

# Address It WWV

## *An update on technology and volunteers*

**T**he World Wide Web has really become a resource with many different implications for both volunteers and for those who engage them in agency work. The pace of evolving technology is mind-boggling, not only in terms of computers but in all aspects of communications. It therefore seems useful to review the volunteer-related issues, update recent changes, and remark on the most current developments about which we are still learning.

### VOLUNTEERS AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The major concern of the nonprofit field a decade ago was the "digital divide," which evidenced itself in a number of ways: rich vs. poor, developed vs. developing

countries, young vs. old. Accessibility to computers and the Internet remains a serious issue, especially in our poorest communities. But time is winning this battle.

Between the dramatic drop in the cost of computers and other devices, the increasing places with wireless public access, and the trend toward merging telephones and Internet access, computers are fast becoming as common as television sets. In fact, a case could be made that low literacy is a bigger obstacle to Internet use than hardware accessibility.

The fact is that volunteers have been instrumental in narrowing the digital divide and remain on the front lines of the effort. Here are just a few examples of volunteer activity that have occurred widely:

- Wiring school buildings for Internet access and running drives for money and donated equipment to offer computer labs in public schools;
- Doing the same thing for senior centers;
- Working as tutors in public library computer centers, sitting with individual library visitors who need instruction in basic Internet access skills or how to do online research;
- Donating their programming to "open access" projects that make software available at no-cost to people anywhere on the globe who cannot afford commercial products (or don't want to be wedded to the need for continuing costly upgrades);
- Seeking donations of computer equipment being replaced by newer versions; then repairing, reformatting, and otherwise rejuvenating those that still can be useful to others; and either giving away or selling these at cost to grassroots organizations and low-income individuals.

Looking to the future, such volunteering will continue to be needed, particularly to regularly upgrade equipment and services. The world of computers never stands still and those with few resources will need support to keep up.

### VIRTUAL VOLUNTEERING

Once a completely foreign concept, virtual volunteering or online service is now a recognized form of volunteering. Most of the online registries of volunteer opportunities permit agencies to advertise virtual assignments, as well as those on site in the real world. The range of things that volunteers do virtually is eye-opening and still only being discovered.

Understandably, one major area of activity is Web design. Volunteers - many highly skilled and others enthusiastic hobbyists - have built and maintain Web sites, online discussion forums, online surveys, and other elements of conveying information via the Web. Another logical role for online volunteers is research of all kinds, as well as any work that can be exchanged via documents attached to e-mails: editing, translating, critiquing, etc.

It's also been proven that direct client services can be offered online by volunteers. They can be provided whether it's a modern "keyboard-pal" project linking individuals across distances, providing technical assistance to counterparts in developing countries, moderating online self-help groups of people sharing an illness or concern, or answering confidential questions like telephone crisis hotlines. Organizations are still learning the best ways to apply real world volunteer management techniques to virtual volunteering, but it is working well for many already.

The future of online service will be influenced by a number of trends:

- The amazing availability of voice-over-Internet-protocol (VOIP) telephone services - totally free to members of a service - moves people from email communication to talking with one another. This makes individual exchange much easier, even if you have to pay attention to time zones again. Voice contact humanizes outreach to clients, as well as for volunteers and paid staff who work together. And since it's free, distance is not a problem.
- As Webcams become more available and video streaming faster, we'll be able to add a face-to-face component to online exchange. This will alleviate lingering reservations about computers as "low touch" environments. There are some who warn that this development will actually spoil the current anonymity of the Web. They argue that it will make it less comfortable for people with a problem to seek online help and raise old prejudices about age, gender, race, and other characteristics that are avoided when you can't see the person at the other keyboard.
- Baby Boomers will become the first cohort of older people to have decades of experience in using email and the Internet. This has great implications for their definition of "isolation" as they age and for their expectations in being able to contribute services online as a volunteer.

## ON VOLUNTEERS

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There are all sorts of possibilities that haven't yet been tried. For example, might a volunteer pool in Australia handle emergency emails during the night in the United States while it's daytime Down Under, with a pool of American volunteers returning the favor 12 hours later?

### THE NEWEST TECHNOLOGY

Two new developments – not to mention new words in the English language – are Podcasts and blogging.

The iPod and other download devices are not just for music anymore. Businesses and organizations are recording an incredible variety of material, most often for free distribution. We're just beginning to see the potential for Podcasting as it relates to volunteer issues. Volunteer San Diego has begun a weekly audio program, ranging from just a few minutes to half an hour, on volunteer opportunities and individuals engaged in service in their area. New programs are springing up that interview various nonprofit guests for online broadcast, such as the weekly 501c3Cast ([www.501c3cast.com](http://www.501c3cast.com)).

Depending on your perspective, blogging is either the most democratic form of communication ever invented or a great example of cyber noise. Anyone can create a blog, at no cost, and start posting opinions on anything – opinions that can, and often are, read and shared by thousands, even millions, of people. Of course some bloggers barely get the attention of their mothers. The point is that "going public" with any viewpoint is easy and instant. Add to this the invention and popularity of sites such as MySpace – where anyone can post a short videotape, many of them recording actual events on a cell phone camera – and you have potential communication anarchy.

See if you can answer the following questions:

- Have you expressed any policies on cell phone use in your offices by volunteers – including rules about taking photographs with a phone? How about wearing iPod headsets?
- Do you record meetings or presentations in your organization and then make the recordings available for download? What about training sessions?
- Do you know which volunteers are blogging their experiences with you and what they are saying? And, do you know who's paying attention?

If you don't have good answers for these questions, maybe you are not paying enough attention to how technology and volunteers are interconnected. Help your organization to think about this as new communication products and services evolve. *NPT*

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