

Establishing a Virtual Volunteering Program

Once you've put in all the necessary systems to make sure that your organization is ready for virtual volunteering, it's time to set up some internal groundwork to ensure success in your online program.

Most of the systems you need to put in place to get your program off the ground and to ensure success revolve around humans: the concerns you will encounter with such a program will primarily revolve around people issues rather than computers, and the use of the technology rather than the technology itself.

Keep in mind that not all of this information may be applicable to your organization or to every manager. Also remember that this is new territory for everyone.

These are tips to help you introduce the practice of virtual volunteering into your organization, and to train your staff in the concept and reality of virtual volunteering.

Getting Started

- Become familiar with **the dynamics of online culture**. Most of your communications with online volunteers will be done via e-mail. Learning to communicate through text only can be a challenge for volunteer and manager alike.
- Allow e-mail exchanges in an existing volunteer program. For instance, if you have a phone support network, matching clients with volunteers around a certain issue via phone, why not give these volunteers and clients the option of also conversing via e-mail? If you allow mentors and mentees to meet face-to-face one-on-one, off-site, what about allowing them to exchange e-mail addresses as well?
- In these cases, it's assumed that your organization conducts extensive background checks on and training for volunteers, and that you feel these offline programs are running smoothly and successfully. This step creates no extra work for volunteer managers, the volunteers or the clients, if your organization is already engaged in these exchanges offline or via phone. It's a gradual introduction to virtual volunteering without even saying the words!
- Create e-mail versions and/or Web versions of all materials given to volunteers at orientations. Again, this does not create ongoing extra work for volunteer managers. This step helps get staff and volunteers used to using the Internet in the course of their regular volunteer-related activities.
- Communicate with volunteers who have Internet access via e-mail. Send reminders about upcoming meetings, updates to your web site, an e-mail from a client who has nice things to say about volunteers, a survey about what it's like to volunteer at your agency... not only does this get your current, on-site volunteers used to using the Internet as part of their association with your organization, it also helps support the image of a caring, proactive volunteer manager!
- Join an online discussion group. A great way to learn about the nuances of communicating with people online is to become a part of an online discussion group. Start by joining an online group specifically for volunteer managers. If you work with young people, you might consider joining a discussion group of a TV show that's popular with teens, and observe how the youth interact with each other. You can also join groups that interest you personally -- for a particular hobby, your favorite author, a sports team you follow, even a political issue. As you observe (or "lurk") on these groups, notice the variety of ways people relate to each other via written communications, the differences in communication styles among people of different age groups.
- Create an e-mail discussion list for your volunteers. Why not let volunteers talk with one another? An online discussion group for your current volunteers can create a sense of team, provide a forum for ongoing feedback,

and encourage collaboration among participants. It also gets your current volunteers used to using the Internet as part of their service.

- Educate staff and key volunteers about virtual volunteering. Help everyone understand why virtual volunteering should be/will be implemented in your organization.

Become a Champion for Virtual Volunteering

The volunteer manager can do many other things to create support internally for a virtual volunteering program and ensure its success:

- Provide vision.
Virtual volunteering is an educational process. Resistance may exist because of a lack of understanding. Be aware of the changing needs of your working environment and how virtual volunteering can meet those needs.
- Be an advocate for your program.
Clear understanding and constant promotion of the benefits of virtual volunteering are essential.
- Practice what you preach.
Are you involving at least one online volunteer? You need to obtain firsthand experience about virtual volunteering!
- Become the subject-matter expert.
Keep your eyes and ears open for all information pertaining to virtual volunteering and even telecommuting, and how virtual activities are being conducted around the world.
- Don't force virtual volunteering on anyone.
Participation by staff or volunteers should be voluntary. Explaining the benefits carefully to prospective online volunteers and managers enables them to make an educated choice.

Building Staff Support

For many agencies, this is the toughest part of introducing virtual volunteering to an organization -- overcoming staff fears and getting buy-in for the concept.

Start by talking with appropriate staff members and volunteers about the potential for virtual volunteering at your organization, and why different staff members and volunteers want, or don't want, to do this. There are many people who would love to try virtual volunteering at their own organizations, but who feel that the other staff or volunteers aren't ready, or are uneasy about the whole idea of virtual volunteering. This feeling can come from a variety of issues:

- Some staff members are still getting used to the idea of the Internet as a concept, let alone a tool. The idea of unseen volunteers may overwhelm these people. Some organizations involving volunteers virtually require these volunteers to come onsite for at least one face-to-face meeting/orientation with key staff members. This helps staff see that these are just as real as onsite volunteers! For some managers, there is no substitute for personal discussion, and in such cases, these managers may be able to only manage virtual volunteering with individuals that do occasionally make onsite visits.
- Staff feels volunteer management is already time-consuming and that adding a virtual component will make it more so. Virtual volunteering is successful only in those organizations that already engage volunteer successfully in traditional, face-to-face settings. If this is not the case with your agency, it's probably not ready for virtual volunteering. However, if your organization is successful and effective in its volunteer endeavors, creating virtual components of these endeavors should not be a substantial burden. The key to getting buy-in in this situation is starting small, with a virtual volunteering pilot project.

- Staff fears that you are trying to replace onsite volunteering with virtual volunteering. Virtual volunteering should not be looked at as a replacement for face-to-face volunteering; instead, it is an expansion of your volunteer resources, an augmentation of your organization's activities, and another way for someone to help support your organization and give back to the community. For some people, it will be a preferred avenue of volunteering, but for many people, it will be an additional avenue of volunteering.
- Those in charge of technology use at your organization claim that your organization doesn't have the computer or Internet capacity to involve volunteers virtually. Virtual volunteering has little to do with technology and everything to do with people. Virtual volunteering does not increase Internet costs for your organization, if your organization already has access to the Internet. The Internet affords a volunteer manager many critical resources, in addition to a new way to find and involve volunteers.
- Unfamiliarity with the details and practicalities of virtual volunteering, coupled with some unwillingness to learn more about these matters until you're certain you'll be able to do it. Again, the key to getting buy-in in this situation is lots of staff education about virtual volunteering, you being an advocate for this program, you involving volunteers yourself, and starting small in introducing the program with a virtual volunteering pilot project.

Your target should be those employees who already work with volunteers in some capacity, as well as those volunteers who have a long-term relationship with your organization and work with other volunteers. Because at this point you already have systems in place such as gathering email addresses from potential volunteers, you can demonstrate that the organization would be building on information it already has to institute such a program.

- Prepare a written plan. Develop a mission statement, goals and objectives for your virtual volunteering program, and the introduction of a pilot project. Inventory resources, barriers, expectations, and champions for such an endeavor. Identify the potential costs and fears voiced by staff members in your meetings with them about virtual volunteering and outline ways to allay those fears. Establish a timeline. It is imperative to have a plan. Identify activities and assign responsible parties to complete them. Still, when building the timeline, be flexible enough to allow for changing dates.
- Establish executive-level support and commitment. Without support from your organization's leadership, a virtual volunteering program can be doomed to failure. Executive level commitment and ongoing support can help break down managers' reluctance to virtual volunteering and get such managers to participate long enough to see the positive results. If you've addressed the program's potential and addressed staff concerns, obtaining support should not be difficult.
- Do an in-house training on virtual volunteering. Once you've introduced the concept to the staff and gotten their initial buy-in to at least explore the idea, do a workshop on managing volunteers virtually, to show that it's not vastly different from managing people onsite. Address the training requirements for supervisors, volunteers and office-based support staff to be involved in working together virtually.
- Amend policies and procedures manual relating to volunteers. Some adjustments will need to be made to your policies regarding volunteers, to cover volunteers working virtually. For instance, what is your reimbursement policy for expenses a volunteer might incur working via the Internet? You may want to state in your policies that volunteers working virtually must provide their own equipment (computer, modem, software, Internet Service Provider, etc.), and that all expenses must be approved by the volunteer's staff contact before they are actually incurred if the volunteer wants to be reimbursed. You should also define in your policies what would be grounds for an online volunteer dismissal, such as:
 - posting information on behalf of your organization to Internet discussion groups without written approval
 - misrepresenting your organization in a written communication
 - transferring confidential information, including passwords, to third parties

Use your current written policies as a guide for defining the boundaries for your online volunteers.

Some information in this article is based on:

- Robert Moskowitz's "Are You Ready To Telecommute? An Objective Checklist To Determine If Your Company And/Or You Are Ready For Telecommuting", published in MicroTimes magazine. Successful Management in the Virtual Office, by Bernie Kelly and Bruce McGraw
- Pacific Bell Network Telecommuting Guide. Pacific Bell's telecommuting program was one of the first in the nation.

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