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Volunteerism in Cyberspace

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As little as five years ago, even those of us with vivid imaginations could not have conceived of the phenomenon of the World Wide Web and how rapidly cyberspace would become a global arena. Further, since volunteerism has not been particularly well known for its technological savvy (many volunteer program managers still do not have computerized databases for even simple volunteer tracking), who would have expected our field to embrace Internet technology with enthusiasm? Yet this is what has happened.

The power of the Web is its instant accessibility to anyone, anywhere, with the equipment to go online. This means that it does not matter where a useful Web site originates. Once it is posted to the Web, it transcends geography and even cost. We'll never go back--and who knows where this technology may take us once audio and soon video transmissions become clear and commonplace, as well?

Here is a quick outline of the ways in which the Web is being used to support volunteerism in the US. Please bear in mind, however, that cyberspace is an evolving medium and Web addresses come and go. If something printed here is not accessible, try another site. Most of the sites link to others anyway, so you will find additional places of interest once you connect to even a few of these major sites.

ONLINE RECRUITING

American volunteer managers have seen a proliferation of sites all claiming to be "the" database of volunteer opportunities. Designed to attract individuals, these sites urge interested people to enter their interests and zip code (for geographic location) and instantly respond with a list of available volunteer positions. The efficacy of the system is based on whether or not volunteer program managers submit timely information as to their openings, and then keep the information updated. Among the most active are:

VolunteerMatch, www.volunteermatch.org
Action without Borders, www.idealists.org
Youth Service America, www.servenet.org
Netaid, netaid.org/ov
VolunteerHub, www.volunteerhub.com

Internet Volunteer Initiative, www.4laborsoflove.org
VolunteerAmerica, www.volunteeramerica.net
NPower, www.npower.org/volunteer
Volunteer Solutions, volunteersolutions.org

Apart from such national databases, there are also local sites offering online information about volunteering in a specific city. Such lists may be part of a community "free net" or may be posted by a Volunteer Center (such as the one in Orange County, California: www.volunteercenter.org).

One important note about recruiting online. If your organisation has or is developing a Web site, be sure to include information about volunteers--prominently. Visitors to your site ought to leave it knowing that you have a volunteer program, something about what volunteers do, and how to express interest in volunteering!

VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT INFORMATION AND EXCHANGE

The most exciting development has been Web sites that serve the needs of volunteer program managers. The best tend to be maintained by the key trainers and authors in the field, who obviously are used to writing in print for this audience. Here are the key sites--all of which are completely available to Internet users anywhere in the world:

CyberVPM: www.cybervpm.com

Along with an excellent Web site, take advantage of the outstanding listserv, "CyberVPM" (Cyberspace Volunteer Program Management). This free, active electronic discussion group brings questions and answers from volunteer management colleagues around the world directly to your e-mailbox. To subscribe, send a BLANK e-mail to: cybervpm-subscribe@egroups.com

Energize, Inc.: www.energizeinc.com

Offers free access to over 1,000 Web pages: a library of articles and book excerpts, quotations and parables about volunteering, recognition ideas, interactive "hot topics" by Susan J. Ellis, a calendar of conferences and training events, and up-to-date contact information for--and hyper links to--a wide range of international volunteerism resources. The site also has a full Online Bookstore with over 75 books and videos for sale. Sign up for a free monthly electronic update delivered to your e-mailbox.

e-Volunteerism: The Electronic Journal of the Volunteer Community:
www.e-volunteerism.com

New! First online quarterly journal for the field.

Virtual Volunteering: <http://www.serviceleader.org/vv>

Learn all about how to start and manage the new service category of virtual volunteering. Thanks to project director Jayne Cravens, this site contains everything you need to know about what virtual volunteering is and how to apply the principles of real-world volunteer management to cyberspace. You can also download the FREE 138-page *Virtual Volunteering Guidebook* by Ellis and Cravens from this site or from the Energize site (above).

Volunteer Today "Electronic Gazette": www.volunteertoday.com

Another site providing volunteer management information, links, and resources, plus up-to-the-minute "news" items of interest to the field, compiled by trainer/author Nancy Macduff and guest columnists.

SPECIAL EVENTS AND CONFERENCE INFORMATION

The United Nations has declared 2001 as the International Year of Volunteers. and has a Web site: **www.iyv2001.org**

To learn about the International Conference on Volunteer Administration sponsored each fall by the Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA), go to: **www.avaintl.org**

To learn about the Association for Research in Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA)'s annual conference of academics (and some practitioners), go to: **www.arnova.org**

ARNOVA also has an active online discussion group: arnova-l@wvu.edu

To learn about the Points of Light Foundation's annual National Community Service Conference in June, plus its services to Volunteer Centers and to Corporate Volunteer Councils, go to: **www.pointsoflight.org**

THE FUTURE

As more people go online, more activity will occur in cyberspace, and more innovation, too. Without attempting to predict the future (nor how rapidly these developments may happen), consider a few of the possibilities:

1. More and specialized listservs allowing for exchange among volunteer program leaders dealing with similar issues anywhere in the world.
2. More online self-teaching educational opportunities. Academic credit courses, access to readings and sample materials, etc.
3. As a trainer who must now get on an airplane to conduct seminars, I envision a day when I can sit at my desk in Philadelphia and give a lecture to a video camera and broadcast "live" to anywhere a group can receive the

picture. And this will be two-way interactive, too. It also means even the smallest or most remote organisation can afford some consultation or training from any source in the world.

4. National organizations or those with volunteers/members working in scattered field locations can use the Internet to foster direct communication among members. Instead of having to contact the central office with a question, volunteers can post their query to, say, an electronic bulletin board on the organisation's Web site and any other volunteer can respond--in fact, many can.

5. Volunteer reports will be filed by e-mail and communication with all volunteers will be quick and inexpensive. As will pop-up, brightly colored, thank-you notes, complete with music and animation! For example already available (and free), go to: **www.bluemountain.com**

One suggestion you can implement immediately. Place a line for "e-mail address" on your volunteer application form now. Send a brief note to all current volunteers asking them if they are online, too. Update your files semi-annually. I predict you will be surprised by how many volunteers are already connected to cyberspace, and that the numbers will increase exponentially over the next few years.

Don't be afraid that we are moving into high tech-low touch interaction. As with any other tool developed by humankind, cyberspace will be what we make of it. Join in shaping this new arena for volunteerism!