

This paper examines the benefits, implementation and management of online volunteers for People With Disabilities Uganda (PWDU). By drawing on my experiences as Online Volunteer Manager for PWDU, I hope to introduce the reader to the concept of involving volunteers online. I provide guidelines that have helped PWDU manage more than 150 online volunteers working on numerous projects. This article outlines the benefits for both the organization and the volunteers, and it provides information on how an organization can begin to involve online volunteers.

Tapping Global Resources: A Guide to Involving and Managing Online Volunteers

By Laurie Moy

INTRODUCTION

New information communication technology (ICT) has made a huge impact on the operations and management of all organizations, including non-profits, state agencies and other groups that involve volunteers. Every major organization and many smaller ones have a presence on the web and use ICT daily in their operations. Many organizations use the Internet to solicit donations, disseminate information and recruit volunteers. But there is a largely untapped resource that many organizations are not yet utilizing. That resource is Online Volunteers.

There are thousands and thousands of people, from all walks of life, willing to donate their time and resources to a cause. Traditional methods of involving volunteers limit an organization to its local geographic area (and a set time). But with the Internet and email, organizations have the ability to involve volunteers from around the world, as well as volunteers who are nearby or unavailable during regular working hours. Online volunteering is not meant to replace the work of onsite volunteers but, rather, to complement the contributions of those volunteers and invite even more participation, energy and ideas into the organization.

For two years I have managed online volunteers for People With Disabilities Uganda

(PWDU), a national, nonprofit, nonpartisan peace and disability rights organization based in Kampala, Uganda. PWD has implemented programs to assist local people with disabilities to lead fuller and more independent lives since 1989. While PWD was certainly successful, it was primarily a local organization involving local people and resources. That limited both its results and its reach.

In March of 2000, Richard Mugisha, Director of People With Disabilities Uganda, decided to recruit online volunteers through NetAid Online Volunteering (www.netaid.org/OV), a service managed by the staff at United Nations Volunteers. NetAid is a matchmaking interface allowing nonprofit organizations to find and involve online volunteers from around the globe. Mr. Mugisha did not know what to expect when he posted his first assignments for online volunteers, but he had high hopes for attracting new volunteers for his organization.

I, too, did not know what to expect when I got involved in NetAid and online volunteering. In the spring of 2000, I saw a television ad for NetAid. At the time I had a one-year-old son and another on the way. I had always wanted to work and travel abroad, but I was obviously busy with my family. The idea of volunteering via the Internet seemed

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like a great opportunity. I logged onto NetAid's website, saw a few postings, including the one for PWDU, and applied. It is now two years later and I am the Online Volunteer Manager for more than 150 online volunteers.

WHAT CAN ONLINE VOLUNTEERS DO?

It may be difficult to imagine what online volunteers can do. But if one considers how many hours an organization's staff spends on their computers, it is easy to understand how online volunteers can contribute. Research, translation, and composition are only a few of the possibilities for online volunteers. The prospects are limited only by imagination. Following are some of the accomplishments PWDU has achieved with the help of its online volunteers.

WEB SITE

PWD's most celebrated online volunteer (OV) accomplishment is the creation of its web site, www.pwdu.org. Every aspect of this web site has been volunteer driven, including the creation of a logo. The team of online volunteers worked on various design ideas, selected a design and went to work. The staff at PWD submitted raw information about PWD and its programs, and this data was put together in a coherent package and given to the OVs developing the web site. Other volunteers conducted research to find appropriate links and outside information for the site. The result was an amazing display of skill and collaboration. Because the existing staff at PWDU did not possess the skills for such a project, the team of online volunteers provided them with talent and expertise to create a multi-page web site. The web site contains a video message from the director, a virtual library, descriptions of PWD's programs and background, information about Uganda, a opportunity to listen to our song, and information about the various methods of donation. There is so much more to come!

NEWSLETTER

Another great OV accomplishment for PWD is the publication of a bimonthly email newsletter, *PWD News*, which debuted in June 2001. (We hope to fund a printed version in the upcoming year.) Several proposed layouts were presented by OVs and one designed by a volunteer in Nigeria was chosen. From the first suggested article to the publication of the finished issue two months later, *PWD News* was created and developed by online volunteers from all corners of the globe. Articles have been contributed from Australia, Jordan, Kenya, Nigeria, United Kingdom, and the United States to name a few. They have been edited in many countries, then are laid out and distributed to a growing number of subscribers around the world. These online volunteers have helped PWDU promote its causes, conduct research, and spread its reach through this newsletter. Without the help of these online volunteers, the staff at PWDU would not have been able to devote the time needed to put together such a project.

MARKETING AND PROMOTIONS

With our web site and newsletter operational, our volunteer marketing team hit the ground running. Online Volunteers are responsible for designing and publishing brochures, creating ads, researching potential internet promotions, participating in banner exchange programs, inviting links to our web site (www.pwdu.org), promoting PWD News, building a subscription database for the newsletter and writing press releases.

When our benefit CD is complete, we will have yet another avenue of promoting PWD's efforts.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Another team of volunteers helps PWD develop new and existing programs. These volunteers conduct research, gather information, and develop recommendations for various projects including:

- *Agricultural income generation project for adults with disabilities* — One of our volunteers is an agricultural scientist and was able to recommend a specific avocado plant that would grow better in the climate.
- *Information and Resource Center* — One of our volunteers is a graduate student who just finished a thesis about bringing technology to developing Africa.
- *Children's resource library* — Through the efforts of our volunteers we have collected more than 150 pieces of literature for this resource for children and parents... and more pieces arrive every day.
- *Skills building project for children with disabilities* — Several online volunteers have conducted research for this project developing a training manual for local special education teachers.

These are a few of the projects PWD is working on. Several would not be possible without the help of our online volunteers. Some of the volunteers work on the actual program development of these projects, while others are researching potential funders and developing grant proposals.

WHY HOST ONLINE VOLUNTEERS?

The beauty of online volunteering is that an agency is able to involve people from all walks of life, in their own element. At PWDU our volunteers represent a broad spectrum of knowledge and experience. We have marketing experts, professors, high school students, music producers, stay-at-home mothers, college students, web designers, development professionals, graduate students, journalists, researchers and many more. All of these volunteers bring with them a wealth of knowledge, skill and creativity.

Beyond that, because of the nature of volunteering *online*, these people also bring with them all the resources that surround them. College students bring access to professors and their university's libraries, web designers

and graphic artists bring with them access to equipment and technology, and marketing and development professionals bring the resources of their offices. By engaging people in their normal surroundings, we tap into resources that would otherwise not be available to us. PWDU has had many great experiences with this wealth of diverse resources.

Online volunteer Cesar Napoli, a Grammy nominated music producer from Bahia, Brazil, has written and produced an original song for PWDU, entitled "Sunshine, Baby" sung by Rick Husbands, a popular artist in South America. Working with other volunteers, Cesar is now leading a project to create a benefit album for PWDU. Proceeds from the sale of this CD will benefit PWDU's programs. More importantly, promotion of the album will be a new form of marketing for the organization and will create an awareness in circles that would otherwise not be accessible.

Because we enjoy Cesar's expertise via the Internet, he is able to remain in his hometown, where he has access to his colleagues, his recording studios, CD manufacturing plant, promotions experts and advertising professionals. He even has a few celebrities who are willing to endorse the project.

Cesar is just one example of hundreds of great volunteers who donate their time online. Working with volunteers from around the world, PWDU has seen accomplishments that would not otherwise be possible.

WHY DO PEOPLE VOLUNTEER ONLINE?

There are many reasons why people choose to volunteer online. One major reason is convenience. A person may be interested and willing to donate their passion and energy to a cause or organization, but cannot because of work or school schedules or family obligations. Many would-be volunteers cannot commit time during an organization's regular operating hours. Perhaps they don't have time to travel to and from the work site, look for a

parking place and find a baby sitter. Volunteering online negates those problems. An online volunteer can work on his/her assignment at the best time for that person. Whether it is late at night, between classes, during a lunch hour, after dinner, on the weekend, or during a child's nap, the online volunteer makes his/her own schedule. And travel time to a volunteer assignment is nonexistent, as most online volunteers work from their home or office computers.

Another reason people volunteer online is because on the Internet a person can remain anonymous. They will be judged only by their thoughts and skills. An online volunteer can be involved with an organization for an extended amount of time without ever revealing age, race, religion, nationality, and even gender. Many online volunteers find this anonymity empowering. In my experience managing OV's, I have seen this many times. One of our volunteers was writing an article for our newsletter about landmine victims. We decided to include an interview (to be conducted via email) with a doctor experienced in that field as part of the article. The volunteer became apprehensive and concerned that she wouldn't be taken seriously. Although I had worked with this volunteer for months, it was only then that I learned she was in high school. We discussed it and when she realized that no one would question her age, she went for it. The interview was great and she finished the article. She would never have gone through with it if she had had to conduct the interview in person. In fact, she might not have been granted the interview. For many people volunteering online allows them to take chances they might not otherwise entertain.

Some online volunteer activities do require that the volunteer reveal their age and/or other information about themselves, such as volunteers working with confidential information or working with clients. Issues such as age may have no bearing on projects such as designing an organization's logo or writing articles or conducting an interview.

Some people enjoy volunteering online because it provides a philanthropic outlet for talents and interests that they may not be able to express in their professional work. There are secretaries who are great web designers. There are stay-at-home parents who are excellent writers. There are seniors who are wonderful researchers, and there are marketing professionals who enjoy computer programming. Volunteering online provides these people with a way to pursue their interests.

It is also possible for two or more online volunteers to collaborate together on a project via the Internet. By fostering this kind of mentoring/collaborating relationship, the host organization not only benefits from the work produced, but also from extended training of its volunteers.

HOW DO YOU MANAGE VOLUNTEERS ONLINE?

Managing volunteers online is not all together different from managing onsite volunteers. Both need guidance, support, recognition and the assurance that their work makes a difference. There are, however, some inherent differences in managing online volunteers that are worth mentioning.

Because the bulk (if not all) communication with your online volunteers will be written, there are several things to remember.

- You must communicate promptly via the written word. Although online volunteers are not there in person, it doesn't mean they aren't waiting for your prompt attention. Be prepared to respond to emails within a couple of days of receipt. If you take too long to respond they will feel unappreciated and lose interest. They will feel that their work is a low priority and will react accordingly. You can respond to emails as you receive them, or take some time to think about things before you respond. Or you can set aside a specific, regular time to deal with emails, fitting it into your schedule as needed.
- You must communicate clearly via email. Without the face-to-face contact, you do

not have the benefit of body language. Add cultural differences and there is the potential for miscommunication. It is very important to be absolutely clear in your communications. Take advantage of the fact that you can edit, add and clarify before you hit the "send" button.

- Remember that "conversations" are contained. Everything that needs to be conveyed must be done explicitly. If you take, for example, an average day in an office, there may be an official meeting about a project, but then there are small conversations in the halls after the meeting. There are office drop-ins, lunch time conversations, and so forth. Much information and direction is passed on in these smaller conversations, despite the information-packed meeting. The manager of online volunteers must remember that in cyberspace those "small conversations" are not so spontaneous. It is important to encourage the online volunteers to ask questions and respond to emails and directions. Facilitating these "conversations" will create an atmosphere of communication, will ease your directions, and will result in quicker completion of tasks.

These points are relevant no matter how many online volunteers an organization involves. If you are going to involve more than two or three online volunteers, there are additional points to consider.

- People who communicate online automatically have at least two identities — their name and their email address. Sometimes, they have screen names as well. It is likely that you will have two or three identities per volunteer. This can make managing more than a few OV's confusing to say the least. In addition to the problem of managing multiple identities, there is the difficulty of the names themselves. This difficulty is twofold. First, it is possible that many of the online volunteers will be from other countries around the world. Their names may be difficult to pronounce or spell. Secondly, screen names

and email addresses may have no relationship to the person's name. For examples online volunteers may have identities such as "Prince Charming" and "TMLJ142." It is important to keep all of the aliases in your volunteer records. It is not enough to rely on email addresses because many OV's check in from more than one computer and/or address. A side note regarding screen names and email addresses, don't be tempted to take an individual with a name like "ShopGirl" less seriously. Many people volunteer online with their personal email accounts and the names may be a little more casual. This does not, however, reflect their level of competence or enthusiasm to do good work for your organization.

- A useful management tool if you plan to host more than a few online volunteers is a web based group. There are several of these "groups" throughout the Internet, that combine web-based group information with email messaging. You simply create a group and invite people to become members. All group members, in this case our online volunteers, can control where, when and how they use the service to ensure it fits their lifestyle. For PWD we have set up five main "groups" based on our major project categories: marketing and promotion, program development, grant writing, newsletter, and web site. Each individual "group" has the following: 1) homepage with basic group information, a welcome to volunteers and an introduction to our aims; 2) message area — where we post messages to the group and can read past messages; 3) event calendar — where we specify deadlines and events; 4) files area — we share information, documents, everything from raw data to edited and revised text, to completed web pages, and more; 5) picture albums — where we share photos of the organization in Uganda and the children who participate in our programs. Some volunteers also like to post their own photos. [There should NOT be a

requirement to do this]; 6) voting area — here the members (online volunteers) can complete a survey or vote on a topic; 7) classified ads — this is where we post specific tasks that need to be completed so volunteers can respond to tasks they are interested in doing and/or are willing to take on; 8) simple database system — another facility for sharing information; 9) management area — where information about group participation and group settings can be accessed.

We have our groups set up so that they are private and by invitation only. Only our online Netaid volunteers are members. Using web based groups has been a tremendous help in managing all our volunteers.

There are several factors that will affect the number of online volunteers a project involves. The best practices listed above will help to retain valuable volunteers online. But it is also important to note that sometimes people are “surfing the net” and are just curious when they apply for online assignments. They may forget or neglect to fulfill their tasks. To “weed out” those who are not serious, it is a good idea to establish contact with the potential volunteer before giving them an assignment. As the volunteer manager for PWDU, I contact each applicant with more information about the organization and the projects in which we are involved. If I hear back from the applicant within a few days, we progress to the next level and assign them a task. If I don’t hear back I close their application. PWD has received 374 applications from 56 countries around the world. In our experience, approximately 70 percent of contacted applicants respond and get involved.

Turnover is also a factor in the number of online volunteers an organization involves. There are varying degrees of time commitment by volunteers — one volunteer may be willing to work online for several months while another may be interested in one finite task. It is a good idea to find out from the volunteer how long they are interested in being involved with the organization. They

can always extend their involvement if they are still interested at the end of their “term.” It is frustrating and time consuming to try to maintain communications with an online volunteer who is no longer interested. By establishing the time commitment terms first, the organization can efficiently involve online volunteers and enjoy seamless transitions.

CONCLUSION

Just as no two onsite volunteer programs are alike, neither are any two online volunteering programs or program managers. The guidelines I’ve mentioned have worked for PWDU and its team of online volunteers. Other organizations may have a different set of circumstances, management styles and results. Volunteer managers who already work with onsite volunteers are probably doing most of what we are doing, but without the Internet: making sure assignments are clear, staying in touch with volunteers, managing the volunteer information and project progress, etc. If you love working with volunteers onsite, you will probably love working with them online as well. If you are passionate about your organization and how volunteers are contributing to it already, you are going to be fantastic at managing online volunteers too. The PWDU online volunteering program works because PWDU is an established, already-accomplished organization and is committed to making its programs work. If your organization has these two elements, online volunteering can work for you too.

The NetAid OV Web site [www.netaid.org/OV] provides information on how to screen online volunteers, how to create online volunteering assignments and how to connect online volunteers with resources that can help them learn more about developing countries. The Virtual Volunteering Project [www.service-leader.org/vv/] provides the most detailed, comprehensive information available about online volunteering, including information about online safety for such programs. Both should be your next stops for learning more about online volunteering and involving these cyber volunteers yourself.