

Involving International Online Volunteers: Factors for Success, Organizational Benefits, and New Views of Community

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Abstract

In conjunction with the Institute for Volunteering Research's November 2005 conference, "Volunteering Research: Frontiers and Horizons," this research was undertaken to assess current common practices among organizations successfully involving international online volunteers; to explore the role online volunteering may play in building a more cohesive global community; and to assess the relationship between involving online volunteers and building organizational capacities. This paper offers a brief history and overview of online volunteering practice and details survey results regarding organizations that involved the Outstanding Online Volunteers of 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005 at www.onlinevolunteer.org.

Key Words: online volunteers, virtual volunteerism, virtual volunteers

Introduction

While there is a plethora of articles and information about online volunteering, there has been little research published regarding the subject (known research is listed at www.coyotecomunications.com/volunteer/ovresearch.html), and none of the existing research focuses specifically on the factors for success in involving international online volunteers. Some mission-based organizations (nonprofits, NGOs, civil society, etc.) involve online volunteers effectively, but most do not (Cravens 2004, Cravens 2005). Why?

In addition, many assume relationships with online volunteers are much more impersonal than onsite volunteers and that online volunteers are outside the "real," offline community of a mission-based organization.

To shed some light on what factors may contribute to success in involving

international online volunteers (indeed, any online volunteers) and to identify how these volunteers are thought of in relation to an organization's onsite staff, the researcher surveyed organizations that involved online volunteers named as "Outstanding" in 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005 by the United Nations Volunteers program (UNV), part of the UN Development Program (UNDP).

The researcher also identified benefits to these organizations in involving international online volunteers and assessed the relationship between involving such volunteers and building the capacities of mission-based organizations.

Research was conducted in conjunction with the Institute for Volunteering Research's November 2005 conference, "Volunteering Research: Frontiers and Horizons," and the results were first presented at this

conference on behalf of the Association for Volunteer Administration.

Background: Online Volunteering

Online volunteering means volunteer activities that are completed, in whole or in part, via the Internet on a home, work, or public access computer, usually in support of or through a mission-based organization (nonprofit, NGO, civil society, etc.). The initial impression is that online volunteers are never seen by their host organization; but in fact, the majority of online volunteers support organizations locally and volunteer onsite at such organizations in addition to volunteering online (Cravens 2000).

Examples of online volunteering include: translation, research, Web site design, data analyses, database construction, online discussion facilitation or moderation, proposal writing, production of articles, online mentoring/coaching/tutoring, professional advice, curriculum development, and publication design. Online volunteering also goes by these names:

- virtual volunteering
- telementoring
- teletutoring
- online mentoring
- cyber service

Online volunteering is more than 30 years old: Project Gutenberg (www.gutenberg.org) is probably the oldest example. This nonprofit endeavor was established decades before public access to the digital highway became the norm, and through the efforts of online volunteers, provides electronic versions of classic, public domain works, such as *Les Miserables*, *Dracula*, and *Alice in Wonderland*. Online volunteering began to become more widespread among mission-based organizations in the mid 1990s with

more widespread public use of the Internet. During the first year of the Virtual Volunteering Project (www.serviceleader.org/old/vv), fewer than 200 organizations, most in California, were identified as involving online volunteers. Less than 10 years later, as of October 2005, thousands of organizations involved online volunteers. However, just as no one institution or initiative is tracking every instance of onsite volunteering, there is also no tracking of every instance of online volunteering; therefore, no data is available on exactly how many online volunteers exist worldwide nor how many organizations involving them.

The Online Volunteering service, www.onlinevolunteer.org, was originally a part of NetAid (www.netaid.org), a joint initiative by Cisco Systems and UNDP. The Online Volunteering service launched in March 2000 and has been managed since its inception by UNV. The service separated amicably from NetAid and relaunched in January 2004 at its own URL, www.onlinevolunteer.org. The service is focused exclusively on organizations working in or for communities in the developing world, allowing these organizations to recruit and manage online volunteers.

Previously Identified Obstacles to Success

Due to staff constraints, UNV has not undertaken research regarding its virtual service, but staff observations regarding trends and user feedback are well-documented in internal materials and inform this research paper (Cravens 2004, Cravens 2005). Published research, articles regarding online volunteering, and the author's experience conclude the biggest obstacle in online volunteering is the lack of an organization's capacity to involve *any* volunteers effectively. Many if not most mission-based organizations, in the North or

South (i.e., the developing world), have little experience or training in fundamental volunteer management tasks, such as creating volunteering opportunities and effective support for volunteers. This lack greatly impedes their ability to involve any volunteer successfully, including online volunteers. Capacity gaps in volunteer management experience and resources are particularly acute among organizations in the developing world, so the UNDP/UNV staff that managed www.onlinevolunteer.org, from February 2001 to February 2005, concentrated most of their efforts on building the capacity of organizations to work successfully with online volunteers by posting material at the Web site, sending a user newsletter twice a month via e-mail, and providing technical support as organizations wrote assignments, responded to candidates, kept in touch with volunteers, and acknowledged their efforts. This focus is in line with current and continuing development practice as promoted, for instance, by Open University's Development Management Master's Degree program: "Outside of emergencies, indigenous NGOs, with a few notable exceptions, are poorly equipped in skills and in finance to deal with the roles now being asked of them" in delivering services to communities instead of the state. Thus, "the watchword for donors and NGOs alike is 'capacity building,' with the role of international NGOs increasingly consigned to that of an intermediary agency in the development of people skills" (Bennet and Gibbs, 1996).

New Research: Experiences of Organizations Successfully Involving Online Volunteers

The researcher surveyed non-UN agencies involving the Outstanding Volunteers of 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005 through UNV's OV service. The purpose was to identify

common practices and infrastructure that might play a role in organizational success in involving online volunteers. Twenty-seven organizations received the 14-item survey via e-mail and 11 responded. A list of organizations that completed the survey, including their country of origin and the year each was established, follows:

- Mgbala Agwa Youth Forum (Nigeria): 2001
- Datelinehealth-Africa Inc (USA): 2001
- Bureau for Reconstruction and Development (Afghanistan): 2003
- People With Disabilities Uganda (Uganda): 1989
- Kenya AIDS Intervention/Prevention Project Group (KAIPPG): Established in Kenya, 1995, in the USA, 1997, and achieved nonprofit status in the USA, 2000
- Centre for Research in Women's Health (Canada): 1995
- Shine a light, la red internacional pro niños de la calle (USA): 1998
- Overcomers Visionary Faith Centre (Kenya): 1992
- Professional Education Organization International-PEOI (USA): Established in 1999, and achieving official nonprofit status in 2001
- Lawyers Without Borders (USA): 2000
- Pearls of Africa (USA): 2001

Infrastructure

Simply by using www.onlinevolunteer.org, the responding organizations already have several commonalities regarding internal capacities and experience that may play a role in their successful involvement of online volunteers:

- They are able to navigate administrative and bureaucratic processes, per their passing of UNV's vetting process to use www.onlinevolunteer.org, including providing: proof of organizational status or formal affiliation with a state-recognized nonprofit, NGO, public academic institution, or a United Nations office; references from other organizations; and online or printed materials about their organization.
- They have at least somewhat reliable Internet access and use this access regularly.
- Their staff has solid literacy skills and the ability to communicate well with others online.

The role an organization's age plays in success in involving online volunteers was not researched, but the relative youth of the organizations that have involved online volunteers successfully through UNV's online volunteering module is interesting: all of the responding organizations were founded since 1989, and more than half were founded in 2000 or later.

Other infrastructure findings:

- Six of the 11 are entirely volunteer (no paid staff). Five, all based in the developing world, have paid staff ranging in numbers from one to 20. All but two involve onsite volunteers, from two to 45. The minimum number of onsite staff, volunteer and/or paid, at nine of the organizations is three (the other two organizations are entirely virtual, with all staff geographically dispersed).
- Each organization has involved at least 25 online volunteers. Some said they had involved hundreds of such

through onlinevolunteer.org; however, most of these organizations have not marked this many volunteers as "accepted" via the service. This implies that they are using the service to connect with online volunteers but not using its reporting and management tools.

- Five of the 11 said their staff had more than a few years of experience managing volunteers and cited examples of such.
- All have one person who is primarily responsible for working with onsite and online volunteers.

Why Involve Volunteers?

Based on the responses, most organizations see volunteers as free labour, and this is the primary benefit of involving volunteers online or onsite.

Almost half the responding organizations gave additional reasons, beyond cost-savings, for involving international online volunteers, most relating to volunteers providing expertise the organization's staff did not have. Five organizations also identified advantages relating to networking with the global community and bringing in a broad spectrum of people and experiences into the work of the organization. One organization noted, "Involving volunteers from around the world increases the diversity and opens the thinking of the organization." Another said, "It is enriching for your staff because they are being given the opportunity to engage with a wide range of experts from diverse settings, communities, and countries. That kind of exchange and diversity adds to the richness of any research or policy initiative." One organization noted that international online volunteers bring fresh perspective as they are typically from different communities and

countries and trained in a wide variety of disciplines.

Three organizations cited additional publicity as a reason to involve international online volunteers. Other advantages included online volunteers' abilities to find new funding opportunities; their ability to present information in a user-friendly, concise format; and their level of commitment.

Two organizations gave answers relating to a focus on volunteers themselves:

- Centre for Research in Women's Health (Canada): "(because) our mandate includes training and building capacity in the next generation of researchers [i.e. university students' service as volunteers] in women's health.
- Pearls of Africa: "While POA's service mission is to inform, involve, and inspire, that is also what we hope to do for our volunteers - inform them, involve them, and get them inspired. POA is as much an organization that serves people in Africa as it is an organization that provides an opportunity to serve."

The primary disadvantage cited in involving online volunteers was regarding volunteers who drop out after receiving an assignment. Another frequently cited disadvantage was the amount of time needed to orient and support online volunteers. Other disadvantages cited were that some volunteers don't spend enough time familiarizing themselves with the organization or the community that's being served and that volunteers want more communication and tasks than the organization can provide. It is worth noting that all of these are often cited as

disadvantages of working with onsite volunteers as well.

Some unique disadvantages cited (that might be different from involving onsite volunteers) were the lack of language skills other than English among online volunteers and that "absolutely everything has to be in writing."

Factors for Success

The responding organizations identified several factors regarding successful volunteer involvement online that can be grouped into three categories. For items noted more than once, the number of organizations that noted them is included in parentheses:

Communications

- Responding to mail immediately and in a professional manner and following-up immediately with volunteers (3)
- Valuing feedback and attending to their identified problems/questions immediately (2)
- Maintaining openness, establishing trust
- Requiring regular reporting on the part of volunteers and reviewing outcomes on a regular basis

Management

- Creating a support system/protocol early on for managing online volunteers (2)
- Requiring candidates to "go through so many hoops" so "that we knew those who completed the process were committed volunteers." (2)
- Keeping tasks simple, not too-time-consuming, and "informative" to volunteers

- Not recruiting without being ready to involve responders immediately
- Involving online volunteers in teams

Other

- Involving “expert,” highly-committed volunteers (3)
- Having an individual champion at the organization who is “very comfortable” with the concept of online volunteers, who advocates on the online volunteer’s behalf, and is willing to make the “extra effort needed to engage” online volunteers (2)
- Being an organization that operates mostly online or being founded by online volunteers (2)
- Engaging volunteers in support for staff and operations rather than direct service with clients
- Having a compelling mission or focus that “gives people incentive to support us.”
- Having volunteers whose interests are compatible with the organization’s

Two quotes summarize the findings well: (1) a representative of an organization in Africa said, “Online volunteers are efficient if well-managed.... They need motivation, with constant contact;” (2) another representative of an organization in North America said, “Online volunteers can do a tremendous amount of work... but interaction with volunteers is very important to motivate them, explain what to do, and keep them attached to the organization.”

Benefits to the Organization Beyond Completed Service and Views of Online Volunteers

Building Capacities

All organizations responded positively when asked if onsite staff had had their own capacities built as a result of involving online volunteers, and if so, how. They identified the following capacities:

- *people management skills*, including volunteer management, overall staff management, motivational leadership, relationship-building, and “people skills.” As one respondent noted, “I have learned how to manage people, motivate them, and reward them - all without the benefit of body language.” (8)
- *communication skills*, including how to express oneself via the written word, making sure information and requirements are clear and complete, and how to ask for and value constant feedback (6)
- *valuing diversity*, including how to accommodate/appreciate people of different cultures and from different disciplines (4)
- *project proposal skills*, including writing, planning, and management (2)
- *other capacities built*:
 - improved organization
 - ability to take a project and divide it into more manageable sections that can then be distributed to volunteers
 - having volunteers work as a team
 - training manual development
 - creating budget estimates
 - website development

- fundraising skills and grant writing
- “how to be more flexible”
- “how to ask”
- “I type much faster.”

Indicating what these new capacities can mean, one respondent noted, “I think this translates into a better onsite manager as well because your communication and management styles become more deliberate and clear.”

Views of Online Volunteers

Most of the respondents felt strongly that online volunteers were not only a part of their organization’s “community” but were also a part of the organization’s staff. These quotes, each from a different organization, are insightful:

- “We consider them as being part of our organisation.”
- “They are part of our ‘work staff’ and are consulted regularly.”
- “Online volunteers are our staff.... We are constantly in contact with them just like any other local staff.”
- “Some of them have become ‘family,’ even traveled to meet our members in Kenya, and are vital to our work and well-being.”
- “Many have become good friends.”
- “They are part of us.”

One organization went into detail about how it views online volunteers in relation to its organization:

We definitely think of our online community as a key component to our organization’s ‘community.’ Our virtual community of volunteers is very tight, very dependent upon the computer as a communication port, makes a point of

speaking via telephone periodically so we can get to know each other better, has exchanged photos that we post online so we can put a face to a name. We have a newsletter that features the online volunteers and is a communication tool to let them know about each other so they have a sense of belonging. We do well with a virtual community and convert many in-office volunteers and interns to virtual volunteers when their time with us is over.

Another organization representative noted, “I see them as part of my project’s network--each bringing a unique knowledge and experience base to the table and each having made a valued contribution to the success of the project,” however, “I don’t think that my larger organization sees them in this light.”

Another person offered a mixed view about the organizational “family” and online volunteers:

There is a core of online volunteers who seem to be in for the duration and they are definitely part of the organizational family. Others, who are still very competent, committed and useful, are just involved during their particular task and then they move on. That is fine, and certainly we have a place for those online volunteers, but they don’t usually come to mind when I think of our organization’s community.

Final Thoughts

In summary, three areas of discovery regarding international volunteer involvement online have ramifications for all volunteer involvement online:

- 1) Successful online volunteering requires the following attributes on behalf of the host organization:

- excellent literacy level (reading and writing);
 - a comfort with working online (more than just Internet access);
 - a comfort with bureaucracy/protocol;
 - basic, stable infrastructure and staffing in place;
 - at least basic experience in volunteer management;
 - at least one person responsible for the involvement of online volunteers;
 - a commitment to supporting online volunteers;
 - well-developed people- and project-management skills;
 - an openness to diversity of view and working styles; and
 - a broad understanding of “community.”
- 2) Online volunteering can be a positive side to “globalization”, happening at a very local, personal level for people and organizations all over the world.
- 3) Involving international online volunteers leads to the building of certain capacities for staff at host organizations.

However, more research is necessary to fully develop understanding of online volunteering. For instance, how are the global views held by international online volunteers changing as a result of their service? What do they believe contributes to

the successful involvement of online volunteers? Do organizations build their online volunteers’ capacities and consider them part of their overall volunteer corps?

One final note: The researcher’s impression from the responses is that many organizations wish online volunteers were more, if not entirely, self-managing (i.e., not requiring explicit task descriptions, guidance, or so much support). The comments left the researcher wondering if organizations have unrealistic expectations of not just online volunteers but all volunteers, perhaps a good subject for further research.

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About the Author

Jayne Cravens is an internationally recognized professional in capacity-building for and management of mission-based organizations/civil society. Until February 2005, she directed www.onlinevolunteer.org, an initiative of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and UN Volunteers, and was a manager of the UN Information Technology Service (UNITeS), a volunteerism initiative by the Secretary General. Previously, she directed the Virtual Volunteering Project, helping to pioneer the concept of involving volunteers via the Internet, including online mentors. She worked with the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin (UT-Austin) regarding its AmeriCorps programs and was part of the organizing committee for the Texas Governor's Mentoring Initiative. She has been a guest lecturer for graduate-level classes at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Policy at UT-Austin and for the University of North Texas. A Kentucky native, she is currently based in Germany.