

# 1997 International Conference on Volunteer Administration

## ABSTRACT

*This article introduces virtual volunteering, where real people are able to do volunteer work via cyberspace. Readers will learn about the possibilities for contributions by volunteers working remotely via home or work computers and the Internet and how to assess organizational readiness for virtual volunteering.*

## Virtual Volunteering: A Powerful New Resource for Volunteer Managers

Jayne Cravens

### THE INTERNET AND VOLUNTEER MANAGERS—A PERFECT MATCH OR TECHNO-HYPE?

Many people actively search for volunteer opportunities they can complete via home or work computers because of time constraints, personal preference, a disability, or a home-based obligation that prevents them from volunteering on site. Virtual volunteering enables anyone to contribute time and expertise to non-profits, schools, government offices and other organizations that utilize volunteer services without ever leaving home or office.

Virtual volunteering also enables agencies to expand the reach of current volunteer programs by allowing more volunteers to participate and by involving volunteers in new areas. Virtual volunteering is a way to extend the range of volunteer opportunities and help organizations meet the increasing challenges of the future, while also reaping tangible benefits from emerging technologies.

There are many ways people can (and do) volunteer virtually. They can:

- Send E-mail answers to questions people ask or engage in a chat room where

support group members provide advice to one another. This type of virtual volunteering is similar to phone answer/support lines.

- Work together (volunteers and/or clients) online to carry out a project such as writing about news of the neighborhood, school, or special interest group to post on a Website or use in printed material.
- Electronically "visit" with someone who is homebound, in a hospital, or a resident of a nursing home.
- Provide online mentoring and instruction via E-mail. Examples include helping students with homework questions or helping adults learn a skill or find a job.
- Conduct online research such as finding information to use in an organization's upcoming grant proposal or newsletter, or gathering information on a particular government program or legislation that affects an agency's clients.
- Welcome people who are about to enter the hospital or go to summer camp and follow up afterward.
- Train other volunteers in a subject via

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the Internet through distance learning.

- Design an organization's Website, newsletter, or brochure, or copy-edit a publication or proposal.
- Translate a document into or from another language.
- Register an organization's World Wide Web home page and other appropriate pages with Internet search engines.
- Conduct online outreach and advocacy by posting information or sending legislative alerts to appropriate newsgroups and listservs.

Virtual volunteering is not a replacement for face-to-face volunteering. Instead, it expands existing volunteer resources, augments an organization's off-line activities, and offers another way for someone to help support an organization and give back to the community. For some people it will be a preferred avenue of volunteering, but for many it will be an additional avenue of volunteering.

In 1996, Impact Online (IOL), a national non-profit organization "turning good intentions into action," launched its virtual volunteering program to assist organizations with virtual projects. IOL's own services would not have come into being without the contributions of numerous volunteers, on and off-line. IOL has been talking about and benefiting from virtual volunteering since 1994 when it first went online. As part of its virtual volunteering program, Impact Online offers a number of resources.

IOL has an ever-growing area on its Website to showcase information about virtual volunteering and to facilitate matching volunteers with non-profit organizations who need them. Information includes:

- The benefits of using the Internet to find and involve volunteers.
- Marketing an organization's volunteer opportunities online.
- Determining if an organization is ready for virtual volunteering.
- Suggestions on how to get staff buy-in

and participation, developing an implementation plan, training staff and volunteers, etc.

- Implementing a virtual volunteering pilot project.
- Suggesting needed adjustments in styles and approaches to volunteer management that must be made to ensure the success of virtual volunteering.
- Orienting and evaluating volunteers for virtual assignments.
- Informing about volunteer activism via the Internet.
- Making E-mail communications more effective.
- Tips for volunteers who want to work virtually.

Impact Online is working directly with selected organizations to help them develop or expand effective and ongoing virtual volunteering programs. This has made it possible for Impact Online to obtain firsthand data on the realities of setting up and maintaining such a program. Issues such as volunteer screening, monitoring, evaluation, and recognition, as well as how to look for assignments within an organization that can be handled by volunteers via online technologies are being thoroughly researched.

Impact Online posts learnings and tips to the Impact Online Website regarding virtual volunteering and communicates its findings via appropriate Internet discussion groups. It compiles its virtual volunteering information from organizations that involve or have involved volunteers virtually, internationally recognized experts in volunteerism, volunteers who have provided support to an organization via a home or work computer, IOL staff's own firsthand experiences working with volunteers virtually, and related resources on telecommuting or publications such as those that help organizations involve people with disabilities as volunteers.

The focus of Impact Online's project is to engage organizations that already understand the basics of volunteer man-

agement and how to work with volunteers effectively in traditional, face-to-face settings. We don't recommend that organizations that do not have experience managing volunteers embark on a virtual project. The Impact Online site does not have information to teach the fundamentals of volunteer management. However, our Index of Online Resources for Volunteer Managers on our Website has links to other Internet resources that provide information on the basics of volunteer management.

#### HOW DO I KNOW IF MY ORGANIZATION IS READY FOR VIRTUAL VOLUNTEERING?

Before your organization decides to involve volunteers virtually, do some self-evaluation of both yourself and your organization. Impact Online suggests your organization meet the following criteria before attempting to engage in virtual volunteering.

- The entire staff and board should understand how your organization already involves volunteers and be committed to the success of your existing, off-line volunteer program.
- Your organization should already successfully involve volunteers in traditional, face-to-face settings either assisting staff and/or working directly with clients. You should have an established management system for volunteer recruitment, screening, matching to assignments, feedback, and evaluation (measures of success for both volunteer assignments and your volunteer program in general).
- All of your organization's paid staff should have training and/or experience in the basic hows and whys of volunteer recruitment, screening, and management. You should also have an established system through which staff members define and communicate to you volunteer needs in their own areas/departments.
- The volunteer manager in your organi-

zation should have regular access to an Internet E-mail account during day-time hours. The same person who is in charge of managing your current volunteer program should also manage the virtual volunteering component. Don't think of virtual volunteering as a different program. Think of it instead as an extension of your existing, off-line volunteer program.

- Your organization should already have on file the E-mail addresses of volunteers as well as the postal mailing addresses and phone numbers for all volunteers.
- The volunteer manager must be committed to reading and responding to E-mails regarding volunteering with your organization within 48 hours of receipt.

A well-run agency and a well-organized volunteer program are key elements to the success of virtual volunteering. If you feel you meet all of the above criteria, you are ready to start looking into setting up and managing a virtual volunteering program.

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#### AUTHOR'S NOTES

If you feel your organization is ready to create an online component of its volunteer program and would like to participate formally with Impact Online, please visit its Website (<http://www.impactonline.org>).

The author has her own Website (<http://www.coyotecom.com>) that offers technology tips for not-for-profit organizations. It was a featured selection by America Online's Web Diner and inspired AOL to spotlight online Web resources for not-for-profit organizations.

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