Virtual Volunteering

Handbook
for Organisations

VIRTUAL VOLUNTEERING

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Virtual Volunteering Handbook for Organisations

Introduction

Volunteers make a difference in a whole range of settings and organisations and without these volunteers, many organisations would struggle to achieve their strategic objectives and cater for the needs of their beneficiaries. As a Volunteer Centre, we are acutely aware of the on-going demand for volunteers. From a volunteers' perspective, however, the feedback we receive often relates to a perceived lack of a wide enough range of opportunities. Alongside this, we know, from our own experience, that the majority of referrals we receive from volunteers, take place online. The technology at our disposal nowadays means that the way people generally communicate has changed and we, as organisations, must adapt to these new circumstances, hence the adoption of online or virtual volunteering opportunities. This has been hugely highlighted during the pandemic wherein the vast majority (if not all) face to face interactions were prohibited.

Part 1 – Virtual Volunteering

Myth – Virtual volunteering is a very new concept. In fact, it's 30 years old. (1)

There are many benefits for organisations to use this growing opportunity to work with virtual volunteers.

This is a practical handbook created for every organisation that wants to create new volunteering opportunities and wants to learn more about how virtual volunteers can help their organisation develop new or ongoing projects.

Our aim is to help enable your organisation to:

- Develop virtual opportunities
- Be able to maintain and support virtual volunteers
- Have the resources and support they need

a)   Definitions:

NCVO define volunteering as:

"any activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or someone (individuals or groups) other than, or in addition to, close relatives. . . volunteering must be a choice freely made by each individual.

This can include formal activity undertaken through public, private and voluntary organisations as well as informal community participation." (2)

As such, virtual volunteering can be seen to be a subset of the above definition of volunteering as it fulfils all the above criteria but varies simply in the mode of action.   The classic definition of virtual volunteering is

> "Virtual volunteering is a term describing a volunteer who completes tasks, in whole or in part, off-site from the organization or person being assisted, using the Internet and a computer, tablet, smart phone or other Internet-connected device."[3]

However, in terms of our interpretation, we use a much broader definition which encompasses off-line opportunities as well:

"Virtual volunteering is a term describing a volunteer who completes tasks, in whole or in part, off-site   from the organization or person being assisted"

b) Benefits of virtual volunteering for Organisations

- Extending the range and type of opportunities and resources
- Increasing the diversity of volunteers utilised
- Being more competitive in terms of opportunities offered
- Enabling more volunteer roles that cover more tasks and skills
- Enabling staff and volunteers to learn how to engage in or manage virtual volunteering
- Extending the help staff need to do what needs to be done
- It's an and effective way of working given the current tools now at our disposal
- Gives increased access to more volunteers
- Enables ways to save money on some operational costs
- Provides a forward momentum on your website, social media, email, and other modes of communication
- Enables potential professional levels of communication, branding, and outreach
- Enables a vastly extended reach of your organisation and its mission

c) Benefits of virtual volunteering for volunteers

- It's a unique outlet for skills or passions that aren't currently being met by traditional volunteering
- It increases skills sets
- Expands knowledge
- Enables volunteers to learn in terms of new ways to engage in volunteering
- Potentially many more opportunities to volunteer for multiple causes and organisations
- Increases access to volunteering for those currently unable to volunteer
- Gives volunteers a degree of flexibility in scheduling, location, and level of involvement
- Enables volunteering for people with a disability or very remote volunteers
- The skills gained make volunteers more competitive in the job market
- Enables the Fulfilment of education or career volunteer milestone

- Facilitates personal and professional development Gives volunteers the ability to gain a reference and enhancement

d) Who can volunteer online?

- Students and stay at home parents
- Professionals: Vets, administrators, nurses, doctors, photographers, event organisers, accountants, solicitors, web-designers, etc.
- Employed and Unemployed people
- People with disabilities
- From teenagers to older people
- Women and men
- Vivacious people, shy people
- Techies and non-techies
- People in cities and rural areas

Online volunteers' can, potentially, come from anywhere in the world and be from all ages, backgrounds, and levels of education. All potential volunteers need is an internet connection and have a bit of time on their hands.

Part 2 – Getting ready for virtual volunteers

As with any volunteering opportunity, the virtual volunteering role needs to be clear and well defined and put into a clear, written role description. The role description should outline what the role entails and the benefits that will be gained by both the organisation and the individual concerned (see Appendix 2). Again, as with any other volunteering role, there needs to be an application process and a designated manager for the role advertised.

a) Needs of the organisation

From your organisations' perspective, you will need to think about what your needs are:

- Are there any tasks that are being postponed due to a lack of resources/skills?
- Are there any projects or initiatives that could be improved or adapted to include virtual aspects?
- Is the role suitable for a virtual volunteer?
- Are there any of your current roles that could have a virtual component?
- Who will manage the virtual volunteers?
- How can you tweak your current policies and procedures to enable virtual volunteering?

b) Examples of Virtual Volunteer roles

Possible roles		
Administration	Facilitate & moderate online discussion groups	Project development and management
Accountancy	Fixing software (e.g. Community patches)	Providing legal, business, medical, agricultural or any other expertise
Answering questions	Foster	Reading
Art and design	Foster pets or pet's advice	Religion
Audio recording	Fundraising or Crowdfunding	Research
Befriend	Healthcare services	Scanning documents
Budgeting	Idea creator	Social media developer
Coaching	Interpreter or translation	Supervision
Community or event organising	Knit and crocket	Tagging photos and files
Copywrite, editing and proofreading	Language tutor	Teaching and training
Counselling	Leadership and strategy	Technology development
Creating a podcast	Listener	Track birds
Creating web pages	Manage email	Track climate changes
Creating, editing or transcribe videos	Managing other online volunteers	Trustee
Data entry, processing, or analysis	Marketing	VA virtual assistant
Designing a database	Mentoring	Word processing
Designing graphics	Mentoring or tutoring students	WordPress website developer
Develop websites and apps	Monitoring the news	Write blogs
Developing material for a curriculum	Outreach and advocacy	Writing letters or songs
Editing or writing proposals, press releases, newsletter articles, etc.	Pastoral support	Writing software

c) Practices and policies example:

Just as with traditional volunteering roles, you should have the necessary policies, practices, and infrastructure to support virtual volunteering.

Policies:

- Health & Safety
- Equalities
- Volunteering Policy
- Data Protection
- Safeguarding

Practices:

- Management/Supervision
- Application form and process
- Ongoing communication
- Overview of organisation

Best practice principles in volunteering:

- Volunteering should be open to everyone
- Recruitment processes should be fair and accessible
- You should aim to deliver a good volunteering experience
- You should have the appropriate policies for managing volunteers.
- You should support and supervise your volunteers within their roles
- Volunteers should have the training and information they need to carry out their roles
- All relevant legal requirements should be met.
- You should have a flexible approach to volunteers

To create online volunteering assignments and roles and to support the volunteers undertaking them, a staff member should be designated to supervise or manage the virtual volunteering assignment and to develop an effective working relationship with the virtual volunteers involved. This need not be an onerous task and should enable a straightforward process for the volunteer and your organisation.

Part 3 – Recruiting virtual volunteers

As for all volunteers, there is no magic formula to the recruitment process. Your first port of call should be people already associated with your organisation be they, staff, volunteers, or beneficiaries. You will need a clear call to action in terms of who you are recruiting and why. You should also target your recruitment processes and communication channels to reflect the audience or audiences that you are aiming at. It goes without saying that your website and social media channels are extremely important and should reflect an image that is attractive to any potential volunteers. Any contact that you have with potential volunteers needs to be fit for purpose and, most importantly, quick, and efficient

a) Resources

Any organisation that utilises volunteers knows that the support and management of volunteers involves a degree of resource. If you already manage volunteers, then you will most likely have the processes and procedures in place to manage virtual volunteers. Unlike onsite volunteers, extra expenses such as transport, office space and parking will unlikely to be incurred. However, in some cases, you might need to buy a headset or webcam if communicating by audio or video calls, to maintain privacy and confidentiality or refund legitimate expenses such as broadband or telephony costs.

Many communication tools are available for free, such as Skype, Zoom (both can record calls), WhatsApp, Facetime, Viber, Google talk, etc.

b) Communication

People already use several different ways of communicating. With the increased use of smartphones and all the apps currently available, is it hard to have an excuse to not be able to communicate with someone, in one way or another or in the way in which they choose to communicate.

Many of the programs used to communicate are available both on computers and smartphones.

The most frequent way of communicating nowadays is by email and this is not going to disappear any time soon. By the contrary. If an organisation, doesn't use email to communicate, it will certainly be viewed as old-fashioned and hard to access which will put off most volunteers and not just the virtual ones!

Other ways of communication are increasing in their popularity, such as video-chats, social platforms/networks, group messages, etc.…This has been amplified by the effects of the pandemic which means that many more people are now confident and able to use these means of communication.

c) Ongoing evaluation

Like any project or volunteer programme, ongoing evaluation is necessary to assess the effectiveness and success of your interventions.

d) Support

As mentioned previously, ongoing support is essential although the support needed will vary depending on the type of volunteering opportunity.

e} Maintaining volunteers connected and informed

Virtual volunteers can be connected as an online community, by creating a forum, Facebook groups, etc.:

Your aim should be to create a sense of belonging, sharing experiences and knowledge to help each other.

This can be achieved by:

- Sharing photos – adding a face to the name.
- Sharing experiences, project development and successes.
- Organising a periodic call to get to know each other better.
- Sharing the organisations newsletter.
- By offering new opportunities/projects, announcements, resources, etc. to enable a progression route for volunteers.

Appendix 1 - Organisation readiness checklist

To be able to evaluate your needs, it is worth to think thoroughly what projects are ongoing and which (if not all) can benefit by having more input from volunteers.

Step 1. To begin with, it is important to list all your ongoing projects and associated needs

Step 2. Ask your employees, what tasks would also benefit from extra input,

Step 3. Use the above information to connect the tasks to the projects. (If some tasks are related to the management of the organisation, consider it as an "organisation project")

Step 4. Consider any deadlines for these projects and associated tasks

Step 5. Highlight any tasks from the list that can be delegated to volunteers

Step 6. From those highlighted tasks, reflect on the possibility of being completed by a virtual volunteer

Some tasks can be just a small or micro task completed in a couple of hours or able to be broken down to be part of a bigger task which requires the ongoing completion of several tasks.

Step 7. Creation of role descriptions setting out time required, tasks needed, and the benefits gained by the volunteer

Step 8. Adapting practices and procedures

Step 9. Decide who is going to manage each virtual volunteer

Step 10. Recruiting volunteers and interviews (bearing in mind that interviews can take place online)

Step 11. Selection of volunteers and sharing all they need to start working

Step 12. Continuous evaluation

Step 13. Conclusion of the role or allocation of new role or tas

Appendix 2:

Type: Social Media developer Virtual Volunteer

Where: From the comfort of your home

When: March 2020 – January 2021

Commitment: Flexible hours per week, including guidance and support. It is expected to see
                            at least one post in each social media platform per day (7 days a week)

Duration: Ongoing

Requirements: We are looking for a volunteer with experience in Social Media Content
                            Development who can support us to increase the visibility of the Virtual
                            Volunteering project, using our publications and other resources to create and
                            curate interesting content for our social media channels. The tasks will take place
                            via the internet. Knowledge of the Voluntary and Community Sector would be an
                            advantage. Knowledge of computer and/or smartphone apps. Experience on
                            Social media platforms, campaigns, job offers, design creation. Pleasant manner,
                            patience, good listener, problem-solving ability, creative, innovator and team
                            player.

- Research for resources to curate relevant content
- Develop and implement a measurable social media content and activity
- Ensuring agreed key metrics and milestones are hit
- Manage our social media channels (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn)
- Writing/editing copy (approved by Administrator/Manager)
- Report on performance
- Create digital adverts / Campaigns
- Daily publishing
- Making reminder "calls" to volunteers and organisations
- Aids in the preparation of new campaigns
- Other duties as assigned.

What's in it for you?   You have the chance to be part of the development of a new project and achievements of the Virtual Voluntary within the Canterbury District. A good opportunity to increase your skills and gain insight into the Voluntary and Community Sector. This would be perfect for someone who would like to update their skills and references before returning to work and/or a student looking to add to their portfolio or CV.

Why we want you: Since 2007 the Canterbury & Herne Bay Volunteer Centre has been supporting, promoting, and developing volunteering opportunities within the Canterbury District. We see this Virtual Volunteering project as a long-term project which will play an increasing role for all generations in the years to come. We want you to help us to make this project a success!

Appendix 3:

Virtual Volunteering Myths:

Myth 1 – Virtual volunteering is a very new concept

It's 30 years old.

Myth 2 – Virtual volunteering is great for people who otherwise do not have time to volunteer

It requires real time, not virtual time.

Myth 3 – People who volunteer online do not volunteer face-to-face

The majority of face-to-face volunteers also volunteer online.

Myth 4 – People who volunteer online do so for organisations that are geographically far from them.

Most online volunteers look for opportunities on their own geographical area or at their actual volunteer organisation.

Myth 5 – Working with online volunteers is completely different than working with onsite volunteers

The application of basic volunteer management standards is the same, as well as support, feedback, guidance, and recognition.

Myth 6 – Online volunteering is impersonal

Online interactions are quite personal. In general, are more willing to share information and feelings online.

Myth 7 – Online volunteers engage primarily in technology related tasks.

They engage in many tasks unrelated to technology.

Myth 8 – Interviewing potential volunteers face-to-face is much more reliable than interviewing people online

Both methods have strengths and weaknesses, but each one is effective.

Myth 9 – People who volunteer online are very shy and have trouble interacting with others

Online volunteers have a hunger for interacting with others.

Myth 10 – The internet is dangerous and therefore online volunteering opens an organisation and its clients up to many risks

The internet is no more or less dangerous the offline worlds.

Myth 11 – Online volunteering requires building a dedicated online platform or using a specific tool

Email is key and are used in every organisation. There are several free tools available for smartphones and computers.

Myth 12 – Much more needs to be done to get people to volunteer online

There are plenty of people who want to volunteer online, far more than there are opportunities for them. (1)

Appendix 4:

Canterbury & Herne Bay Volunteer Centre

Virtual Volunteering Development Project Overview

1) Area of benefit:

We are piloting this project in the Canterbury district as this district has a mix of both urban and rural areas. There are three main towns in the District (Canterbury, Herne Bay and Whitstable) each with a unique demographic. This will give an overall picture of the differing needs in these distinct areas be extremely useful in terms of any subsequent extension of this project both within the Canterbury district and, subsequently, across Kent.

2) How will people and communities be involved in this project?

We aim, via this project to work with a number of organisations to explore and co-produce resources to support and increase the development of virtual volunteering opportunities across the District.

In terms of volunteers, we will be supporting volunteers (of all ages and backgrounds) to enable them to inform and be actively engaged (both online and face to face) with volunteer-involving organisations regarding the development of suitable and pertinent virtual opportunities. This will enable us to both to match up the volunteer expectations with organisational expectations to enable the co-design of virtual volunteering opportunities and resources, to meet all needs.

3) The benefits of the utilisation of virtual volunteering:

We aim to:

- Show how virtual volunteers could effectively extend the resources of any organisation
- Enable potential volunteers to find new ways of supporting causes or organisations they feet passionate about or are interested in thereby attracting the involvement of new volunteers
- Remove some time constraints & physical barriers from current and new volunteers
- Demonstrate how forward thinking, modern and efficient organisations can be.

- Enable organisations to reach volunteers who may not be reached or attracted by traditional methods or types of opportunities
- Enable organisations to be able to attract younger volunteers/to be more attractive to younger volunteers
- Show the environmental friendliness of online volunteering
- Extend current volunteer oversight and operation.
- Increase the range of volunteering opportunities on offer to enable organisations to compete more effectively for volunteers
- Substantially Increase the diversity of volunteers
- Increase the ability of organisations to cater for the needs of their beneficiaries and enhance any funding applications
- Provide the tools and resources and support to organisations in regard to developing virtual volunteering opportunities and supporting virtual volunteers.

- Assess the current volunteer take up of Virtual Volunteering opportunities
- Assess perceived barriers to virtual volunteering from a volunteer's perspective
- Enable volunteers (irrespective of mobility, location, finance) to be able to access an increased range and type of volunteering opportunities.
- Enable volunteers to shape the type of virtual volunteering opportunities available to them

- Enable volunteers to be able to volunteer in a way that is convenient to them
- Enable the involvement of people who were unable to volunteer onsite because of home obligations or work schedule.

3. Outcomes of Virtual Volunteering Project:

Organisations:
Increase knowledge of how virtual volunteering can benefit organisations:

- Increase diversity of volunteers: this can include younger people who are well versed in internet use; people who are housebound or have some other disability; people living in rural or remote locations; people on a low income.
- Increase ability to cater for beneficiaries in different ways
- Increase ability to fundraise or promote service provision as a result of adopting virtual volunteering opportunities (social media in particular)
- Increase skills of organisation/employees/volunteers/beneficiaries
- Expand their volunteering offer

- Increase diversity
- Better respond creatively to volunteers' abilities and desires in terms of how they volunteer
- Increase volunteers' positive engagement with organisations
- Increase their ability to cater for their beneficiaries
- Attracting pro bono volunteers

Volunteers:

Increase knowledge of how virtual volunteering can benefit volunteers:

- Increase potential access to a wider and more diverse range of volunteering opportunities.
- Enabling people with disabilities, in remote/rural areas or on a low income to volunteer
- Increase engagement with the community and community organisations
- Encouraging employees to volunteer and share skills due to accessibility of time limited or micro volunteering
- Increase social engagement of volunteers via virtual networks.
- Decrease social isolation and loneliness
- Increase volunteers' positive engagement in the community
- Actively contribute to their community
- Increase their social networks
- Learn new skills and increase their self-esteem and confidence
- Increase choice in volunteering roles
- Increase volunteers' positive engagement with organisations

Appendix 5:

References

(1) The last Virtual Volunteering guidebook
(2) NCVO   https://www.ncvo.org.uk/policy-and-research/volunteering-policy
(3) Coyote Communications http://www.coyotecommunications.com/vvwiki/definition.shtml