

For every Volunteer an Opportunity and for every Opportunity a Volunteer.



Virtual Volunteer Guide

A guide to volunteering online from home



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By: Jerry Sauder
Project Thinktank Enterprise

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Welcome to Virtual Volunteering

Welcome to a brave new world! Internet technology has changed society in many unexpected ways. As we enter the new millennium, the ability to communicate online has evolved a truly fresh and distinct form of service to others: “virtual volunteering.” The *volunteers* are real; it’s the service they provide that is done electronically. Volunteering and volunteer program management have entered the electronic age in full force. This *Guidebook* is designed to help leaders of volunteer projects apply the skills of real-world volunteer management to cyberspace.

What Is “Virtual Volunteering”?

“Virtual volunteering” refers to volunteer tasks completed, in whole or in part, via the Internet and a home or work computer. It’s also known as online volunteering, cyber service, telementoring, teletutoring and various other names.

The concept is not meant as a substitute for traditional “in person” volunteering. In fact, one of the most exciting things about this innovative use of technology is that it is adding both to the quantity of service contributed and to attracting people who have not necessarily volunteered before. Virtual volunteering offers greater access to community resources and provides more ways for people to support community groups, nonprofit agencies, schools and other organizations. For some people, service online will be a preferred avenue of volunteering but, for most, it will be an additional way of contributing time and talent.

Most organizations which involve online volunteers do so in addition to welcoming on-site volunteers. Also, only a few online volunteers work solely via the Internet. Often a combination of on-site and online tasks for volunteers works best for everyone involved (volunteers, staff, clients). As will be described later, assignments can have different levels of virtuality. For instance, one volunteer may interact with clients online but meet on-site with a staff member regularly; another may talk with a client via e-mail in addition to regular face-to-face visits.

TIPS on Volunteering Virtually

Volunteering via your home or work computer offers many advantages, no question. But it also brings with it special challenges, for both volunteers and the organizations that need them. For instance, more flexibility in your schedule is a plus, but the self-management and motivation it entails can make things difficult. Also, this is a cultural adjustment for many staff members—you are an unseen volunteer, and they may have trouble thinking of you as “real.”

Based on feedback from various volunteers who have contributed time virtually, organizations that have involved such volunteers, and various telecommuting resources, we offer the following tips to help make your

virtual assignment rewarding for everyone:

Make sure you are ready to volunteer virtually.

It's so easy to say yes to volunteering via the Internet that many individuals sign up to do so before really considering their expectations and schedule for an assignment. There's nothing virtual about the commitment you are making, nor the deadlines you are assigned to complete the volunteer work. The organization is counting on you to finish any projects you volunteer for. Before you volunteer to help an organization via the Internet, self-evaluate to determine if you are ready.

Discuss the job description and your expectations with your contact at the agency at the time the assignment is made.

You need to make sure you understand what it is you are committing to as a volunteer. This will cut down on frustration and disappointment for everyone involved.

Expect an acclimatization period.

It takes a while for even the most organized person to figure out how to manage time, space, communication systems and projects while working remotely. Even with all of this advice, expect to make adjustments, encounter conflicts, etc.

Define a schedule to complete the assignment.

You'd be surprised how easy it is to commit to do an online research assignment that isn't due for three weeks and will only take a few hours to complete... and to then find yourself the day before it is due without having done anything! Don't count on the time to do an assignment to just happen.

- Set a specific time(s) to complete the assignment at the time the assignment is made.
- How many hours will you work on this assignment each day and week?
- Which hours will you work? How many breaks will you take during your volunteer activity? You can limit your tendency to overwork or motivate yourself to work harder by deciding this up front.
- Some people are most comfortable with systems and routines that would be very much like those they would use on-site at an agency. You could also try counting backwards from project deadlines, then making careful daily and weekly schedules for what you need to accomplish; work until you've finished meeting your goals for each day, then quit.
- If you take on a long-term virtual volunteering assignment, periodically check your routine to see if it's working. Systems should make your life easier, not more complex. If you are not getting the results you want from your routine, revise it.
- To be successful in a virtual volunteering assignment, be aware of your goals and target everything you do as a volunteer toward meeting them. Be flexible enough to recognize when something isn't working for you, and adjust it accordingly.

Pace yourself and learn when to say “when.”

It is easy to over commit via the Internet! If you've never volunteered virtually before, start with an assignment that will take only a few hours, to

see how you like this kind of volunteering. You may have less time to offer than you think.

Set up a communications routine with the organization.

Report in at least once a week via e-mail on your volunteer activities for the organization, even if it's to report no activity. Review what you've accomplished, and what your immediate next activities will be. Ask questions! It doesn't have to be a large, involved report; just a short, friendly update will do.

Be kind to office support staff.

Remember that people that work at the agency your are supporting have many roles and are expected to do a lot with limited resources. While the volunteer manager or your key contact at the organization knows what you are doing, support staff may not be completely up-to-date on the project you are working on.

Follow the policies of the organization.

Every organization has policies on chain of approval, confidentiality of information, how you may represent yourself on behalf of the organization, etc. These policies are meant to be taken seriously! When in doubt, ask for guidance.

Avoid burnout.

At the office, routines structure your time. There's a routine for arriving at the office and getting settled into volunteering activities. When volunteering virtually, you may not know when to stop. This will lead to fatigue and burnout, and frustration for the organization if you've committed to a particularly large and very needed assignment. One way to get around over-work is to set firm starting and stopping times: develop a routine for volunteering virtually (see above). Taking breaks is another tip; severe headaches, eyestrain, neck and back pain are the result of working too many hours without a break.

Motivation has to come from yourself.

At many organizations, there are posters and charts around the office that display the work and impact of the agency. When you are on-site, you come in contact with staff and clients. This all helps motivate on-site volunteers. But volunteers working virtually don't have these natural, informal inspirations around them, so they have to be much more self-motivated and self-driven.

Do a task when you are excited to do it—don't wait until later. For many volunteers, that comes when the assignment is made. Breaking the assignment into parts, and rewarding yourself with a break at the completion of each part, is another way to get through an assignment. Taking breaks will help you avoid burnout, as well as help you keep you motivated. Coffee breaks, exercise breaks, phone breaks, food, kid time, outdoor breaks, game breaks—you have a variety of ways to reward yourself!

If you find yourself having trouble completing an assignment because you just can't seem to get started on it, try re-reading the job description, and

review the organization's Web site. Think about how your contribution is going to add to the worthwhile work of the organization. If you don't know, ASK.

Remember positive reinforcement. Don't "guilt" yourself into working by putting yourself down or labeling everything, including yourself, in terms of success or failure.

Keep your workspace manageable and free of distractions.

Set up your work space with all your equipment and materials within reach. Make sure others in your household understand and respect your commitment to volunteering virtually.

What interruptions will you allow? Define a policy in advance so you don't have to make individual decisions at each distraction. Define "I'm volunteering" rules to help family and friends avoid interrupting your volunteer time.

Help the organization evaluate the program

If you get a survey from the organization about your volunteer experience or future interests, take the time to respond to it. Your feedback will help the organization improve its program. Also, agencies rely on such feedback to help them meet the evaluation requirements for certain grants. Speak up if you have constructive criticism or a great idea. You've earned the right to give input.

A Self-Test: Are you Ready to Volunteer Virtually?

Volunteering from a home or work computer is **different** from working on-site with an organization for many obvious reasons: there's usually more flexibility in the use of the time you have; a greater degree of independence; you interact very little (if at all) with various staff members; etc. For some, these differences make virtual volunteering ideal; these same reasons can make it difficult for others.

Setting your own schedule is one of the chief joys of virtual volunteering. However, there's nothing virtual about the commitment you are making, nor the deadlines you are assigned to complete the volunteer work. The organization is counting on you to finish any projects you volunteer for. When you agree to a virtual volunteering assignment, you are agreeing to completing the assignment on time.

It's so easy to say yes to volunteering via the Internet that many individuals sign up to do so before really considering their expectations and schedule for an assignment. Before you volunteer to help an organization via the Internet, consider the following to determine if you are ready:

Do you have regular, ongoing access to the Internet?

If you only have access at college and the semester is about to end, or if you are about to switch Internet providers or computers, now is probably not a good time to volunteer to complete a project virtually. Online volunteering assignments usually last around three months; make sure you will have ongoing access to the Internet during that time.

Do you know how to communicate well via the written word?

Most, if not all, of your communication during a virtual assignment will be via e-mail. Good writing skills and excellent attention to detail are important in any virtual volunteering project. Even if you want to provide a highly technical service, such as creating a database, you have to be able to communicate what you are doing to your contact at the organization.

Do you stick to deadlines? Do you see a project through to its finish?

Organizations are counting on you to complete the assignment you've volunteered for; there's nothing virtual about your commitment.

Are you comfortable working on your own, without direct supervision?

That doesn't mean you shouldn't ask for guidance when you need it. However, virtual assignments are best for those people who like working on their own.

Are you self-motivated?

Some organizations involving remote volunteers are good at creating ways to inspire those individuals during their assignments—they may call you just to say, "good job" or to check in. The executive director may send out a personal e-mail thanking a volunteer for his or her contribution. But many organizations aren't this savvy with online volunteers yet. When you work at home, the inspiration to work on a virtual assignment has to come from yourself.

Do you pace yourself well? Do you avoid over committing for projects?

Most volunteers who do not complete their online assignments say that they thought they could do the work when they signed up but, as the deadline for the assignment approached, they realized that other things must take priority: school activities, home duties, work projects, etc. The organization is left with an unfinished assignment and an unmet need.

Think about your work style and your other commitments before volunteering virtually.

Do you have a set time of day when you will work on virtual assignments?

Don't just assume that you will get to that three-hour virtual assignment some time before the deadline two weeks from now. Schedule a time, however approximate, to complete the project you've committed to do.

Will your work area be void of distractions while you are working on a volunteer assignment?

Any virtual assignments is going to take a certain level of concentration and intensity. Make sure your environment is going to allow you to devote the proper energies to your assignment.

Is this the right time for you to take on a volunteering project?

If you are feeling overwhelmed by other responsibilities, now is probably not a good time to volunteer, on or off-line. Volunteer managers try to be very understanding about your job and family commitments—but they are also counting on you to finish assignments to which you commit.

Do you answer your e-mails quickly (no more than 48 hours/two business days after receipt)?

The organization may need to contact you with a critical issue before you complete the assignment. If you are interacting one-on-one with someone as part of the virtual assignment, responsiveness is crucial to the success of your online relationship.

**What benefits do you expect out of volunteering virtually?
What results should the organization expect because of your volunteering?**

Answering these questions for yourself will help you better identify the virtual assignments right for you.

If you answered no to any of the above questions, or had difficulty answering some of the questions, perhaps you are not ready for volunteering virtually.

What can a virtual volunteer do?

Need inspiration to get started? Here are a few examples of what a virtual volunteer can do.

Administration and maintenance

Designing a database: Designing a generic database format for a specific project or organization.

Database management: Making sure that information is correct and up-to-date.

Proof reading: Making sure that all documents, content, publicity and newsletters are written in the correct format and use the correct grammar.

Emailing and mail-outs: Making sure that all contacts have up-to-date information and updates about what is happening within the sector or organization.

Collating information and printing publications: Collating information or ideas for best practice guidelines, newsletter articles and minutes from meetings. Printing relevant information for the group, sector or organization.

Questions, queries and information: Providing information and answers for organizations or individuals wanting more information about a project, programme or organisation or how to get involved.

Campaigning, consultations and research

Campaigning forum: Providing up-to-date information about ongoing campaigns, how to get involved and set weekly challenges/tasks for volunteers to complete. Allowing other campaigners to talk to like-minded individuals and organisations.

Consultation: Being able to give feedback and comments about designs, content and layout for websites, newsletters, logos and branding.

Questionnaires and surveys: Completing and designing questionnaires and surveys for organisations who would like to consult young people on various issues and documents.

Consulting: Providing feedback and information for young people looking for advice, guidance and information about CVs, interviews and employment.

Researching: Searching for relevant information, documents and contacts, then gathering statistics and analysing the information.

Online research: find information to use in an agency's upcoming grant proposal or newsletter, gather information on a particular government programme legislation that affects an agency's clients, gather website addresses of similarly-focused organisations, etc.

Professional consulting expertise: Answering an agency's questions regarding human resource, accounting, management or legal issues; writing speeches, developing a strategic plan for a particular department, etc.

General research: Daily or weekly search for news articles relating to an organisation or a particular topic.

Fundraising campaigns: Developing ways to generate more funding for a project or campaign.

Media and publicity

Designing and branding: Helping a newly-formed organisation or charity create a brand and a logo that will get noticed.

Designing publicity materials: Making sure that all publicity material (flyers, posters, leaflets etc) complement each other and are eye-catching.

Podcasts: Interviewing relevant people about a specific topic or issue and recording the interview. Then editing the interview and uploading the podcast onto a website.

Vodcasts: Interviewing relevant people about a specific topic or issue and filming the interview; then editing the interview and uploading the vodcast on to a website.

Taking and submitting photos: Providing relevant photos that can be stored in the organisation's photo bank for publicity use.

Bloggng: A way to promote and advertise a project, programme or organisation. It is also a way to get people's opinions and views about different topics and issues as well as encouraging others to do the same.

Videos: Producing a video about a project, programme or organisation for publicity and promotional purposes.

Music production: Producing music for use in promotional materials for websites.

Promotion: Promoting and publishing a project, programme or an organisation through known contacts and networks.

Websites and online communities

Website designing: Designing a website for an organisation, forum or project.

Maintaining a website: Updating information and produce and publish content on the website.

Updating online search engines: Registering an agency's website (homepage) and other appropriate pages into directories and "What's New" items.

Maintaining and updating online community pages: Making sure that the information and content is up-to-date and replying to any messages or comments.

Moderation: Moderating an online forum, making sure that the conversation stays on the topic and is censored appropriately.

Developing an online forum: Creating web space for people to communicate with others and exchange information.

Other

Pen pals: Making and maintaining contact with someone living in a different area or country.

Translation: Translating letters and documents into other languages.

Book recording: Recording for visually impaired and the blind.

Study support: Providing help, advice and study tips for students on different topics and subjects.

Once you have an idea in terms of what you would like to do, the next and final step is to offer your services to a non profit organization that you would like to volunteer with. There is certainly no lack of opportunities and most if not all of them would be more than happy to accommodate you. Perhaps a good first step is to contact us here at Volunteer Nanaimo and tell one of the volunteer councillors that you would like to be a virtual volunteer and describe what you would like to do.

Our Contact Information here at Volunteer Nanaimo is:

Volunteer Nanaimo
3, 2350 Labieux Road
Nanaimo, BC

(250)758-7121 phone
www.volunteernanaimo.ca

We publish a list every week listing volunteer opportunities with new ones coming up all the time. All of them are listed on our website. Unfortunately a lot of organizations do not advertise virtual volunteer opportunities with us simply because they do not know they exist or how to administer them. Hopefully this publication will improve that. You may want to speak to one of our volunteer counsellors and say you want to volunteer virtually. Chances are they can match you up with a suitable organization who can benefit from what you have to offer.

Virtual Volunteering Resources

<http://www.serviceleader.org> - has a wealth of information on virtual volunteering
www.onlinevolunteering.org - has listings of virtual volunteer opportunities. This site is sponsored by the UN.

www.netsquared.org - a good overall resource on virtual volunteering

www.volunteermatch.org – also lists virtual volunteer opportunities, note this site only accommodates US based charities, but many of these would be open to Canadian volunteers.

www.charityvillage.com – has a good amount of information on virtual volunteering and also lists virtual volunteer opportunities all across Canada.

www.idealists.org – A great site on volunteering in general listing virtual volunteer opportunities from around the world.

www.true Travellers.org – Another excellent site on volunteering listing volunteer opportunities from around the world.

www.dosomething.org – A site listing virtual volunteer opportunities specifically targeting youth.

Creating and Managing a Virtual Volunteer Program for your organization

Why Involve Online Volunteers?

Online volunteers, just as those who come on site, extend the resources of an organization. The additional help augments staff resources and allows an organization to reach more clients. There are many good reasons to involve volunteers via online technologies, as well as to use the Internet for recruitment of on-site volunteers:

- Potential volunteers not reached by traditional off-line means may be reached online.
- There are people who don't read the newspaper's column on volunteer opportunities or who don't read bulletins from the local volunteer center, but who would, indeed, love to volunteer and are easily reached online via the World Wide Web and appropriate Internet discussion groups.
- People who prefer not to volunteer on-site may be willing to do so via their home or work computers. Setting out expectations online allows prospective volunteers to self screen their interests before contacting an agency.
- Some people prefer to communicate via online means. Dashing off an e-mail or filling out an online sign-up sheet is more convenient and, for some people, preferable to calling an organization.
- Virtual volunteering programs allow for the participation of people who might find on-site volunteering difficult or impossible because of a disability, mobility issue, home obligation or work schedule. This, in turn, allows agencies to benefit from the additional talent and resources of more volunteers.
- People in their 20s and 30s are more prone to use the resources of the Internet than other age groups and like the novelty and convenience of finding and signing up for either on-site or virtual volunteering via this technology. These younger volunteers can turn into long-time supporters, including becoming financial donors.
- Online volunteers are environmentally friendly—no car exhausts, less paper waste, etc.

What Can Someone Do as an Online Volunteer?

This guide has defined two categories of online volunteering: technical assistance and direct contact with clients.

Technical Assistance

“Technical assistance” assignments utilize the expertise of a volunteer to support paid staff or other volunteers at an agency, and usually involve accomplishing a project or reaching an objective. The results are readily visible: a final product, a report, etc. E-mail is the main form of communication as the work progresses.

Here are just a few examples of what a volunteer can do to provide virtual technical assistance:

- *Conduct online research:* find information to use in an agency's upcoming grant proposal or newsletter, gather information on a particular government program or legislation that affects an agency's clients, gather Web site addresses of similarly-focused organizations, etc.
- *Provide professional consulting expertise:* answer an agency's questions regarding human resource, accounting, management or legal issues, write a speech, develop a strategic plan for a particular department, etc.
- *Conduct online outreach and advocacy:* post information to appropriate newsgroups and electronic lists, prepare legislative alerts to be sent via e-mail, etc.
- Design an agency's newsletter or brochure, or copy edit an agency's publication or proposal
- Design a logo for an agency or program
- Translate a document into another language
- Prepare information for an agency's World Wide Web site make sure a Web site is accessible for people using assistive technologies register an agency's Web home page and other appropriate pages with online search engines, directories and "What's New" sites
- Design a database
- Do daily searches for news articles relating to an organization or a particular topic.
- Provide an online orientation to all volunteers with Internet access (whether or not they are on-site or online volunteers), or survey volunteers via e-mail about their experiences with an agency or program.

Direct Client Contact

Most organizations readily see the potential of involving volunteers in doing virtual technical assistance. A much more complex subject is how to create electronic links between a volunteer and a client or other recipient of service. This subject is discussed in more detail later, but here are some ideas for what an online volunteer could do with or for a client:

- Electronically "visit" with someone who is homebound, in a hospital or a rest home; this can be done in addition to on-site, in-person visits
- Provide online mentoring and instruction via e-mail or private intranet (helping students with homework questions, helping an adult learn a skill or find a job, or help prison inmates with studies or programs)
- Help with language instruction (for instance, help people learning English)
- Staff an e-mail or chat room answer/support line, just like a telephone answer/support line, where people write in questions and trained volunteers answer them; or, be part of an online support group, where members provide advice to each other via a chat room, electronic discussion list or newsgroup.
- supervise or moderate an agency-sponsored chat room, listserv or newsgroup.

- provide advance "welcoming" of people about to enter the hospital, go to summer camp, etc. from volunteers, via e-mail or a special Web page or intranet, and post-service follow up to the same group via e-mail or the Web.
- work with other volunteers and/or clients to create a project, such as writing about the news of their neighborhood, school, special interest group, etc., or gathering historical information relating to a particular time or region, to post on a Web site or use in printed material. create distance learning opportunities, such as training volunteers in a subject via the Internet
- supervise any of the above activities via the Internet and provide guidance, or ask for staff guidance, as appropriate.

How Do I Set Up a Virtual Volunteering Program?

Managing online volunteers is not vastly different from managing people on-site: it involves basic management skills such as setting and communicating goals, assessing progress and giving regular feedback. Agencies that already have volunteers working off-site, in the field, won't find it altogether foreign territory to work with volunteers virtually. For that matter, most volunteer managers don't see on-site volunteers every moment either.

Managing volunteers virtually even affords managers several benefits, such as having an automatic, extensive written record of volunteer activities (via e-mail and chat archives). Still, in a virtual environment, some adjustments in style and approaches to volunteer management must be made to ensure success. For instance, volunteers working via home can feel isolated or undervalued, and gradually lose their inspiration for the work your organization is doing.

Involving volunteers via the Internet comes naturally to some people. For others, there is a significant learning curve. Keep in mind that not all of the information here may be applicable to your organization or to every manager. Also remember that this is new territory for all of us! We're all still learning how to make the most of this exciting new medium. The best volunteer programs pay attention to the thirteen major elements of successful volunteer management:

13 MAJOR ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT

1. *PLANNING AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION*
2. *VOLUNTEER WORK DESIGN*
3. *RECRUITMENT/PUBLIC RELATIONS*
4. *INTERVIEWING, SCREENING, AND MATCHING*
5. *ORIENTATION*
6. *TRAINING*
7. *VOLUNTEER/EMPLOYEE RELATIONS*
8. *COORDINATION*
9. *SUPERVISION*
10. *EVALUATION*

11. RECOGNITION

12. RECORDKEEPING AND REPORTING

13. VOLUNTEER INPUT

Online Comfort Level

It's difficult to talk about setting up a virtual volunteering program as a step-by-step process because every organization is different and may need to implement some suggestions in a different order than presented in this *Guidebook*.

While one key to a successful volunteer program is good volunteer management, a second key—equally important—is a high comfort level in online communication and culture. Although we do not go into detail about this subject, be aware from the start that Internet skills belong in your volunteer management toolbox.

If you are not already corresponding via e-mail daily, particularly with people you have not met in person, we suggest that you look for and join an online discussion group. This can be a group relating to your professional life, such as CyberVPM, or a group that discusses something you enjoy in your personal life, from a hobby to your favourite television show.

There are suggestions for how to find such groups. Join one really active group or a few moderately busy ones—don't get overwhelmed. You can just read messages without posting any yourself (this is called "lurking") or you can interact with the group. Whichever you choose, this will be an excellent exercise to prepare you for managing online volunteers.

Laying the Groundwork

The first of the thirteen fundamental elements of volunteer program Management is "Planning and Resource Allocation." Any planning you would do for any new volunteer activity will be applicable here, too. But there are a few special needs to consider in preparing for online volunteers.

Have the right equipment and online services available, which means easy accessibility to a computer and the Internet, a high-speed modem, and access to technical advisors (whether expert volunteers or your agency's staff). You must have your own e-mail address. Sharing an e-mailbox is awkward and slows communication. It is equally important to check whether the people who volunteer virtually have the right equipment and Internet service, too. All of this costs money, so budget in advance.

Now it's time to set goals so that everyone knows what you want to accomplish through virtual volunteering assignments. Start small. A pilot project is the best approach; you can expand as you learn the ropes. When you have articulated achievable goals, you can then coach volunteers towards those goals, and later evaluate and recognize success. Amend any policies and procedures manuals relating to 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 dismissal of an online volunteer, 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.

Once you've determined that your organization is ready for virtual volunteering, it's time for some internal groundwork: getting staff buy-in and participation; developing an implementation plan; training staff and volunteers. But the most critical task awaiting you is developing the assignments you will ask online volunteers to fulfill.

Virtual Volunteering Work Design

Just as with any other type of volunteering, the first step in creating online tasks for volunteers is to look around and see what needs to be done. When thinking about possible virtual volunteering tasks, start by examining what existing volunteers already do for staff and clients. Could you add an online component to one of your existing volunteer activities? Before identifying assignments that could involve volunteers virtually, your organization must first have a clear understanding of the various objectives and tasks of all staff members and current volunteers. Then you can determine if there are components of these tasks that could be completed off-site by a volunteer working via a home or work computer and the Internet.

But don't stop there. This new medium has all sorts of new potential. We are all learning what the Internet can do to expand our services beyond what we might have imagined. It is in this realm that virtual volunteering is most exciting. In many cases, you will be engaging volunteers in experimental work—testing new ways of service provision as well as widely expanding your organization's sphere of influence. For the first time you can think globally— and act on it!

In their publication, *Successful Management in the Virtual Office*, Bernie Kelly and Bruce McGraw identify the following categories of tasks as appropriate for telecommuting jobs, and they are also appropriate for virtual volunteering:

Virtual Volunteering and Telecommuting Jobs

- Administrative
- Analysis
- Calculating
- Data analysis
- Data entry
- Data manipulation
- Data processing
- Data programming
- Maintaining databases
- Meeting with clients
- Planning
- Project-oriented work/management
- Reading
- Recordkeeping
- Research
- Sending/receiving electronic mail
- Spreadsheet analysis
- Support activities
- Thinking
- Typing
- Using a computer
- Word processing
- Writing
- Web Design

Tapping Expertise

The power of cyberspace is that it can connect you with just about any knowledge base you need. Individuals with specialized training or credentials— anywhere in the world—can now be recruited as technical advisors. No travel time or costs. Just succinct e-mail exchanges.

Help your staff to let their imaginations soar. What types of information or advice would help them to do their work to the highest standards?

How about:

- Access to a child psychiatrist for questions about clients in crisis?
- Feedback on a press release from a newspaper editor, before mailing out 500 copies?
- Having a “think tank” of five experts who can toss an idea around to assess and expand it?
- Access to translating materials into any language under the sun?

Virtual volunteering makes these types of technical assistance feasible because experts can be recruited online, never have to come on-site for meetings (less time consuming for them), and can contribute something truly helpful in manageable e-mails.

The key to successful online technical assistance is the art of asking good questions, the more specific the better. The more open-ended and vague, the poorer the chances of receiving a useful answer. No expert has the time or energy to do a “brain dump” of everything s/he knows. Remember, too, that sometimes a telephone call is more efficient than e-mail! Allow the volunteer this option whenever possible.

"Byte-Sized" Assignments

It is often best to start off with smaller projects. The volunteer will experience the unique aspects of virtual volunteering and you will have a trial run to get acquainted with the work of the newcomer. Assign tasks that can be completed in five hours or less, with a deadline of two weeks after the assignment is made. This gives the volunteer a definite time boundary for working with you. If you both find the first experience satisfactory, the volunteer can take on another assignment. If things do not work out as hoped, this initial trial run offers a natural break point to halt the volunteer's involvement. Some possible assignments to try with a first-time online volunteer at your organization include:

- Online research of any sort
- Converting an e-mail newsletter to a Web page for your site
- Writing (or editing) an article, press release, or anything else and submitting it via e-mail
- Web site proofreading with IBM/clone PC if the agency uses Macs, or vice versa
- Web site proofreading with a browser other than what your agency uses in-house
- Compiling or updating a list of Internet discussion groups relating to a particular topic, or a list of Web sites of organizations sharing an interest in your organization's mission, or a list of publications with a particular focus
- Compiling a calendar of conferences and events with a particular focus—with Web addresses of where to find more information doing a Web search to seek out resources that are needed for specific clients: summer camps; vocational training; etc.
- Checking out the requirements of various funders, such as foundations, by accessing grant proposal submission information online.
- Adding HTML codes to make web pages accessible for people using assistive technologies.
- Converting Web pages from English into another language

There are many ways to create new services for clients or consumers through virtual volunteering. For example, a volunteer, via e-mail or a chat room, could:

- Electronically "visit" with someone who is homebound, or in a hospital or nursing home, or with someone geographically isolated
- Provide online mentoring and instruction via e-mail (helping students with homework questions, helping an adult learn a skill or find a job, or

with homework questions, helping an adult learn a skill or find a job, or help prison inmates with studies or programs)

- Help with language instruction (for people learning English) by allowing clients the chance to practice writing skills via e-mail.
- Staff an e-mail or chat room answer/support line, like a phone answer/support line, where people write their questions and volunteers answer them
- Offer advance "welcoming" of people about to enter the hospital, go to summer camp, etc., and then do post-service follow up of the same group.
- Work together with clients online to create a project, such as writing about the news of their neighborhood, school, special interest group, etc. to post on a Web site or use in printed material conduct distance learning: training on a subject via the Internet.

Recruiting Potential Virtual Volunteers

Target Your Audiences

The most successful recruiting is accomplished through targeted marketing. Spend some time (perhaps with a group of advisors) thinking about the following two questions:

- 1. What are the skills or credentials, and technical equipment, our online assignments require?*
- 2. Where are we most likely to find people with those skills/credentials/equipment?*

Again, your answers must match each distinct volunteer position. The point initially is to brainstorm as many ideas as possible about potential sources of volunteers—whether or not you know how you might approach such sources. Techniques come later!

There are many sources of virtual volunteers, especially volunteers with disabilities, these sources would be sensible contact points:

- A vocational rehabilitation agency
- The MIS departments of large agencies that serve disabled populations, such as Canadian Mental Health or Cerebral Palsy
- Disability rights groups
- Computer classes in special ed. schools (for both students and teachers, by the way)

From these two very different lists, you can see that the strategies you might use for spreading the word of your volunteer opportunities will vary as well. Off-line, you might employ techniques such as:

- bulletin board flyers
- contacting the head of the computer department for referrals
- making a presentation to a class

Online you will use the electronic equivalents of such activities. The many options open to you are outlined below.

Regardless of your recruitment technique, make sure you are ready to act when applicants respond to your outreach. The number one complaint we hear from volunteers is that agencies said they needed volunteers, but were not ready to put them to work immediately, sometimes not even responding to the offer of help. Keep in mind that volunteer recruitment is most effective when it is a year-round effort involving a variety of techniques designed to reach a diverse group. Use of many different approaches will yield the most success, since not all interested persons can be reached by a single method. So make sure your virtual volunteering program is fully in place prior to recruiting and be in a position to respond to inquiries as they come in.

Marketing Volunteer Opportunities Online

Naturally the Internet provides all sorts of avenues for spreading your message electronically. This section is as relevant to finding off-line volunteers as online ones. Even if someone will physically work on-site at your agency, you may very well find him or her via electronic means

“Golden Rule” of Recruitment

Do NOT recruit volunteers online (or off-line, for that matter) until you have well-defined, written volunteer assignment descriptions, and you have an immediate next step for people who call or e-mail about these opportunities (a date for a face-to-face meeting or orientation, for instance).

Online Volunteer Opportunity Registries

New Web sites are springing up with the goal of assisting the nonprofit community in general and volunteering in particular. They all share several things in common right now: they are free; you can post and update your entries at will; they allow prospective volunteers to search for opportunities postal code and by interest; and they are growing in popularity as people become aware of the accessibility of this sort of information online.

Unfortunately, they also share another characteristic: most of the postings are too general and many are out of date. Remember that the web allows you to be as specific as necessary. Better to post ten detailed position descriptions that really help people to self-screen their interest than to post one “Hometown Agency Needs Help” ad that gives no real information at all. Return to the directory site and delete assignments no longer available or update those that are. And, as we have emphasized repeatedly, do not post at all unless you will contact respondents immediately with a next step!

Charity Village’s website at www.charityvillage.com is a great place to start placing virtual volunteer ads. They are Canadian and exclusively related to the volunteering and non profit

community. Note that most of the free commercial online services, such as www.kijiji.ca and www.craigslist.ca have created special interest areas devoted exclusively to volunteering opportunities. The ads are free to post and get a lot of traffic.

Online Discussion Groups

Through “newsgroups” and other electronic discussion groups accessed through e-mail, people with mutual interests can communicate amazingly well in cyberspace. When you “subscribe” to an online discussion group or other electronic publication, your e-mailbox receives all messages posted each day, or you can browse postings via your newsgroup reader (usually your Web browser). Fellow subscribers can be limitless in number and anywhere on the globe.

The point for a recruiter is that online groups gather like-minded individuals who might be candidates as volunteers. It is target marketing heaven. Looking for people who can teach bicycle safety to your teens? Find a bicyclist newsgroup or bulletin board. Want to find an architect with experience in designing tree houses? Dip into an architecture or an outdoor recreation list.

Some lists reject postings that read like an advertisement. Introduce yourself courteously to the discussion group hosts first and ask how best to access their group and if your posting would be appropriate. Explain who (and where) you are and why you are using this format to locate someone with these particular skills.

Lurk before you leap. Get a sense of the audience in a particular group before posting, to make sure that they might be receptive to your information. For instance, don't post volunteer opportunities to the newsgroup soc.org.nonprofit, as this group is made up of nonprofit professionals who are looking for volunteers themselves. Posting inappropriately can result in bad publicity for your organization.

Here is a list of online discussion groups specifically related to volunteering:

<http://www.groups.google.com>

www.netsquared.org

<http://www.techsoup.org/community/index.cfm>

<http://groups.yahoo.com>

Search for regional newsgroups using the name of the city where you are located and another keyword, such as “volunteer” or, depending on your volunteer position descriptions, “Web design,” “pregnancy,” “tutoring,” etc. You can also try the name of nearby colleges and universities to find Internet discussion groups in your area that might be open to the posting of volunteer opportunities.

Social Media Sites

The latest trend in networking in general is Social Media. The most commonly used are: www.twitter.com , www.facebook.com , www.youtube.com , www.linkedin.com and blogs. Getting familiar with these tools takes a bit of time but once you know how to use them they can revolutionize how you advertise your volunteer opportunities.

Twitter- www.twitter.com

Twitter is a chance to broadcast your message to a group of people who want to hear it. The first step is to set up your twitter account and start to follow other twitter users who have a twitter account related to you or one that you have interest in. In Twitter you have people you are following and people who are following you. Once you are registered, people will seek you out to receive your 'tweets' or messages. As your following grows over time and as the people you are following grows, twitter will become a more effective way to get your message out. It is always good practise to 'follow' those who are following you. It is also good practise to send out messages or 'tweets' to your subscribers on a regular basis. It is a good idea to broadcast all of your volunteer opportunities, not just your virtual volunteer opportunities. The only limitation to Twitter is that your message must be limited to 140 characters or less. Most people will create an Ad such as: Virtual Volunteers Wanted! Followed by a link to their website in order to keep it short.

Facebook- www.facebook.com

Most people are familiar with facebook, but forget that you can create a facebook page for their particular organization. As your 'friends' list grows more and more people will be seeing what is new at your organization. It is also a good idea to post all your volunteer opportunities as they come up on your facebook page. On facebook, you are also able to create 'groups' and also publicize 'events' as they come up. Your facebook friends will join these so you could create a group called 'Virtual Volunteers' and recruit people that way as well.

Youtube – www.youtube.com

Youtube is another social media medium for your organization. If you have a digital camera with video capabilities and/or a webcam, you can upload videos to your youtube site for the world to see. You can name your videos 'Volunteer Opportunities' or 'Virtual volunteers needed' or something to that effect and it will show up as people on youtube do searches on various topics.

People will either comment on your video or send you a message.

Linkedin – www.linkedin.com

Linkedin is like a massive contact manager. Users can register their profile and search for people and / or organizations to add as contacts. It is different than facebook in that it is generally used for business and professional purposes. It is also an excellent tool for job searching and general business and professional networking. You are able to create ads that will be displayed on the Linkedin website but you must pay for these on a CPC (cost per click) basis so you could advertise your volunteering opportunity this way, although it is probably not the most effective medium to do so. It is, however great for making contacts in the community.

Blogs – Your own and others

Blogs are another way that organizations are networking and getting their message out. Setting up a blog is relatively easy. The two main blog providers are www.blogger.com and www.wordpress.com . You simply name it, select a templated look and start writing. There is no cost in setting up or hosting a blog and many non profits use it in lieu of a newsletter. You would then simply post your virtual volunteer opportunities as they come up. The biggest thing to keep in mind is to update your blog with fresh content on a regular basis.

Posting to other organization's blogs are another way to get your message out. Simply do a google search on blogs related to your non profit or blogs in your area and add your comment to it. Some blogs don't like advertising on their site, but usually when it comes to volunteering it generally isn't an issue.

Your Organization's Web Site

A growing number of non-profit and government organizations are developing web sites to publicize their work, attract donors, reach prospective clients, communicate their message to anyone interested, and even deliver their services. So, if volunteers are already active in the organization, they ought to be visible on the web site, too. Work with your organization's web designer to post specific pages for volunteer news, recruitment, and recognition. Make sure there is a "hot link" on the home page to connect interested people to information about volunteering in your agency.

The beauty of cyberspace is that you can post absolutely everything you want to share with the public at no printing cost, but those who enter your site can choose to access as much or as little information as they please. The person who loses interest in your material will exit; the prospective volunteer can, in fact, become quite well educated about your work and what you need volunteers to do.

As we have been stressing, it is crucial that you offer a way for people to respond immediately. E-mail is a basic tool. Ideally, you'll have some sort of response mechanism on the page as well, so that an interested person can "click" on "I'm interested, let's go to the next step..." and get a screen with a message form that is delivered electronically back to you. All of this is valid for any applicant, but it goes double for anyone interested in virtual volunteering.

Make sure that there are links to your volunteer information pages on every other page of your web site. Register your volunteer opportunities/ information page with Web search engines and directories. Which ones? Start with the ones you use most. Ask staff and volunteers for their suggestions as well.

Include your organization's Web address on all printed materials (business cards, letterhead, newsletters, fax cover sheets, etc.) right next to your organization's "snail mail" address and phone number. In your mailed newsletter, announce that there is information on volunteering on your Web site. In any newspaper announcements, press releases, PSAs, etc., as well as online announcements regarding volunteer opportunities at your organization, note that there is volunteer information on your World Wide Web site as well. Why do all this? Because many people in your target audiences who visit your Web site do so because of something they have read on paper or been told over the phone, not necessarily because they are looking for it via a Web search engine.

Finally, train everyone who answers your organization's main phone line, as well as your executive director, marketing staff and fund raising staff, to mention that there is volunteer information on the Web site (so they can make appropriate referrals). Also make sure they know how to say the Web address correctly!

If for some reason your organization is unwilling to create its own web site or to give you the space you need on its site, consider designing a web page for the volunteer program that is independent of the site of the agency as a whole. Obviously, if you are genuinely interested in establishing a virtual volunteering program, you have to have an electronic presence online. You can also create a blog specific to your volunteer opportunity as well.

E-mail Newsbriefs and Broadcasts

Even without a Web site, you can generate electronic communication and send it to a long list of interested people at no printing or postage cost at all. Keep an "address book" of the e-mail addresses of prospective volunteer sources and develop regular news updates to keep your organization on people's minds. Remember that the instant nature of cyberspace allows you to advertise a volunteer assignment the same day it becomes open. Whenever you send out a press release to the traditional media, make an electronic copy and e-mail it out to your Internet contacts, too. This is often called an 'email blast' and should be a regular tool in your recruiting toolbox. Always remember to paste your recipient's email address in the BCC or blind carbon copy field in your email program so that emails are kept confidential.

Hints about Recruiting College Students

People in college are often looking for unpaid internships as a way to get the experience they need for a career. College students are also probably the most wired population of all. Seek out web sites for colleges (which often give you the ability to communicate with specific academic departments) and student organizations. As with every other population, you will find various online discussion groups for students. Some college based job placement sites have options for posting volunteer internship opportunities as well as paid work.

Despite their access to the Internet, students are still reachable offline, as well. Mail printed announcements regarding your volunteer/unpaid internship opportunities (including virtual assignments) to every college and university in your city. Mail these announcements to these departments and offices:

- Career development office
- Student volunteer center (which would be happy to help you with your search) and the English department (because such students usually have excellent writing skills and attention to detail)
- Departments and offices that are related to your organization's mission or the volunteer opportunity

Today most universities give every student an e-mail address on the school's intranet. Find out if there are any regular e-mailings on campus which might include notice of your virtual volunteering needs.

Keep Current!

Two important issues: timely response and updating your information. Cyberspace is a here-and-now environment. When someone sends an e-mail or a Web message, it is delivered to you instantly. So netiquette demands a reasonably quick response of at least acknowledgment if not a complete answer. Check and deal with your e-mail daily and never less than once every four days. Here is a great assignment for a volunteer who likes computers!

The humorous but ironic term for a Web site that never changes is a "cobWeb." Be sure you are not gathering virtual dust! The whole point of cyberspace is to go beyond the limits of the print media. Your Web page is not simply another newsletter. Once you publish a paper newsletter, it is permanent until replaced by the next edition. Not so on the Web. You can—and should—update postings frequently to make it useful for people to enter your site often. There is a lot of competition on the Web today as new sites appear. What would make someone want to return to your site to see if any new volunteer opportunities are posted? A good idea is to designate the job of updating your website/blog/twitter and facebook to someone in your staff or a volunteer. Keeping these media fresh is the whole key to success with them.

Getting Acquainted Online

Be prepared for some back and forth e-mailing with prospective volunteers. Keep the e-mails comparatively short. It's better (and much faster) to exchange a series of brief question-and-answer communiqués rather than pose a multitude of questions and have to wait for the volunteer to write a whole essay in return. On the other hand, some volunteers do not like this approach, preferring to complete the initial process as quickly as possible through fewer, if longer, e-mails.

As you e-mail back and forth with prospective volunteers, you will get a sense of their work style, their written communication skills, and their commitment to your organization. Prospective volunteers may say they will answer e-mails within two business days of receipt, but it's during the screening and orientation process that you will find out if this is so.

If you have an online volunteer application form on your web site, you will already have some basic information about the applicant. Putting the application on your web site automates the process—you don't communicate with most prospective volunteers directly until they have completed this form.

Start with basic questions, whether on an electronic form or via e-mail: "What made you express interest in our virtual volunteering assignments?" "What types of things would you like to do online as a volunteer?" If appropriate, you might further suggest that the volunteer read certain pages on your Web site carefully for more information before answering you. You can also ask the applicant to snail or e-mail you a resume or other documentation of his or her background, as well as samples of similar work performed.

Show the applicant that you are reading his/her responses by following up on something s/he wrote. Ask whatever questions you would like to clarify based on the application information. The point is: Don't make every e-mail sound like a "form letter." On-site volunteers wouldn't be motivated by a standardized approach and neither will online volunteers. Ask questions to get an overview of the resources available to the prospective volunteer as part of a virtual assignment. Confirm that the volunteer has regular access to:

- a computer
- a personal e-mail account (home or work?)
- the Internet, both via e-mail and the Web

You may or may not also need to know the following, depending on the nature of the assignments under consideration:

- Do you know how to use Web search engines? Which ones do you use regularly?
- Do you know how to zip/unzip or stuff/unstuff a file?
- Do you know how to e-mail a document as an attachment?
- What word processing software do you have? spreadsheet software? database software? artwork software? How experienced are you with each of these software packages?
- Do you know how to convert documents to other formats? a word processing document to a spread sheet? One kind of database to another?
- Do you know how to import data into a database from another data file?
- Do you know how to export data from a database?
- Have you ever participated in an online chat, and/or been a regular participant of an online discussion group?

After the potential volunteer has completed your online application process and answered your questions, you will need to communicate your organization's volunteer policies and code of conduct, and provide an overview of what will happen next. You can now describe the online assignments available in more detail.

Volunteers will usually tell you exactly what they want to do online for your organization, particularly if you have provided well-written descriptions of potential opportunities at your organization. If you really can't match their skills or interests with what you have available, tell them. Often, the volunteer will still be enthusiastic to help with an existing assignment but, if not, it is only fair to allow him or her to seek elsewhere for a service opportunity. Also, just as in the real world, you do not want to push round pegs into square holes. It is always better to live with a vacancy for a while longer than to place the wrong volunteer into an important assignment and be sorry later.

Matching volunteers to assignments, on or off-line, is a learned skill. The more you do it, the better you will become at matching people to tasks. Be patient, be supportive, and remember that not every volunteer job is right for every volunteer. The better your screening and orientation

process, the less chance there is for misunderstandings or incomplete assignments.

Selecting and screening potential volunteers

Once you have some potential volunteers, it is important that you implement an application and screening process just like any other volunteer position.

Special Screening Concerns

If appropriate for the assignment under consideration, ask for references and follow up on them. Police background checks and similar screening procedures may be legally required, particularly if the volunteer will be matched one-to-one with a child or older person. Handle this exactly as you would for an on-site volunteer applicant. Just be sure you explain that *all* volunteers must undergo this screening, so that online volunteers do not feel you are in any way suspicious of them because you are interacting with them electronically. This may mean online volunteers must come on-site for a face-to-face screening interview, which will exclude volunteers out of your geographic area. But if this is required to best serve your clients and meet your mission, so be it.

In certain situations, you may need to ascertain whether or not the volunteer is under age 18. If so, then parental permission may be an issue, unless the volunteering is being done as a classroom assignment.

Typing out answers can be more time-consuming than a productive oral conversation—and your personal preference may be voice communication. You can learn a great deal about an applicant on the telephone by his or her voice, tone, level of energy, and other behaviour while speaking with you.

Assess Skills and Interests

If a volunteer came to you largely because he or she is enthusiastic about your mission, then an assignment that directly helps your organization do its work better would probably be of most interest to the volunteer— gathering Web site addresses ("surf and gather") for similarly-focused organizations, for instance. But if a volunteer wants to work with your agency mostly because he or she wants to develop a skill, such as Web design abilities, that person may find a "surf and gather" assignment boring or unsatisfying. Just as with on-site volunteers, you will need to be flexible in matching agency needs with volunteer interests. For example, for this volunteer, you might structure an online research assignment that must be provided in .HTML format, which would give you the information you need in an easy-to-use format, and give the volunteer the .HTML experience desired.

A bigger issue is ascertaining whether a volunteer already has the level of skill necessary to do the work at hand. Self-assessment may not always be reliable. As already noted, you can ask for references or for

examples of previous work. This is where an initial assignment is very important because it will let you evaluate the volunteer's ability and whether or not additional training is needed.

If the volunteer will be working directly with another member of the staff, include that person in the screening process. "Introduce" the applicant and the prospective supervisor/contact by e-mail and have them get-acquainted electronically. Share all the data you have collected with the staff member ahead of time so that the volunteer will not need to repeat anything already communicated. But allow the staffer to ask any questions relevant to the volunteer's knowledge or skills—whatever is necessary to make a decision about the competency of the applicant.

Agree on the Assignment

At some point in the process, you must definitively "accept" the applicant as a volunteer into an assignment, at least as a "volunteer-in-training." This should be done with some enthusiasm and words of welcome to mark the end of the "interviewing" and the start of initial preparation and work.

This is the volunteer program manager's last chance to clearly define the role this volunteer has accepted, and to make sure you both understand that role. It's more than just a name of an assignment and a deadline to complete it. This is where you add pertinent details to the volunteer position description, such as:

- How is this assignment in particular important to the organization?
- In what format should the work be turned in? (as an attachment? cut and pasted into an e-mail? uploaded via FTP?)
- May the volunteer contact organizations on behalf of your agency? If so, how should he or she represent his/her role with you?
- What forms of communication are needed for this assignment other than e-mail? a fax machine? voice mail?

Stress to the volunteer that there is nothing virtual about assignment deadlines or the organization's need for these assignments to be completed. Let the volunteer know how important this assignment is to the organization. Explain how his or her work is going to be used, or where the volunteer fits into the overall project. Giving volunteers the "big picture" and showing how their contributions are going to impact the organization are excellent motivational tools. This, in turn, can help prevent virtual no-shows on assignments.

Tell the volunteer when the natural stopping points are in assignments, when you both can look at what the volunteer has completed, re-evaluate the volunteer's expectations and availability, and decide how best to proceed. Don't automatically assume that volunteers are going to be around for several months, particularly if you have never worked with them before.

Training

As already discussed, we suggest new online volunteers start off with a simple assignment that can be completed in five hours or less, with a deadline of two weeks after the assignment is made. This gives the volunteer a sense of what volunteering with your organization is like, as well as what it's like to volunteer virtually, and it gives an indication of the volunteer's likely future performance.

The amount of training you need to do will depend on the demands of the assignment plus the skill level of the volunteer from the start. Also, training must be done by the person who will supervise the work, not necessarily the volunteer program manager. There will be different initial training needs to get the volunteer started, and then ongoing or "in-service" training to keep volunteers updated. Initial training cannot be standardized, except to remember that *good instructions* are as important as new skill learning. Perhaps the best tool you can give volunteers is a checklist of what needs to be done.

It is important to monitor initial assignments in a supportive way. Much of training is actually "coaching," offering suggested approaches as the work is being performed. So a good idea is to set up a schedule of "check-in" e-mails or even telephone calls as the volunteer is getting started. This will allow you to catch areas that need some correction, as well as to encourage the volunteer to keep on schedule with the work. Cyberspace offers some exciting new ways to provide ongoing information to volunteers, particularly to update material and to keep everyone in a feedback loop. For example, you can:

- Post materials to special pages on your Web site, accessible only to volunteers.
- Provide audio or video recordings of volunteer meetings and workshops.
- Develop special e-mail lists and bulletin boards so that volunteers can communicate directly with each other to ask questions and share tips with volunteers in the same assignment.

If you post something important, you can e-mail an online "quiz" and require it to be completed after the volunteer has read the posting! There are all sorts of ways to make training interactive on the Web.

Recordkeeping and Reporting

Managers of remote volunteers may feel an even stronger need to maintain frequent and ongoing communications with online volunteers, to make up for seldom or never seeing each other face-to-face. As discussed in the section on Supervision, provide guidelines about the expected frequency of communications, what types of reports are expected and when, and the desired format and content.

You may also want to institute a progress report to your virtual volunteers via e-mail on each Friday or Monday. Each volunteer reports:

- the number of hours worked (even if it's none);
- what percentage of the assignment is left to do (is it half done? 75% done?) and how "on track" the volunteer feels;

- what tools and resources are proving most valuable in completion of this assignment;
- any problems/obstacles the volunteer has encountered in completing this assignment.

It is important to reply to these progress reports as soon as possible to acknowledge receipt. If the volunteer doesn't report in, be proactive— write him or her to check in on progress. Without such ongoing communications, your volunteers will feel out of the loop and unsupported.

You can also use Web-based forms for volunteers to report progress. Such ongoing communication has the added benefit of providing an automatic written record of volunteer activities and progress. Develop a procedure to track reported data, keep it accessible in a centralized location on CD or on paper (a spreadsheet, a folder, a directory, etc.), and review this information regularly. You will then be able to communicate what online volunteers have contributed to date, including the hours they have logged. Your goal is to show the impact of virtual volunteering at your organization. Recordkeeping means nothing if you don't generate reports. You will want to keep your organization's executives informed about virtual volunteering activities but you also can use reports as a way to motivate both the volunteers and the staff with whom they work. Make everyone a part of the bigger picture. You may also want to create spreadsheets or charts documenting progress as you go along.

Special issues Online

Confidentiality

The issues of confidentiality, privacy and security are important offline and online, particularly if you are serving any vulnerable population of clients (children, the elderly, the seriously ill, etc.) who deserve special protection. Similarly, volunteers also deserve protection, especially if you serve legal offenders or people with emotional problems.

The first question is: What are your legal obligations? You may be required by law to conduct certain screening procedures and background checks before assigning any volunteer to a client. You may need to bond volunteers who will deal with financial records. In such cases, you must do the same thing with online volunteers as with those whom you see on site. More than anything else, confidentiality is a training issue. Emphasize the importance of confidentiality at every opportunity. Put a statement about it into every volunteer position description. Add it to orientation materials. Say it in training.

Be sure you explain clearly what you mean by "confidentiality." It is more than not revealing a client's name; it's not revealing any information that would allow someone to guess the identity of the individual involved. You can (and, in some cases, should) develop a specific pledge of confidentiality—noting that violation of this key principle is cause for dismissal—and ask every volunteer to "sign" it—either virtually or, if

necessary, by fax or mail.

In some cases, however, "confidentiality" is a smokescreen put up by staff resistant to volunteer involvement. It can be paternalistic to feel that clients must be "protected" against volunteers who might gossip or somehow betray confidentiality. What are the safeguards to discourage paid staff from doing this? After all, if you really wonder how clients feel about their situation being shared with a volunteer, ask them! If the clients give permission (freely, without any sense that they have to say yes), then it's o.k. to share their identities with the volunteer.

The Internet provides some special ways for parties to remain anonymous. Obviously, you can ask volunteers and clients to select a screen name that does not reveal personal information. If you are very concerned about this, offer volunteers and/or clients mail boxes via your own ISP and you assign a screen name. Or move to some sort of password-only system that assures that only legitimate people enter a communications area on your website.

Speak to your Webmaster, MIS Department, or whoever is in charge of your system about security precautions already in place. Generally no one wants their e-mail address—or messages!—to be pirated in any way, so there are undoubtedly already safeguards in the system that will work for the volunteer program, too.

To protect volunteers, the same advice applies. Strongly suggest that they do not give their home address or phone number to a client, if that is a concern you (or they) have.

Volunteers under the Age of 18

Given the number of teenagers who love the Internet and who have already developed greater technology skills than their parents, you are likely to find youngsters under the age of 18 (maybe well under 18) applying for virtual volunteering assignments. Many teens experience difficulty in finding on-site volunteer programs willing to give them meaningful roles, so it's a treat to be valued as an "expert" in the virtual environment.

An important issue is parental permission. While you may not ask a volunteer applicant for date of birth, you are always permitted to ask "are you under age 18?" Place this question on your online application form. The safest thing to do when someone answers "yes" is to mail or fax a permission slip for parental permission to do the volunteer work. While the majority of the time the type of teen who wants to give online service is responsible, one can anticipate times when an eager teen uses equipment, runs up expenses, etc., without checking it out with his/her folks first. Use your judgement in terms of parental permission. For a three-hour task, it may not be worth the effort, but for a 15-hour task over three weeks, it's probably useful to have documentation on file that the parents know. By the way, kids expect this. The point is—so do parents. If you publicly post the names of volunteers on your Web site as recognition, you don't want anyone saying: "Who said you could put my kid's name up?"

Virtual Volunteering for People with Disabilities

One benefit of online volunteering programs is that they can allow for the greater participation of people who might find volunteering difficult or impossible because of a disability. This in turn allows organizations to benefit from the additional talent and resources of more volunteers. More than 4 million Canadians have some type of disability. People with disabilities volunteer for the same reasons as anyone else. They want to contribute their time and energy to improving their quality of life. They want challenging, rewarding, educational service projects that address needs of a community and provide them with outlets for their enthusiasm and talents.

People with disabilities who volunteer are first and foremost *volunteers*, not "disabled volunteers." Bringing people with disabilities into a volunteer program should be conducted in the same spirit as it is for those without disabilities.

A volunteer's disability should only be considered in the context of deciding what accommodations will work best for that volunteer. If your organization is mindful of its actions, attitudes and behaviors regarding working with people with disabilities, you can create an environment at your agency where all volunteers feel welcomed.

Of course, online, you may never know which volunteers have any sort of disability. Their physical or mental condition may not interfere with their *ability* to do the work. Other times, an applicant may share information about his or her limitations.

Initial Preparation

In addition to training staff in involving volunteers virtually, we encourage your entire staff to become familiar with readily-available guidelines for working with people with disabilities, and to consider having staff go through training in disability awareness and etiquette. Such guidelines and training can help your staff welcome people with a variety of disabilities.

The most difficult obstacles to surmount for a person with a disability can be the attitudes of others, such as prejudice and stereotyping. An important part of your organization's efforts to welcome and actively recruit people with disabilities as volunteers is to get a sense of your own and your staff's sensitivity to and knowledge about people with disabilities.

Word Choice

Take a person-first approach to working with volunteers who have disabilities. If the disability isn't germane to the situation at hand, don't mention it. Make reference to the person first, then the disability. Say—or e-mail—"a person with a disability" rather than "a disabled person." Also, a person is not a condition, so avoid presenting someone as "an epileptic" or "a post polio." Instead, say "a person with epilepsy" or "a person who has had polio."

The term "handicapped" comes from the image of a person standing on the corner with a cap in hand, begging for money. A disability is a functional limitation that interferes with a person's ability to walk, hear, talk, learn, etc. Use "handicap" to describe a situation or barrier imposed by society, the environment or oneself. Remember, a person who has a disability isn't necessarily chronically sick or unhealthy. He or she is often just disabled.

When speaking about people with disabilities, emphasize their achievements, abilities and individual qualities. Portray them as they are in real life: as parents, employees, business owners, etc.

Accommodations

"An accommodation is any adjustment made to the environment which enhances access to, and use of the area. Accommodations vary greatly in complexity and expense." Volunteers with disabilities probably know more about assistive technologies—software and hardware that allows them to surf the Internet, write documents, etc.—and how to obtain such technologies, than you do. Still, it's a good idea to be aware of some of the tools out there; this will help you see just how much a person can **do**.

If you are uncertain about the wants or needs of a volunteer with a disability, *ask!* Give volunteers opportunities to tell you what changes might need to be made. Remember in your web site design that people with disabilities use special tools to browse the web, and these tools can be confused by some web site designs and functions.

Recruitment

As with all volunteers, before you start recruiting people with disabilities for your organization, you need to make sure you are ready to place these volunteers immediately into an orientation, initial evaluation and assignment-matching process.

You can reach people with disabilities via your general virtual volunteering recruitment methods. However, there are several ways you can reach out specifically to these audiences. Publicize your volunteer opportunities to:

- schools that work specifically with disabled populations
- independent living centers
- vocational rehabilitation agencies
- disability service groups
- Provincial or Federal offices offering programs for the disabled
- Internet discussion groups, as appropriate

Your recruitment message should be the same as it is for all volunteers, in that it should explicitly state that the organization is committed to placing individuals into the volunteer setting which best matches their interests with the needs of the organization.

Working with Online Volunteers with Disabilities

How do you proceed when someone contacts you about a virtual volunteering opportunity as a result of your outreach to disabled communities? In the same way you would with any other person who says they want to volunteer with you: determine the person's interests and skills. Base the matching of the volunteer to a project based upon the person's ability and desire, not the person's disability. The clearer the task description, the less likely a volunteer will get into an assignment he or she cannot do (for whatever reason!).

Encourage volunteers with disabilities do some self-evaluation and self-screening when looking for volunteer opportunities. Just as you should with any volunteer candidate, ask applicants if they think they can do the assignment, if there is any part of the assignment that might prove particularly difficult to them, and if there is something you can do to help make this easier.

Your volunteer application should not ask about disabilities. Not only could this be a violation of the law, it gives the impression that you match volunteers to assignments based on what they can't do, rather than on what they can.

Learning Disabilities or Emotional and Anxiety Disorders

A person managing an online volunteer program needs to have a general understanding of various learning styles, working styles and information-processing styles. Volunteer management is not "one-size-fits-all," and simple adjustments in management style can be made to effectively channel talents and resources of the greatest number of people.

Volunteer program managers working with online volunteers or looking to provide service delivery online should also be aware of seemingly "hidden" or "nonapparent" disabilities, such as learning disabilities (the most common form of disability), and emotional and anxiety disorders. Unlike other disabilities, such as paralysis, blindness, or even chronic illnesses, learning disabilities and emotional and anxiety disorders don't offer obvious visible signs to the casual observer, and can, therefore, seem "hidden" to someone working with online volunteers.

A learning disability (LD) is a disorder that affects a person's ability to either interpret what is seen or heard or to link information from different parts of the brain. These limitations can show up in many ways—as specific difficulties with spoken and written language, coordination, self-control, or attention. They may impair multiple skills and abilities or they may impair only one. For example, difficulties with spelling may affect learners' writing skills, but not their reading skills. Learning disabilities include Dyslexia and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). The National Institutes of Health estimates that 15-20% of the total population has a LD.

Emotional and anxiety disorders are also disabilities. These can include people who suffer from depression, frequent anxiety, panic attacks, phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder and post-traumatic stress

disorder. DON'T confuse these disabilities with lack of intelligence or lack of talent! In fact, many people considered gifted or with very high I.Q.s also have learning disabilities or anxiety disorders. Some "gifted but LD" individuals were/are Albert Einstein, Agatha Christie, John F. Kennedy, Whoopi Goldberg, Nelson Rockefeller, Cher, George Patton, Leonardo daVinci and Alexander Graham Bell. People with emotional and anxiety disorders include Abraham Lincoln, Edgar Allen Poe, Kim Basinger, Barbara Streisand and many, many others.

A volunteer program manager does not have to become an expert in disabilities to involve people with disabilities as volunteers. Educating yourself about various disabilities in general, however, can help you learn to better accommodate a variety of volunteers in your program

How to Be a Champion for Virtual Volunteering

Our final words are directed to you, the volunteer program manager. Your tone and attitude demonstrate your commitment to virtual volunteering and contribute to a successful program. Be a champion!

- *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 demonstrate 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 yourself? You need to obtain first-hand experience about virtual volunteering and model best practices for the rest of the organization!
- *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.

Good Luck

We hope that this *Guidebook* has given you the confidence to apply your proven volunteer management skills in cyberspace. We are all on the learning curve together. See you on the Web!

Resources for Agencies

Online Newsgroups related to Volunteering:

<http://www.groups.google.com>

www.netsquared.org

<http://www.techsoup.org/community/index.cfm>

<http://groups.yahoo.com>

Social Media Sites

www.twitter.com

www.facebook.com

www.blogger.com – for creating a blog

www.wordpress.com – for creating a blog

www.youtube.com

Places to list your virtual volunteer opportunity

www.craigslist.ca – online ads free of charge

www.kijiji.ca – online ads free of charge

www.charitychannel.com – National Canadian site listing virtual volunteer opps

www.idealists.org – Volunteer opportunities from around the world

www.onlinevolunteering.org – Lists of hundreds of virtual volunteering opps from around the world.

www.true Travellers.org – A Canadian not for profit that lists volunteer opportunities

<http://www.planetfriendly.net> - Post to a daily e-mailing to over 2,000 people seeking opportunities in environment, sustainable living, organics, food issues, peace and human rights.

www.theinterchange.ca – Linking Christian volunteers and organizations in Canada and abroad.

www.dosomething.org – Volunteer opportunities specifically targeting youth

General Information on Virtual Volunteering

<http://www.serviceleader.org/virtual>

www.onlinevolunteering.org

www.charityvillage.com

<http://www.thesite.org/workandstudy/volunteering/virtualvolunteering>

Appendix and Credits

***The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook by Ellis and Cravens
©2000, Impact Online***

Charity Village – Virtual Volunteer Resources

Serviceleader.org – Virtual Volunteering Resources

***Inspiring Volunteers, a guide to recruitment and communication
©2010, Media Trust, Inc.***

***Volunteering in the Information Society
©2005, Manuel Acevedo***

***Virtual Volunteering, Current Status and Future Prospects
©2002, Canadian Centre for Philanthropy***