, USA

We have experienced most of the range of online participation, although we have sometimes been timid about going even further in cyberspace. We are learning constantly (often from our youngest staff members!), and trying to take advantage of all that the Internet has to offer. Fortunately, we have a supportive Board that understands the value of providing us with adequate technology.

One source of frustration for us remains the lack of basic email capability among some of the nonprofit agencies we work with. We try constantly to update our records to include email addresses for all the agencies we serve, yet about 10%-15% of them tell us they have no email capability. I'm not sure whether this is primarily a budgetary issue or a case of techno-phobia, but I'm afraid that those who resist or don't budget for basic technology are falling so far behind the field that they will find it increasingly difficult to catch up -- and besides, they are missing out on some of the best services we can provide them! Have others found widespread lack of email capacity? Have you been able to persuade colleagues of its importance?

Submitted on 3July2003 by Miriam Leslie, Volunteer Coordinator, Alberta, Canada

What a wonderful response to this month's Hot Topic! :)

Our organization has experienced increased contacts for prospective volunteers since we availed ourselves of free space on our local University's "Volunteer!" website and through some other agencies that also offer the same.

I love working with the Internet and appreciate the available resources for research and keeping current. Also, the reminder that I am not alone is a huge motivator!!

The only drawback I see with contacting "virtual" volunteers is sometimes I feel I send too many calls for help and wonder if they ignore some messages because they hear from me too often?? Of course, I work to balance that with cheerful words of thanks and personal appreciation--just in case!

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Submitted on 3July2003 by Susan Peacock Reehl, WestArk RSVP Program Director, Arkansas, USA
I direct an RSVP program in Western Arkansas and we have had wonderful response to our use of the Internet. Our web site (which cost $1200, two years ago) receives over 200 hits per month and has the capability to be updated any time we wish by our staff. Over a quarter of our senior volunteers have e-mail and the number grows every day. This allows us to recruit for last minute volunteer requests without making hundreds of phone calls - plus it is a more complete way to explain a volunteer opportunity. While a printed newsletter remains our primary communication tool - e-mail gives us expanded opportunities between our every other month publication dates. Cost savings have been significant - phone costs and postage expense are down more than 50%.

Submitted on 3July2003 by Marsha Cooley, Volunteer Services Coordinator, United Way of Saginaw County Community Volunteer Services, Michigan
As a "reluctant colleague", this is my first experience in discussion participation. In reading this hot topic, the line about the Internet offering us a level playing field and giving us a voice individually & collectively made an impact on me. I have never been one to express my opinion easily, in person or otherwise, but this article made me see that I am truly "missing the boat" on this one. With limited resources (financially and materially) I need to make the most of everything that is offered and available that will assist me in coordinating and managing volunteers and programs. Thank you and I will join in more often (so far relatively painless!).

Submitted on 3 July2003 by Wanda Llewellyn, O'Bleness Memorial Hospital, Ohio
I agree wholeheartedly that we need to utilize the Internet as much as possible. Although we are a rural, community hospital of only 114 beds, our organization's website provides volunteer

information and we receive application via e-mail. The majority of e-mail applications come from college students. I expect the number to increase as we baby-boomers become available. I know that when I retire, I'll be checking the Internet wherever I may be.

Submitted on 3July2003 by Gail Orser, Prayer Department Manager, Guideposts, New York
The Internet is an important part of our volunteer effort. We now have over 350 Web volunteers. Our volunteers log into a secure area of our website and pray for the over 21,000 prayer requests we receive each month. The growth in our ministry has been phenomenal because of this technology. In 4 years we have almost doubled the number of prayer requests we are receiving and praying for by name and need. We receive prayer requests via the mail, phone and web. In terms of web requests, we are now receiving 6 times the number we received via the web in 2000.

Recruitment on the web has also been phenomenal. When we put our volunteer application on our website we were deluged with responses. We now receive about 30 applications a month. This has allowed us to expand our number of volunteers, as our number of prayer requests has grown.

Submitted on 2July2003 by Hillary Roberts, President/Project Linus NJ, Inc. NJ/USA
Great topic! From day one, Project Linus NJ embraced the Internet! We quickly learned about recruiting online, developed our website, and virtual volunteer power became a reality. E-group and email enhanced our communication efforts -- press releases, e-news, publicity, recipient coordination, npo interaction all grew and grew quickly with this low-cost and user-friendly "gift." As a 100% volunteer organization the Internet means expansion, lightning fast response to daily questions and the ability to learn, share and grow from wonderful npo's out there! We're paying attention to all of you...how each utilizes the tools & resources...and we're receiving a valuable education! Nearly five years later, we have recruited a cyberscout volunteer, an ebay charity site coordinator and a video conferencing partner as a result.

On a more serious note..the Internet has been a godsend for volunteers who want to plug in and make a contribution but for a variety of reasons are homebound. The Internet clearly opens the door to this group of community minded citizens...a very "good thing."

Human interaction will always run the company and propell our mission. The Internet is one tool that has provided our organization the means to reach more than 15,000 children in nearly five years!

Submitted on 2July2003 by Rob Jackson, Volunteering Development Manager, RNIB, London, England
I feel one of the most powerful ways the Internet is and will be transforming our field is to level it. There are fewer barriers online.

Working in a disability organisation I am all to aware of how disabilities can become less of an issue online. I would very much encourage people reading this to look at their web presence and take simple steps to make it more accessible. Use plain text in emails and visit sites like

http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public_webdesign.hcsp for information on accessible web design.

The other levelling related to online volunteering and the dismantling of time barriers. Instead of only getting work done between 9am and 5pm (I wish!) we can now get volunteers on the other side of the world to undertake work when we are asleep. When you come into work in the morning that work in your inbox waiting for you. I find this exciting and truly mind-blowing in terms of its potential for volunteerism.

My first tip to making the most of what is available online is to find a handful of sites that you know are most relevant for you and to visit them regularly. Make sure one of them is some kind of international hub (like Energize) where you can hook into the best resources from overseas as well as from your home country.

My second tip is to make sure you don't join too many listservs. Swimming in emails is not a pleasant experience and many listservs cross post between each other so you find messages from OzVPM on UKVPMs etc.

Submitted on 1July2003 by Andy Fryar, ozvpm.com, Australia
Living in Australia, I can vouch for the professional development benefits of the internet 100%, and it still amazes me that I can (and do)have daily 'e-dialogue' with colleagues from right around the world --- all from the luxury of my own desk!

Here's an interesting observation that I've made that I'd like to share.

From an Australian perspective, I can safely say that a decade ago, volunteer program management in Australia was probably 10 years 'behind' North America (or at least that is the way it 'felt' at that time).

Five years ago I would have said we believed we were five years behind the USA and Canada, whereas today, I believe we are no longer 'behind' at all!

I attribute this largely to the advances, information and networking opportunities we have been able to gain using the technology of the www.
If you consider the infancy of this technology it is just so exciting ...because the best is yet to come!

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