

# Online Volunteering Enters Middle Age

by Jayne Cravens

**T**HE TIME IS LONG GONE TO CALL online volunteering, also known as virtual volunteering, a new or upcoming practice. In fact, the practice is more than 30 years old: Project Gutenberg ([www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org)) is probably the oldest example. This endeavor, now a nonprofit, was established in 1971, decades before public access to the digital highway became the norm. Through the contributions of online volunteers like transcribers, editors, researchers, and tech support, it provides electronic versions of many classic works such as *Les Misérables*, *Dracula*, and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, as well as textbooks and other published materials with expired copyrights.

Online volunteering became more common among nonprofit organizations in the late 1990s, with widespread use of the Internet. Impact Online, now VolunteerMatch, began soliciting "virtual volunteers" to help with its new volunteer recruitment site in 1994. CompassPoint Nonprofit Services in San Francisco, formerly the Nonprofit Support Center, hosted one of the first presentations about online volunteering in 1995. Organizations' early efforts with online volunteering were chronicled at the Virtual Volunteering Project ([www.serviceleader.org/old/vv](http://www.serviceleader.org/old/vv)), a research endeavor at the University of Texas at Austin that spent more than four years identifying

and studying organizations with online volunteers and documenting practices that other organizations could adopt. By the end of 1999, the project had to abandon its comprehensive listing of organizations with online volunteers, as the list had grown into the many hundreds and was no longer possible to accurately maintain.

There are now thousands of nonprofits that involve volunteers through the Internet in some way. For instance, organizations are sending newsletters via e-mail to volunteers who provide service onsite, sponsoring online communities for volunteers to talk about their service activities, providing Web-based platforms for volunteers to log in their service hours, and, of course, volunteering online.

Online volunteering means volunteer activities that are completed, in whole or in part, via the Internet, usually in support of or through a nonprofit organization. Examples of online volunteering include: translation, research, Web design, data analyses, database construction, online discussion facilitation or moderation, proposal writing, issue advocacy, production of articles, online mentoring/coaching/tutoring, professional advice, curriculum development, publication design, video editing, podcast development—the list of online volunteering activities is as long as a listing

of onsite service possibilities. As can be seen from even this partial list, most online volunteer activities are not directly tech-related. Also, traditional onsite volunteers who engage online with organizations they support, such as through an online discussion group, can also be considered online volunteers, since some of their service is happening online.

Involving volunteers online is a flourishing and growing practice. The organizations that do so vary tremendously in terms of agency staff size, agency age, and mission focus, ranging from large and long-established nonprofits such as Greenpeace, the World Food Program, and the American Cancer Society to relatively new, smaller organizations such as Perverted-Justice (which works to catch online pedophiles), Blogger (a new nonprofit that promotes blogging by women), and Knowbility (a nonprofit that promotes education and employment access to people with disabilities). To see examples of the hundreds of organizations involving online volunteers, visit the virtual volunteering section of VolunteerMatch ([www.volunteermatch.org](http://www.volunteermatch.org)) and the UN's Online Volunteering service ([www.onlinevolunteering.org](http://www.onlinevolunteering.org)), as well as the archives of the Virtual Volunteering Project ([www.serviceleader.org/old/vv](http://www.serviceleader.org/old/vv)). Online volunteering is also a frequent

## Research: Online Volunteering

Research and academic journal articles regarding or directly relating to online volunteering are listed here:

- [www.coyotecomunications.com/volunteer/ovresearch.html](http://www.coyotecomunications.com/volunteer/ovresearch.html). Links are provided on this Web page to all publications or ordering information.

Some of the research available includes:

- “Involving International Online Volunteers: Factors for Success, Organizational Benefits, and New Views of Community,” by Jayne Cravens, MSc. In conjunction with the Institute for Volunteering Research’s November 2005 conference, “Volunteering Research: Frontiers and Horizons,” research was undertaken to assess current common practices among organizations successfully involving international online volunteers, to explore the role online volunteering may play in building a more cohesive global community, and to assess the relationship between involving online volunteers and building organizational capacities. Published in *The International Journal of Volunteer Administration (IJOVA)* in July 2006.

- “Power to the Edges: Trends and Opportunities in Online Civic Engagement,” Final Edition 1.0, by Jillaine Smith, Martin Kearns, and Allison Fine. This paper explores trends and strategies related to the current (as of May 2005) and future state of online activism, fundraising, and democracy. The report concludes with a series of findings and recommendations for the ways that organizations, individuals, and philanthropic groups can help build such cultures. Commissioned by the USA-based Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE).

- Vic Murray and Yvonne Harrison of the University of Victoria produced “Virtual Volunteering: Current Status and Future Prospects” regarding online volunteering in Canada, with findings applicable for online volunteering in other countries.

- The Virtual Volunteering Project, based at the University of Texas at Austin, the first extensive research project regarding online volunteering, 1996–2001.

topic among practitioners on the CYBERVPM discussion group (groups.yahoo.com/group/cybervpn/).

Many who are new to online volunteering have the impression that it will replace onsite volunteering, that those who contribute online are new to community service, and that the majority of online volunteers are in their 20s. But according to research by the Virtual Volunteering Project in the late 1990s, as well as further research and anecdotal evidence since then from various organizations (see sidebar), the overwhelming majority of online volunteers also volunteer in onsite settings, often for the same organization they are helping online. Online volunteers also come from all age groups (usually starting over age 13), from various educational and work backgrounds, and from various geographies and ethnicities. There is some evi-

dence that there are slightly more women who volunteer online than men. Of course, each organization will have a different breakdown as far as online volunteer demographics, but it’s important to keep in mind that one cannot make sweeping generalizations about who online volunteers are, or will be.

The appealing features of online volunteering for individuals are many:

- it’s another way for a person to help causes they believe in;
- it’s a way for those who can’t volunteer onsite because of constraints in leaving their home or workplace;
- it provides a way for people with disabilities and mobility/transport problems to volunteer;
- it can allow people to help organizations that are important to them when onsite opportunities are not available; and

- it can allow people to help others in a geographic region that they cannot travel to or do not live in.

Organizations involve volunteers via the Internet because:

- onsite volunteers have asked to volunteer this way in addition to their face-to-face service;
- online volunteers may have skills and expertise or sophisticated hardware or software that nonprofits may not have, but need;
- just as with onsite volunteers, online volunteers help stretch staff resources even further, often allowing onsite staff to serve more people and undertake more activities;
- online volunteering allows for the participation of people who find onsite volunteering difficult or impossible because of a disability, home obligation, transportation difficulties, or work schedule, which in turn allows an organization to benefit from the additional talent and resources of more, and a greater diversity of, volunteers; and
- online volunteers don’t require physical accommodations (no desk, no chair, no parking place).

## Getting Personal & Transparent

Online interactions with volunteers can often feel quite personal. This is because many people are more willing to share information, feelings, and criticisms online than they are face-to-face. Also, volunteers can more easily share information about their interests and background (such as family and work photos) over the Internet than, say, at an onsite volunteer luncheon.

In addition, involving volunteers through the Internet is done most successfully by organizations focused on making volunteers collaborative partners in how the organization operates. This often means actually giving volunteers more to do and requiring a greater volunteer commitment. These organizations’ successful volunteer involvement is focused on acknowledging and listening to the feedback from volunteers.

They are making volunteers feel included and energized—not with pins or mugs or luncheons, but through greater and more meaningful involvement and ongoing, interactive support.

Therefore, in learning to work with volunteers online, nonprofit staff must learn how to interact with people on a more transparent, personal level than they may be used to with traditional onsite volunteers.

### Positioning for Success

There are a number of ways that organizational leadership can encourage and support staff in embracing online volunteering, mostly through incorporating Internet use into traditional volunteer management:

- Ensure that all staff, particularly those who currently engage with volunteers, have reliable access to the Internet and are supported to use the Internet regularly to research information and engage in online communities

relating to their work. If staff aren't experienced using the Internet as part of their work already, it's going to be quite difficult for them to feel comfortable working with volunteers online.

- Ensure that staff master the basics of traditional volunteer management and are involving onsite volunteers successfully. Research shows that most of the challenges in involving online volunteers relate to traditional management practice.

- Encourage staff to regularly communicate with current volunteers using e-mail and to commit to responding to e-mails from volunteers quickly.

- Encourage the staff person primarily responsible for managing volunteers to create an online community for current volunteers to talk about their service. This gets both the staff person and current volunteers used to interacting with one another online.

- Support your volunteer manager in creating a robust volunteer-related

section on your organization's Web site, featuring complete information on how volunteers are recruited, screened, trained, and supported at your organization; details on how community members can express interest in volunteering; and a listing of what volunteers do at your organization. This may be a challenge, not because of a lack of technical know-how, but because the manager has not had to provide this information in writing before. This task is essential, however, to get a volunteer manager used to thinking of online activities as part of his or her job responsibilities—it will make the transition into involving online volunteers much more natural down the road.

You may find, as your organization engages in these activities, that online volunteering is already happening at your organization—for instance, a volunteer who is designing a new brochure for your organization may be undertak-

ing some of this assignment from his or her home or work computer, and interacting with a staff person by e-mail as the project progresses. Because the volunteer is seen onsite, no one may ever have thought of the person as *also* an online volunteer.

### Safety & Confidentiality Concerns

Staff may express reluctance to involve volunteers online out of a misplaced fear of the Internet as being inherently dangerous. However, the Internet is no more dangerous than the offline, face-to-face world. Just as there are any number of things that can be done to protect people in face-to-face interactions, there are many things an organization can do to ensure everyone's safety, as well as the safety of its information, online. The Virtual Volunteering Project details various safety measures that can be undertaken here: [www.serviceleader.org/old/vv/safety/](http://www.serviceleader.org/old/vv/safety/).

It must also be noted that a volunteer, online or onsite, is no more likely to share confidential information inappropriately than a paid staff member if the volunteer undergoes the same training and experiences the same management as a paid staff member regarding confidentiality. In short, confidentiality is a training issue; all staff, whether paid or volunteer, whether onsite or online, needs to have training on what can and cannot be shared with the public.

### Keys to Success

In research about involving online volunteers, several recommendations emerge as common to successful programs regarding the role of staff in volunteer management, and these recommendations are easily applied to working with *all* volunteers, including those onsite. The following practices are especially appreciated by younger volunteers and those new to service onsite at a nonprofit:

- providing clearly defined, well-written, detailed online volunteering

assignments, where expectations and needs are explicit;

- stressing in the assignment how the tasks will help the organization and the people or areas served;

- providing a quick response to all volunteer applicants and promptly approving or rejecting applications;

- promptly providing detailed next steps for the assignment to approved applicants;

- being ready to put online volunteers to work immediately *before* recruitment begins;

- responding to all e-mails from accepted and active volunteers quickly and regularly (most organizations successfully involving online volunteers adhere to a 48-hour rule);

- ensuring online volunteers feel they are a part of the organization's mission and understand how their contribution helps an organization; and

- ensuring online volunteers feel as recognized as onsite, face-to-face volunteers and long-term volunteers.

### Conclusion

Research and practice show that the keys to success in involving online volunteers have little to do with technology and everything to do with people skills, management style, and transparency. Organizations that successfully involve online volunteers do not think of volunteers in two different groups; they are all volunteers, often the same volunteers, and the management of all these volunteers is fully integrated, responsive, and transparent, fueling volunteers' enthusiasm for further service. Organizations successfully involving online volunteers represent innovation through their management, not their technology.

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