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## FROM THE FIELD

# A Nonprofit Manager's Guide to Online Volunteering

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*As access to the Internet expands, volunteer managers have the option of using this new technology to manage pools of volunteers online. Online volunteering can appear deceptively simple: post an opening, select a volunteer, and then manage them by e-mail. However, our evaluation of an active online volunteering service used by more than three hundred organizations and ten thousand potential volunteers indicates that additional planning and management are frequently needed. Through an analysis of two years of quantitative data and interviews with forty volunteers and managers, we have extracted suggested practices and programmatic implications for managers in the areas of program design, volunteer selection, training, ongoing operations, and evaluation.*

**O**VER THE PAST DECADE as Internet access has expanded globally, a small but growing group of technology-savvy managers have found new ways to recruit and engage volunteers online, replacing or adding to their on-site programs. Several major Internet-based services such as Idealist.org and Volunteermatch.org connect potential volunteers of all types with organizations, while others, such as the United Nation Volunteers' Online Volunteering program, focus strictly on matching online volunteers. As early as 2001, a solid 3 percent of organizations with Internet access did some sort of online volunteering, according to a 2001 Independent Sector survey of trends in giving and volunteering among Americans (Toppe, Kirsch, and Michel, 2001, p. 41).

Online management creates new possibilities for volunteering. Remote, small, or start-up organizations may find it easier to recruit and engage volunteers online, especially skilled professionals beyond their home geography. For volunteers, the online context presents new opportunities for access to those otherwise limited by schedule, distance, or physical disability.

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What are appropriate goals for an online volunteering program? What operational factors need to be considered when recruiting, selecting, managing, and motivating online volunteers? In this article, we highlight the emerging practices for operating an online volunteering program and make recommendations for managers just getting started. (For additional research on online volunteering programs and their management, see Cravens, 2006.)

In 2003, we initiated an evaluation of an online volunteering service, including an analysis of two years of quantitative service data and completion of in-depth interviews with twenty online volunteers and twenty managers. The service we examined connected more than two hundred organizations with a pool of ten thousand potential online volunteers.

As manager and evaluator of this online volunteering service, we were able to observe wide-ranging approaches to the design and management of online volunteers, some of which achieved much larger scale and greater impact than others. Launched in 1999 and jointly operated by the United Nations Volunteers program and the NetAid Foundation until 2004, the service we studied was one of the first and largest international online volunteer exchanges and continues to be operated by the United Nations Volunteers.

The aim of the online volunteering service we studied is to provide organizations and volunteers dispersed around the world with a place to connect virtually through the Internet. Qualified organizations post volunteer assignments, and registered members review and apply for opportunities of interest. By 2003, more than ten thousand potential volunteers offered their time and efforts to nearly three hundred organizations in sixty countries.

Our results suggest that the key elements for success in online volunteering programs are having clearly defined goals, clear and regular communications with volunteers, and a process for monitoring results. Many of the traditional volunteer management techniques apply, whether managing volunteers online or on-site, although some of these techniques need to be modified to work well in the online environment. In this article, we elaborate on the lessons learned by managers and online volunteers who used the NetAid-UN Volunteers' online volunteer service over the past five years with the aim of helping volunteer managers expand or improve their own online volunteering programs.

## Data and Methodology

We analyzed service use data on both managers and online volunteers for the period of July 1, 2002, to March 31, 2003. First, we reviewed use data collected on our Web site, including demographic information about the organizations; the number, type, and duration of assignments they posted; the frequency with which they posted assignments; the number of applicants to each assignment; the

number of applicants accepted; and the number who completed assignments.

Next, we developed and tested standard guides for use in telephone interviews with both online volunteers and managers. To focus on which factors lead to success, we deliberately separated organizations and volunteers into three categories: those who had used the service but had stopped for at least twelve months, those who had posted or applied once in the past year but did not seem active, and those who seemed actively engaged. Then we randomly selected eighty-nine organizations and 120 potential volunteers from across these three categories and contacted them for an interview using a baseline questionnaire: we talked to twenty-four of the thirty-two volunteer managers and twenty-two of the twenty-six volunteers who agreed to be interviewed. Interviewers did not know from which category the organization or individual was selected. Interview data and use statistics were summarized and analyzed.

The most common types of online volunteering assignments posted appear to reflect the operational nature of online volunteer programs in many participating organizations. According to our analysis of the service data, most online volunteer assignments related to functional or operational activities (technology support, fundraising, communications, marketing, and so on), management consulting or advice, and, less frequently, mission-related program activities (research, writing, editing, e-mail discussion group leadership, and so on). Our key findings are presented below.

### Lesson 1: Plan with Clarity

It is vital to know exactly what you want to accomplish and why. "Have it planned," one online volunteer manager advised. Know what your organization wants to accomplish through an online volunteering program. Then make sure that you can translate that into clear, detailed assignments. When the assignment is not clear from the beginning, managers may find that online volunteers give up without explanation. Asking for a demonstration of skills by a volunteer candidate is actually appreciated by many of the candidates themselves.

#### Clarity of Purpose: Conceptualizing an Online Volunteering Program

The majority of managers interviewed conceived of online volunteering as a tactical solution to solve immediate operational or staffing problems. Many respondents reported that they brought in online volunteers to handle tasks that they could not have afforded otherwise. In a few instances, respondents explained that volunteers had skills that would not have been readily available locally. As one respondent put it, "Cost is the main thing. But there is also a question of skill. We didn't have access to people with those skills or those that were local were costly."

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Alternatively, a handful of organizations approached program design from a perspective of strategic growth, and these organizations are able to involve online volunteers in ways that allow them to achieve widespread geographical coverage or program scale. These organizations were unusually prolific with assignment postings: 8 organizations using the online volunteering service posted more than twenty assignments each on average, while the remaining 312 organizations currently posting assignments each typically posted only one or two assignments. Thus, a handful of organizations accounted for more than 50 percent of all posted assignments and built entire programs around online volunteers, who quickly became central to their operations. Managing volunteers for these organizations even included training high-performing volunteers to supervise and train new ones.

### Clarity of Expectations: Understanding the Mind-Set of a Volunteer Candidate

The motivations of the applying volunteer are often quite personal, yet understanding them is critical for the host organization's success. When deciding whether to apply for a posted assignment, potential volunteers are concerned that their time and contributions will be well managed to maximally contribute to the organization's goals. Potential online volunteers often chose activities consistent with their education, background, or experience ("I base my choice on my skills"); a desire to learn new skills; or to explore a desired future career path ("I wanted more experience in grant writing"). These volunteers appreciated product-oriented assignments rather than ongoing ones. While potential volunteers more often prefer program-oriented assignments to fundraising and administrative tasks, they will consider any assignment that clearly makes the link between the assignment and a positive impact on the host organization.

Most online volunteers prefer assignments that are limited in both weekly time requirements and duration. More than seven of ten online volunteers opt to apply for volunteer assignments that require a commitment of between one and five hours a week, and nearly half choose volunteer assignments that last twelve weeks or less. Most organizations are savvy about this and craft their assignments accordingly. At the service we evaluated, over a nine-month period between July 2002 and March 2003, two-thirds of the organizations posted assignments lasting twelve weeks or less, and nearly 30 percent posted assignments that required less than a four-week commitment. More than 62 percent asked for volunteers to commit only one to five hours a week to their assignment.

This approach may make sense from a management perspective. In interviews, several managers recommended starting online volunteers with short, discrete assignments, not only to make assignments more manageable for volunteers but to evaluate individual

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volunteers before selecting a subset to take on more challenging and longer assignments.

Gaining clarity means that managers need to focus on the following:

- Clearly articulate your strategic basis for pursuing online volunteers (for example, whether you intend to address short-term needs or build a longer-term program).
- Define assignments fully before beginning recruitment.
- Keep assignments clear and product focused.
- Limit assignments in duration and intensity, especially when either the organization or the volunteer is a newcomer.

## **Lesson 2: Communicate, Communicate, Communicate**

The key to both volunteer retention and performance is communication. Volunteers and managers alike reported that regular communication motivated volunteers and clarified tasks at hand, helping the volunteer to do more work and do it better. The manager's immediate needs are predictable: communication with volunteers essential for the work to be reliable and of high quality.

From the volunteer's perspective, a lack of communication is a key source of dissatisfaction. Again and again, we heard volunteers emphasize that they want to hear about the real impact of their work. If there is only time to strengthen one element of a program, the manager should focus on increasing the frequency and quality of direct communication with volunteers.

### **Communication: It Starts with Recruitment and Selection**

Managers reported that it is relatively easy to recruit using Web sites that facilitate assignment and volunteer matching. The challenge, most say, is not recruiting volunteers but finding qualified volunteers who complete assignments. As one manager reported, "Two years ago, I posted an assignment and received thirty applications. Only a couple of volunteers really followed up." Online volunteer managers must clearly communicate expectations early in the recruitment process, separating serious candidates from others and setting the tone for the subsequent relationship.

Consider the approach adopted by some managers who require candidates to complete significant trial work as a way of evaluating commitment as well as qualifications. Rather than feeling inconvenienced, online volunteers appreciated the extra requirements. They felt that the organization was taking their application more seriously. In fact, volunteers themselves reiterated the recommendation that managers should ask for additional information up front when screening volunteer candidates.

Managers should review the following as they prepare to recruit and select online volunteers:

- Seek matching services that specialize in volunteers with profiles of interest to your organization (and tailor assignments accordingly).
- Determine the screening mechanism at your matching service. If the service does not have adequate screening mechanisms, be prepared to introduce them yourself. For example, ask online volunteers to complete written assignments or other tests to evaluate their skills.
- Phrase the assignment posting to clearly connect the work to its impact on your organization's goals and programs.
- Date assignment requests so potential volunteers will know how long the assignment has been posted. Include an expiration date for the assignment if applicable. That way, potential volunteers can judge whether an assignment might already be filled.
- Request that filled assignments are pulled (or marked as "filled") to reduce the number of late applications.
- Make sure that the first few communications with selected volunteers repeatedly describe the organization, how the assignment fits with organization's goals, and acknowledge the volunteer for her interest in helping. It is useful to agree on a schedule and discuss expectations about the frequency of communication.

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Do not overlook the need to communicate with volunteer applicants who are not accepted. We found that when volunteers apply to assignments, many find that organizations do not follow up. Most of the interviewed volunteers had applied to four to six assignments and reported that often there was either complete silence ("I never heard a response from any of the assignments") or else they heard from the organization that their application was accepted but then never heard anything again. Potential volunteers outnumbered active assignments by at least four to one on this online service, and the lack of immediate response from organizations can discourage would-be volunteers and may leave a negative impression of the organization with potential donors and future volunteers.

When planning initial communications, managers should:

- Communicate to all applicants within twenty-four to forty-eight hours to acknowledge receipt of an application and explain how it will be reviewed.
- Once the review is completed, communicate with each applicant whether his or her application is accepted, and be sure to thank all who apply for their interest.

### **Routine Communications: Keeping Online Volunteers on Track**

Even when there was not much to say, both online volunteers and managers emphasized the regularity of communication. Three host organizations were in daily contact with their online volunteers,

and two others wrote once or twice a week. In other cases, the frequency would vary. As one host explained, "At the beginning, I explain the task, give them three weeks to contact me. Otherwise it's up to them: they send me information, and I reply right away. They know they don't have to report every week. I try to check in with each one at least once a month." Another concurred: "Frequency of communications varies highly. It really depends on the volunteer. Sometimes I will send or receive three to four e-mails from one in a week, and then not hear from them for a month."

For many volunteers, regular communication was reassuring and motivating. As one volunteer put it, "It's not that I need supervision, but I need to know if I'm doing a good job rather than doing the wrong things. I'm starting to have doubts as to whether I'm wasting my time." Another said, "It is just like any business relations, like working with a client or my boss. We go over and approve everything I do."

Response time seems as important as regular outreach, as numerous managers emphasized: "If you don't respond to them quickly, you'll lose the volunteer." At the extreme: "I check e-mail hundreds of times a day. Volunteers are very happy that e-mails are responded to very quickly, and that's really important." For the volunteers, getting feedback was "doubly reassuring," and not getting feedback was a consistent complaint. One volunteer describes the difference: "I didn't like working on [that] assignment. I am used to having personal relationship with people that I work with through the Internet. There was no personal rapport developed with [that] organization."

Most organizations communicate and coordinate with online volunteers exclusively by e-mail. However, some groups expanded communication to include telephone, Yahoo Groups, and instant messaging, experimenting with better ways to communicate, motivate, and manage volunteers. One person put it this way: "Currently, 85 to 90 percent of our communication is via e-mail, but it is changing. If we have a really good volunteer, we might start investing in phone calls. Phone calls build relationships. The ante goes up. So it has to be worth it. I have also used instant messaging a lot. I do whatever I can to keep people active."

The majority of online volunteers said they work on their own. Often volunteers hypothesized that "maybe at some point we'll be working together, but right now we're assigned our separate assignments and do [them] independently." The majority of volunteers who were pleased with their experience were coordinating with only one manager in the organization and felt satisfied with that arrangement as long the communication was good. Although few had the experience of working in groups, most who did reported enjoying it, as long as they still received some personalized attention. Two volunteers indicated that they are sometimes lumped together as a group; one expressed frustration at receiving an e-mail "addressed to me and someone else . . . but I'm not in touch with the other person and don't know how our work connects."

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Ongoing communications cannot be easily standardized, especially if each volunteer has a different assignment. And for managers, the key challenges with online volunteering are almost certainly aggravated by any preexisting managerial deficiencies, especially deficiencies in managing volunteers. Managers should plan on the following activities when supervising online volunteers:

- Communicate regularly, even if it is only to say hello and ask how the project is going or to share a tidbit about how the volunteer's assignment will make a difference.
- Check e-mail daily, and let volunteers know when to expect a response if it is not possible to respond immediately.
- Evaluate whether to introduce other communication technologies such as shared work spaces or discussion group software to make it easier for volunteers to interact with each other and with a manager.
- Be prepared to provide clear and specific feedback in a timely manner.

### Lesson 3: Monitor and Learn from Results

Online relationships require more deliberately gathering feedback than on-site programs since many of the informal opportunities for feedback are missing. This is true for both the satisfaction of volunteers and the effectiveness of the host's program. Almost across the board, practitioners in this field could greatly benefit from more regular and proactive assessment.

Few organizations had any formal mechanism for evaluating their volunteers' performance or satisfaction with their experience. Six respondents evaluated their volunteers' satisfaction using informal processes such as e-mail exchange or telephone conversations. Three organizations use a Web site evaluation and certificate tool to assess and recognize volunteers. Two organizations do not evaluate volunteers' satisfaction at all, even though one of these organizations did use formal evaluation for its on-site program ("I don't evaluate volunteers"; "I hope they were satisfied. I think they were"). Two understood the question in the reverse direction: the host was satisfied if the volunteer finished the assignment. Five organizations had never come to the point where evaluation was necessary.

The majority of volunteers were never asked to evaluate their experience or give feedback on how an organization could improve its online volunteering program, but nearly half of the volunteers felt that evaluation should be built into the volunteering program, noting that everyday feedback seems less inherent with volunteering online than on-site.

To underscore the need for more internal monitoring, we observed a retention problem from the limited monitoring data available. Because the quality of future assignments depends on retaining the best volunteers, host organizations are deeply affected by retention difficulties. Retention rates for assignments varied widely, and only a

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small percentage of online volunteers went on to complete a second assignment. Some hosts were not optimistic: four respondents estimated that 10 percent or fewer online volunteers completed an assignment. Twice that many believe that between 50 and 80 percent of the online volunteers who started an assignment would complete it if given sufficient support. Yet most organizations interviewed reported that very few of volunteers who satisfactorily completed an assignment go on to undertake another assignment. We believe broader implementation of basic monitoring could help improve retention.

In summary, managers could benefit if they:

- Monitor volunteers' performance and provide regular, informal feedback.
- Maintain data on completion and retention rates, and review the data periodically to see if there are any distinguishing characteristics for volunteers who drop out versus those who complete assignments.
- Prepare a standard evaluation form for all volunteers to respond to when they end their assignments.

### State of the Field: What's Next

Despite excitement around online volunteering, the field is still young. Only a small number of organizations made online volunteering a routine part of their operations. Offering relatively few assignments is commonplace; in the three-year history of the service we studied, most of the participating hosts (163 of 386) had never posted more than two assignments. Many organizations do not seem to be adding any new assignments; in the final nine months we observed, fewer than half had added any (only 183 of 386).

In these beginning days, each active practitioner is an explorer. As many managers openly acknowledged, "We are still in the beginning stages of figuring out how to make this work." To move from ad hoc to best practices, the field will grow most quickly in breadth and depth of practice if we encourage more sharing of information. In that vein, through this article, we are seeking to share our experiences with others.

Managers who wish to continue improving online volunteering should feel empowered in their role as leaders in this new field and are advised to share their case studies and stories either on-site or online. In this manner, more effective collective practices will continue to emerge as organizations increasingly realize the potential of online volunteering.

### Appendix: Online Volunteering Resources

- <http://www.idealists.org/volunteer/index.html>. Idealist's Volunteer Center has an online database of global volunteer opportunities as well as links to resources for volunteers and volunteer managers.

- <http://www.mentornet.net>. The E-Mentoring Network supported by MentorNet offers a one-on-one mentoring program that pairs community college, undergraduate, and graduate students, post-doctoral scholars, and untenured faculty with experienced professionals in their fields for e-mail-based mentoring relationships.
- <http://www.onlinevolunteering.org>. Online Volunteering, a service of the United Nations Volunteers, connects development organizations and volunteers over the Internet and supports their effective online collaboration.
- <http://www.serviceleader.org/vv>. The virtual volunteering resources collection on ServiceLeader.org, a project of the Center for Philanthropy and Community Service at the University of Texas at Austin, provides information on how volunteers, volunteer managers, and service leaders can use technology to benefit their organizations.
- <http://www.volunteermatch.org>. VolunteerMatch is dedicated to helping everyone find a place to volunteer. The organization offers a variety of online services to support a community of nonprofit, volunteer, and business leaders committed to civic engagement. Volunteer opportunities are currently concentrated in the United States.

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