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Incorporate the Power of Live Web Calls into Volunteer Management

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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March brings Energize's 39th anniversary, which is hard for me to believe. So much has happened in the world and in volunteering since 1977, when my sole piece of state-of-the-art equipment was a brand-new IBM Selectric typewriter (see photo, for those who don't remember it). I doubt anyone would disagree that the most profound change since then has been the introduction of computers for individual use, followed by the invention of the World Wide Web and then smartphone technology that puts a powerful computer with Internet access into the palm of our hands. This technology has led to entirely new ways of volunteering virtually and new tools for volunteer management, such as online registries of volunteer opportunities in dozens of countries (like [VolunteerMatch](#)). In [The Last Virtual Volunteering Guidebook](#), Jayne Cravens and I offer a comprehensive look at how electronic, global communication and access to information has become integral to every volunteer initiative.



Yet, from my observations, most leaders of volunteers have not yet embraced the enormous potential of technology. In this Hot Topic, I want to discuss the amazing opportunities that VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) platforms offer for a wide range of volunteer management needs. Once only imagined through the wrist watch of the Dick Tracy comic strip, today face-to-face, real-time audiovisual conversations are both commonplace and **free**. Even a decade ago, only big corporations and universities had video transmission capabilities, often requiring satellite access and costing thousands of dollars for only a few minutes of air time. Today, Skype, Google Hangouts, and other similar platforms require nothing more than a webcam and microphone (on both sides of the call) to link people across the world in no-cost conversation.

I'll bet that the vast majority of you reading this have used Skype or another service to "visit" online with a friend or family member, particularly if they are a distance away. You may already use this

method to interview prospective volunteers or to interact with volunteers who work remotely. Have you considered Skype as a method of bringing expertise to your organization?

Skype as a Training and Consultation Tool

Something that hasn't changed in 39 years is lack of funding for all the things a volunteer effort needs, including support for the professional development of volunteer resources managers. Over and over I've been told that there's not enough money to bring in an outside speaker to a workshop or pay for consultation with an expert. Programs such as Skype completely turn that argument on its head and open – literally – the whole world to each and every group of volunteers or VRMs.

Using myself as an example, if you invite me to do a presentation to your group, I have to charge you for my time preparing, presenting, and traveling to and from your site. And you will need to reimburse me for airfare or mileage, a hotel room, meals, and all other expenses involved in making the trip to your city from Philadelphia. The travel costs also make it almost impossible to ask me to help you for a less than a day, since I'd incur the same expenses for just a one-hour meeting.

Inviting me to join your session via Skype immediately eliminates all the travel costs. And I can charge you simply for planning and presentation time. This makes my participation as a guest speaker wonderfully affordable (and much less time-consuming and physically stressful for me). It also means that suddenly the location of your desired speaker is irrelevant. Now you can invite someone from Sydney or Anchorage or Helsinki and still pay only for the time needed.

There's even more potential, too. Anyone you invite to speak on-site, even someone right in your own community, needs to give up at least a half-day of other work to get to your venue, present, chat informally, and travel back to his or her office. With Skype, you can tell your local expert or celebrity, "we'd love you to join us remotely for 30 minutes" – and mean it. Odds are you'll get a lot more positive responses to your invitations.

Stop and think for a moment who might add value to a volunteer training session or the next meeting of your professional network of volunteer managers. Elected officials? Key department heads in your institution? Representative clients? People who work in similar settings in other parts of the country or world? University professors who have researched a topic relevant to you? Book authors? The sky's the limit.

Different from a Webinar

We have all experienced webinars and know they can be useful learning forums, but they often are highly scripted, present slides without live video of the speaker, and field questions through tiny chat boxes. A live Skype call is much more like a face-to-face visit. As a speaker, I love seeing my audience and being able to interact directly with individuals. Below is a very short recording I just made to give you a feel of what I mean.



Very little equipment is needed to use Skype well. Both sides need an Internet-connected computer, of course, and working webcams, microphones and speakers. The outside expert doesn't need much else, but the site hosting the participants can project the live video onto a larger screen using the same LCD projector used to show PowerPoint® slides. The trainer can use the "share screen" function to show slides or anything else directly from her or his computer screen to the audience. And you can have more than one remote participant on the same call.

If your organization has some (unreasonable) rule against using Skype on its computer network, bypass the system by using someone's laptop. If you don't feel comfortable setting up all the equipment, find a volunteer who does. Do a very quick test-run with your guest speaker the day before.

Be Creative

I really want to hear from you how you are using VoIP technology with volunteers and your colleagues now. The possibilities are endless. Here are just a few ideas:

- If you had someone speak to your group live to present a longer workshop session, do a follow-up Skype visit a few months later to discuss progress or to ask questions that have surfaced while practicing the new learning.
- Invite clients to interact with new volunteers by Skype during an orientation session, sharing their stories and answering questions to help volunteers understand the issues the clients face.
- Include a short Skype visit in your next board of directors meeting with someone who can explain a fundraising idea, legal obstacle, or new legislative issues relevant to strategic planning.
- Think *consultation*, not just training. It's quite feasible to have an expert give some advice to a committee or small group by remote access – and you don't even need projection equipment.

Put a laptop on the table and, if necessary, ask someone to move it as different people speak so the person online can see as well as hear.

- Connect two groups of volunteers from different organizations who share the same types of clients (homeless children; family members caring for someone with Alzheimer's; whatever) to have a discussion about their work and share tips.
- Help a staff member or volunteer practice conversational Spanish or Chinese or another language through 30-minute "immersion" calls with a willing volunteer tutor.
- Permit anyone who cannot attend an on-site meeting to join in via Skype or Google Hangouts.

So...what do you do already with this incredible technology? What works and what doesn't? Please share!

Related Topics: [Social Media and Internet Technology](#) | [Training](#) | [Virtual Volunteering](#)

Comments from Readers

Submitted on March 4th, 2016

William Henry, Executive Director, Volunteers Insurance Service Association, Woodbridge, VA, USA

Thanks for this topic, Susan. I've done both Skype sessions and Webinars on volunteer risk management, at the invitation of groups it would not be practical to visit in person. It really is a great way to communicate and learn, without using resources the organization needs for its operations.

Submitted on March 4th, 2016

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

Thanks for the testimonial, Bill! Maybe if enough of us speakers share how much we like this, people will believe us! :-)

-- Susan

Submitted on March 7th, 2016

Dinie, EABCT, Utrecht, Netherlands

Hi Susan,

I regularly do videoconferences with our international board.

My experience is that the Skype connection is not always working okay. Especially on Sunday meetings it is very busy on Skype and the connections are really bad.

That is why we use a professional videoconference programme with a broader bandwidth.

Best
dinie

Submitted on March 7th, 2016

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

Thank you, Dinie, for noting something I should have mentioned, too. You are right that the various free services occasionally have connection problems which can be due to many factors -- the capability (and age) of all the computers involved, the speed of Internet service, whether people are connecting by wireless rather than cable (the latter is best), time of day, etc. Also, the number of people on the call, at different locations, is another consideration. It therefore sounds that -- if you are convening many individuals from around the world -- going the professional conferencing route (paid) is smart for something as important as a legal board meeting.

However, I still urge all readers to **try** Skype or other free platforms for the many, many situations in which all that's needed is inviting ONE person remotely, while everyone else is on-site in a meeting room. This limits all the variables greatly. And given that many of things I suggest in this Hot Topic are reasonably informal, some connection distractions can be overlooked in light of this no-cost way to invite anyone, anywhere in the world, into your midst virtually!

Submitted on March 16th, 2016

Nancy, Historic Site Coordinator, Preservation Virginia, Virginia Beach, Virginia, USA

Hi Susan,

I enjoyed your informative post about incorporating technology in volunteer management. Having started in television production in 1985, I can relate to the changes in equipment. The most interesting part of this post is the advice on how to use Skype for volunteer management. Thank you for the creative ideas.

Submitted on March 29th, 2016

Molly Aldrich, Director of Volunteer Services, South Portland School Department, South Portland, Maine, US

Susan- thank you for joining us at our VAMM Conference. It would have been great to have you here in person, but this was a wonderful alternative.

Submitted on March 29th, 2016

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, United States

Thanks, Molly! I enjoyed it, too. Skype is so amazing. I was able to see most of the 75 people in the room. It was helpful to have one person stationed at the laptop in front to repeat questions from further back so I could hear them. Hope the rest of the day kept up the momentum.

Best,

Susan

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