

How the Internet has Changed Volunteering: Findings from a VolunteerMatch User Study

Molly O'Rourke, Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., Washington, D.C.
Greg Baldwin, VolunteerMatch, San Francisco, California

INTRODUCTION AND KEY FINDINGS

Since 1998, the VolunteerMatch user community has grown to over 1.5 million a year including more than 29,000 registered non-profits. (July 1, 2004) In December 2003, Peter D. Hart Research Associates conducted an evaluative survey on behalf of VolunteerMatch to better understand how its use of the Internet has changed the process and experience of volunteering for this community of active users. The study highlights the successful use of VolunteerMatch among both non-profits and volunteers.

Key Nonprofit Findings

- Nonprofit respondents indicate that the Internet has become second only to word-of-mouth as the most useful volunteer recruiting strategy
- 94% of respondents found VolunteerMatch to be among the most useful of the available Internet services
- 85% of nonprofit respondents agreed that VolunteerMatch helped them to recruit volunteers who they otherwise would not have been able to find
- 85% agreed that the service made it easier for their organization to find the right volunteers

- 94% reported satisfaction with the overall service
- Most importantly, 90% were satisfied with the quality of the volunteers they had recruited.

Key Volunteer Findings

- 86% of respondents agreed that the VolunteerMatch service made it easier for them to find a volunteer opportunity of interest
- 82% reported they were more likely to find a satisfying volunteer relationship
- 79% of respondents also agreed that they were more likely to volunteer because of VolunteerMatch
- 86% were satisfied with the volunteer opportunity they found through the service
- Overall, 86% of volunteer respondents indicated they were more satisfied with VolunteerMatch than with other Internet services.

The survey provides strong evidence of the role the Internet has had on the volunteer sector. Nonprofits using VolunteerMatch are not only able to tap the Internet to reach out to a more diverse population of volunteers, they are attracting first time volunteers as

Molly O'Rourke is an analyst at Peter D. Hart Research Associates. In that capacity, she has conducted survey and focus group research projects for a variety of nonprofit organizations, corporations, political candidates, labor unions, and media organizations. Her clients have included The Center for Law and Reproductive Policy, NBC News, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the American Association of Health Plans, Prevention magazine, MTV, Congressman Tim Roemer (D-IN), the AFL-CIO, and the American Federation of Teachers. Ms. O'Rourke previously served as an aide to Senator Frank R. Lautenberg (D-NJ) and as an assistant to the president of EMILY's List, the national political action committee for Democratic women candidates. Ms. O'Rourke graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Brown University and holds a master's degree in applied survey research from the University of Michigan, where she was awarded a Kellogg Foundation Fellowship.

Greg Baldwin joined what is now VolunteerMatch in the spring of 1998 as its Chief Imagination Officer. Today, VolunteerMatch is a leader in the nonprofit world widely recognized for its use of the Internet to encourage service and volunteering. The organization is the proud recipient of Webby Awards for "Activism" and "Services," and has been recognized for its accomplishments by The White House, M.I.T., the Smithsonian Institution, and recently, the Yale-Goldman Sachs Foundation. Mr. Baldwin currently serves on the senior management team and has responsibility for shaping the organization's identity, communications and strategic direction. Mr. Baldwin completed his undergraduate studies at Brown University in 1990 with a B.A. degree in Public Policy. He regularly speaks at nonprofit events and conferences on the subjects of volunteering, communication, and the Internet.

well. Perhaps most significantly, both nonprofits and volunteers are reporting high levels of satisfaction with the quality of the volunteer relationships that they are forming.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted among participating nonprofits and individual site users employing two distinct survey instruments. In both cases, respondents were contacted and e-mailed an invitation to participate in the study. The e-mail contained a direct link to the survey and the surveys were administered online.

The nonprofit sample was drawn from nonprofit organizations that had been registered with VolunteerMatch for at least one year and had at least one active volunteer opportunity posted with VolunteerMatch. Site users included only people who responded to at least one listing on VolunteerMatch within the past year.

In total, Hart Research interviewed 996 nonprofit users and 1,122 individual VolunteerMatch site users. Accordingly, this study's findings are representative of neither all individuals who have ever visited the VolunteerMatch site nor all nonprofits who have ever posted an opportunity with VolunteerMatch. The chosen sample frame, however, allows a greater focus on the most relevant target audiences for VolunteerMatch to examine to better understand how nonprofits and individuals each experience the VolunteerMatch service.

NONPROFIT FINDINGS

Growing Use of the Internet

Over the last 10 years Internet usage has grown to become an everyday part of our lives. It has affected our professional lives, our personal lives, and also our civic lives. In 2003 over 1.5 million individuals used the Internet to access the services of VolunteerMatch. The power of the Internet as a communications tool is clear. Nonprofit users indicate that the Internet has become the second-most important source for recruiting volunteers, behind word-of-mouth (71%) and ahead of live presentations to groups (33%), events (29%), and newspaper advertisements (29%). The organization's own Web site is the most-used Internet source (45%), followed by Internet recruiting services (37%).

Within the category of Internet recruiting, VolunteerMatch has established itself as the leader—94% of nonprofit users say that they have found VolunteerMatch to be one of the most useful Internet recruiting Web sites. The second-most useful service—local Volunteer Center Web sites—is named by 29% of nonprofits. Although the survey sample consists of only nonprofits that have used VolunteerMatch in the past year, the degree to which the service stands out against other Internet recruiting services is still notable, given that nonprofit users do not have to use VolunteerMatch exclusively and are presumably open to and considering other Internet services.

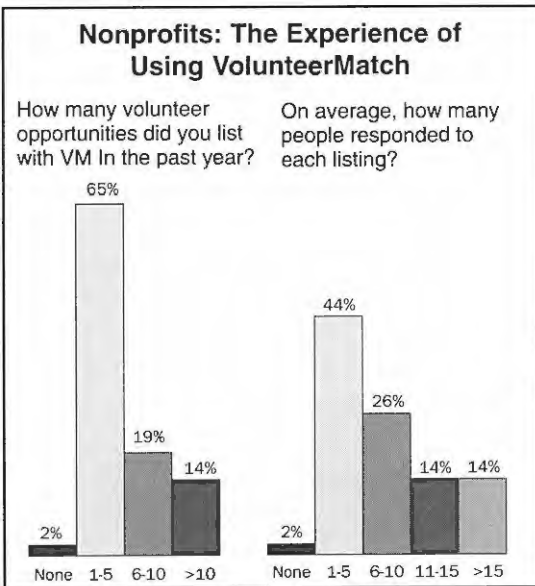
NONPROFITS: SOURCES OF VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT

Most useful volunteer recruiting strategies		Most useful Internet recruiting strategies	
Word-of-mouth	71%	VolunteerMatch.org	94%
Our Web site	45%	Local volunteer center Web site	29%
Internet recruiting services	37%	Idealist.org	12%
Live presentations to groups	33%	VolunteerSolutions.org	8%
Events	29%	Craigslist.org	7%
Newspaper ads	29%	ServeNet.org	7%
Local volunteer center	17%	Local City Cares Web site	3%
Relationship with local corporations	15%	OpportunityKnocks.org	2%
Direct mail	8%	1800Volunteer.com	1%
Radio/TV ads	8%		

ENGAGING VOLUNTEERS

A significant portion of this survey focused on nonprofits' experience using VolunteerMatch's service and, in particular, trying to set a benchmark to track nonprofits' ability to successfully engage volunteers from listings and responses.

The majority (65%) of nonprofits report posting between one and five separate listings on the site in the past year, while one-third (33%) have posted more than five opportunities. Not surprisingly, larger organizations tend to post more opportunities—37% of nonprofits with an annual budget of more than one million dollars report listing six to 20 opportunities a year, while only 20% of those with budgets of \$200,000 or less say the same.



Listings nearly always pique the interest of potential volunteers. Virtually all (98%) nonprofits say they receive at least one response to each listing on VolunteerMatch; slightly more than half (54%) say they receive six or more responses for each listing they post. The response rate is fairly consistent across all subgroups, regardless of organization size and number of listings per year.

As the Internet has made information about volunteering easier to find, volunteers are becoming choosier. Nearly all prospective volunteers responded to more than one opportunity before finding the right place for them to volunteer. For example, 48% say that it takes two to three responses; 21% say four

to six responses and 10% say seven or more. Only 21% say that they found the right place to volunteer after responding to one listing.

On average, nonprofit users report that they are converting 25% of their referrals into volunteers. However, conversion rates vary. Two in ten (21%) nonprofits report that they are able to engage 50% or better of their responders as volunteers while another 20% are converting between 20%-49%. This stands in contrast to 36% who report that they are able to successfully convert only between 1%-9% of their respondents.

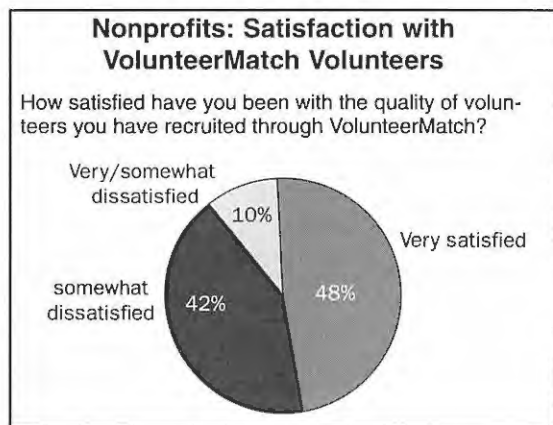
A closer look at the conversion rate reveals that several internal factors related to nonprofits' structure and their use of the service could have a determinative effect on their ability to engage volunteers successfully. For example, nonprofits that already have a high volume of volunteers and presumably have some experience in this area also have a higher conversion rate—36% of nonprofits with more than 100 volunteers per year report a 30% conversion rate, while only 19% of those with 50 or fewer volunteers say the same.

Also, despite the fact that smaller organizations typically receive about the same number of responses to their posted opportunities as nonprofits with larger budgets, smaller nonprofits are not able to convert potential volunteers as effectively as larger nonprofits. Nearly three in four (74%) smaller organizations with budgets of \$200,000 or less report that they engage less than 30% of their respondents; 67% of organizations with budgets of more than one million dollars say the same thing. This differential may be linked to many factors, including the likelihood that larger organizations have more resources available to respond more quickly and more thoroughly to inquiries.

Overall Satisfaction

The research findings suggest that nonprofits are extremely satisfied with VolunteerMatch. In fact, 94% of nonprofits report that they are satisfied with the overall service, including 60% who say they are very satisfied; 85% agree that the service makes it easier to find the right volunteers, while another

85% agree that the service helps recruit volunteers they wouldn't otherwise have found. Most importantly, a nearly unanimous 90% of nonprofits indicate that they are satisfied with the quality of the volunteers they have found using VolunteerMatch, including nearly half (48%) who say that they are very satisfied.



VOLUNTEER FINDINGS

Volunteer Profile

The Internet has allowed nonprofits using VolunteerMatch to attract an extremely diverse group of individuals looking to explore volunteer opportunities in a wide area of interests and causes. This diversity has one notable exception—VolunteerMatch users are overwhelmingly female (84%). Half (50%) of the volunteers are under 30, including a remarkable 22% who are under the age of 18; only 2% are age 65 and over.

POTENTIAL VOLUNTEERS: A DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

VolunteerMatch site users are:

Overwhelmingly female	84% women 16% men
Highly educated	57% have college degree 39% do not have a degree; half of these are under age 18
Young	50% under age 30 32% age 40 or older
Diverse	58% Caucasian 11% African American 10% Hispanic

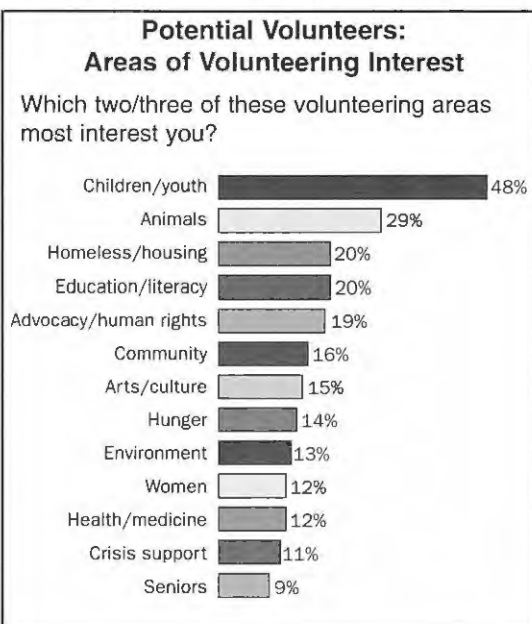
Compared with the U.S. population at large, potential volunteers are a highly educated group—more than half (57%) are college

graduates. This high level of education is even more apparent after looking closer at the non-college educated bloc of potential volunteers (39%)—more than half (51%) are under age 18, and presumably many of them are college-bound.

Potential VolunteerMatch volunteers are also racially diverse—while the majority (58%) describe themselves as white, more than one-third (36%) are non-white, including 11% African-American/black, 10% Hispanic/Latino, and 8% Asian/Pacific Islander.

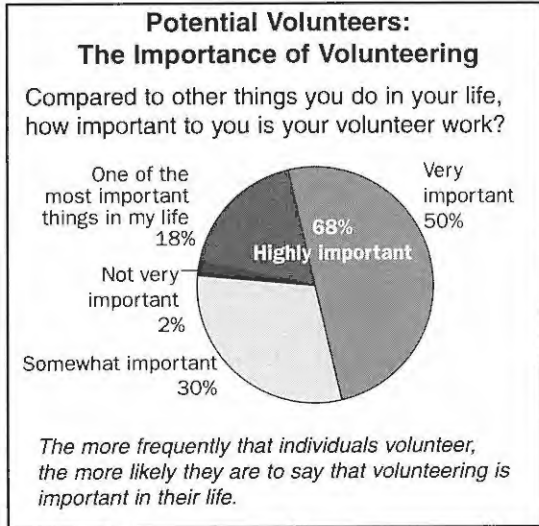
Interests and Motivations

In addition to having a diverse demographic background, VolunteerMatch attracts potential volunteers who express interest in a variety of issues and causes that they want to become involved with through volunteering. The strongest area of interest is working with children and youth, cited by almost half (48%) of volunteers as one of the areas that most interests them. The second most popular area is animals, which is chosen by 29% of all volunteers and is a particularly appealing area for younger volunteers—for example, 43% of volunteers under 18 express interest in volunteering in this area. Other areas of interest for volunteers include the homeless and housing (20%), education and literacy (20%), advocacy and human rights (19%), and arts and culture (15%).



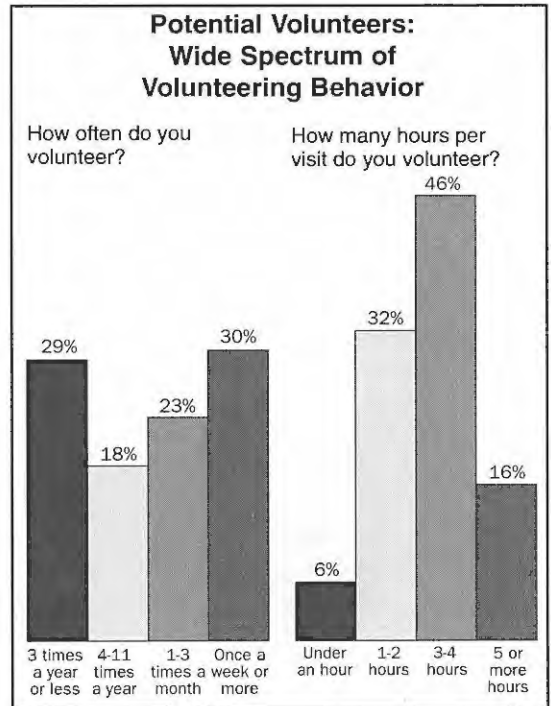
Volunteering Habits

Volunteering fits into the volunteers' lives in different ways, but most individuals who use the VolunteerMatch service view volunteering as a significant part of their lives. About one in five (18%) say that volunteering is one of the most important things in their lives, and another 50% say that it is very important. Volunteering is especially important to respondents over 40—in fact, 74% say it is one of the most important or very important things in their life.



Consistent with other measures, the findings from this study show that VolunteerMatch is appealing and responsive to potential volunteers who have divergent backgrounds and interests as well as wide-ranging schedules and time available to commit to volunteering. Potential volunteers who use VolunteerMatch cover the spectrum in terms of their volunteering habits and behaviors, from the 29% who report that they volunteer very sporadically (1-3 times per year) to an almost equivalent proportion (30%) who indicate they volunteer once a week or more.

Many volunteers make a strong commitment to the organizations they volunteer with, spending several hours volunteering per visit. Almost half (46%) report that they volunteer three to four hours per visit, and 16% say that they volunteer five or more hours. Only 38% percent say that they volunteer two hours or less per visit. Among those who volunteer once a week or more, almost two

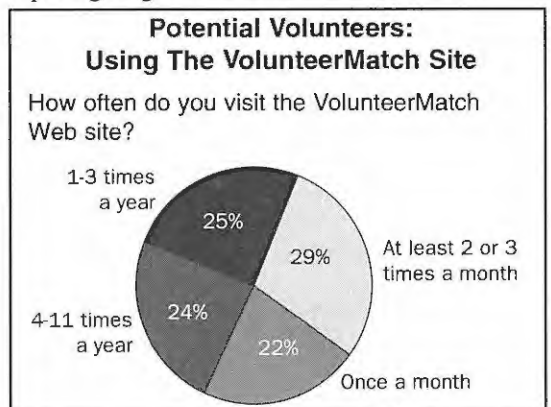


thirds (64%) say that they volunteer three or more hours per visit—a remarkable level of dedication.

Finding Volunteer Opportunities

One of the most insightful findings in the survey is greater awareness of the process by which potential volunteers search for and find volunteer opportunities through VolunteerMatch that interest them and suit their schedule and other needs.

The frequency with which potential volunteers visit the VolunteerMatch Web site varies a great deal. Generally speaking, these potential volunteers are divided evenly into those who drop in occasionally and those who log on on a regular basis. Twenty-five percent report going to the Web site one to three



times a year; another 24% say they visit 4-11 times per year. Among the more frequent visitors, 37% say they visit one to three times per month, and 14% say once a week or more. The wide variation in frequency in visiting the VolunteerMatch Web site is likely a reflection of the broad audience VolunteerMatch serves—including people who have different areas of interest and different quantities of time to commit to volunteering.

A strong majority of site users report that they usually find a volunteer opportunity that matches their interests when they visit VolunteerMatch; in fact fifty-seven (57%) percent of volunteers say that they find an opportunity at least half the time they visit the Web site, including 28% who say they find an opportunity 80% or more of the time. A smaller, but potentially significant proportion of potential volunteers report that they have difficulty finding an opportunity that interests them when they visit the site—24% say that they find an opportunity less than 20% of the time. Interestingly, younger users report more success in finding opportunities that interest them—63% of potential volunteers under age 18 say that they find an opportunity that interests them at least half the time, while only 44% of those over 40 say the same.

Introducing a greater degree of choice into the process of finding a volunteer opportunity is having a positive effect on the quality of the volunteer experience. In fact, fully 86% of individuals who volunteered with an organization found through the service say that they were satisfied with their volunteer experience, including 48% who say that they were

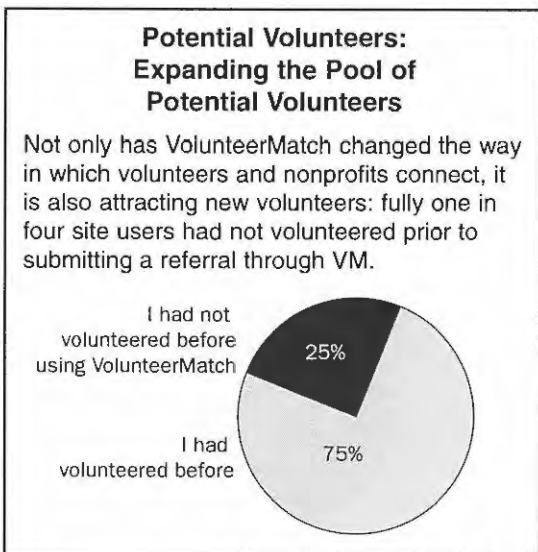
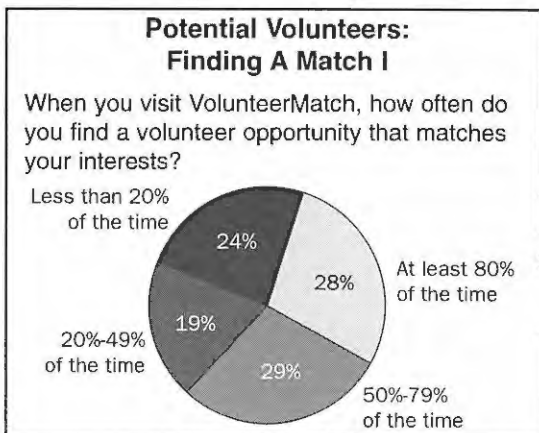
very satisfied. In addition to being satisfied, 61% reported that they had gone on to become regular ongoing volunteers with the organization they found. Among those who do not report satisfaction with their experience, 11% report having a neutral experience, and only 3% say that they are dissatisfied.

Improving the Connection Between Volunteers and Nonprofits

Before the development of Internet recruiting services like VolunteerMatch, respondents report having encountered a range of challenges in trying to find suitable volunteer opportunities. These obstacles revolved primarily around finding opportunities that fit their schedule (35%), getting specific information about volunteer opportunities (32%), and finding volunteer opportunities that interest them (26%). Not surprisingly, “finding volunteer opportunities that were nearby and convenient for me to get to” was a major challenge for 41% of volunteers under 18, many of whom have limited ability to travel to volunteer locations.

Respondents credit VolunteerMatch with successfully addressing many of these challenges. For example, fully 86% of respondents with previous volunteer experience agree that “VolunteerMatch has made it easier for me to find volunteer opportunities that I’m interested in,” including 50% who strongly agree with this statement.

The Internet is not only making volunteer-



ing more efficient by connecting individuals with the organizations that meet their schedules and reflect their interests, it is also expanding the volunteer pool by opening doors to individuals who had not previously volunteered. Fully one in four (25%) of respondents report that they had never volunteered prior to using VolunteerMatch.

Most of those who had never volunteered before recognize and value the role of technology in making it possible to search for and respond to the real volunteering needs of their community. An almost unanimous 86% of new volunteers agree that "I am more likely to volunteer because of VolunteerMatch," including 53% who say they agree strongly with this statement. In addition, 85% agree (57% strongly) that "VolunteerMatch has made it easier for me to find opportunities I'm interested in."

Overall Satisfaction

As with the nonprofits, volunteers give VolunteerMatch overwhelmingly positive ratings on a wide range of measures, including the quality of the volunteer postings and the more technical aspects of searching for volunteer opportunities.

A nearly unanimous 90% of volunteers express overall satisfaction with the VolunteerMatch service, including 51% who are very satisfied. Among the few (10%) who are dissatisfied with VolunteerMatch, their dissatisfaction appears to be due to a lack of success in finding volunteer opportunities on VolunteerMatch; fully seventy-five (75%) percent of these respondents say that they typically

find opportunities on VolunteerMatch that interest them less than 30% of the time and 78% say that they did not volunteer with an organization found through VolunteerMatch.

CONCLUSION

The survey findings are an indication of the breadth of the influence the Internet is having on the volunteer sector. VolunteerMatch has established itself as a valuable service to potential volunteers in facilitating the search for suitable volunteer opportunities and to nonprofits in expanding their reach to recruit new volunteers. The data also reveal that VolunteerMatch is not only reshaping established volunteer patterns, the service is also expanding the pool of potential volunteers by attracting individuals who have not previously volunteered. In doing so, VolunteerMatch has made it easier for nonprofits to tap into not only the existing population of volunteers, but also the new population of individuals who are looking to serve as the next generation of volunteers.

