

Topic of the Month: October, 2004

Topic of the Month features articles of interest for volunteer resource managers and nonprofit leaders. For additional information about training programs or keynote presentations, please contact Mary Merrill at 614-262-8219 or mary@merrillassociates.net

Volunteering At Your Fingertips!

Trying to find someone with just the right skills for your special project? Want to create a new volunteer recruitment brochure in Spanish? Can a banker in Madrid or a marketing specialist in Australia or a spanish student in Marietta, Ohio do the job?

Once upon a time meetings were face-to-face and volunteers had assigned workspaces in the office. Conversation happened around the water cooler and mail came via the U.S. postal service. Today we have Internet, e-mail, instant messaging, telecommuting and virtual companies. People work together who are not together. Physical space, time differences and distances have evaporated as technology has made it possible to work with others across town, across the country or even across the ocean. If you have ever shopped at Amazon books, or eBay, you know there is an amazing selection to choose from. Technology now places a global village of volunteers at your fingertips.

Curious about who volunteers online and what they do? Following are four examples of real people doing outstanding work as online volunteers through the United Nations Online Volunteer Program.

Flavia Trevisani, a graduate in law and international relations living in The Netherlands, manages Lawyers Without Boarder's corps of online volunteers around the world. She implemented a system of volunteer recognition, as well as an online volunteer registration, a log for hours, and a volunteer management tool. Flavia oversees all new volunteer registrations, introduces new volunteers to the organization, is writing a volunteer manual and a volunteer operations manual for the organization.

George Okello Gopal, Kenya, produced a research report as part of a larger project on "Globalization, Gender and Health" for the Centre for Research in Women's Health, Canada. George also researches and summarizes articles on corruption and economic crimes in his region for the US based Fordham Institute for Ethics and Economic Policy.

Kalyani Suresh, India, developed a complete online course in Mass Communication for PEOI, a non-profit educational organization based in the US that offers free online courses to anyone.

Beatriz Iglesias, Spain, translates documents from English to Spanish for several organizations, including Shine a Light, a network of organizations providing knowledge resources about issues of street children in Latin America.

Online volunteers are designing and maintaining web sites; creating blogs; creating newsletters, publications and marketing materials; creating orientation and program manuals – print and online versions; writing grants and developing donor lists; providing direct services such as tutoring and mentoring; and developing resource libraries. Creating a resource library of online resources related to the work/issues/mission of your organization is a great position for an online volunteer familiar with search engines and Internet databases.

For the last three years I have been managing eighteen online volunteers (some of whom I have never met or talked to personally) who serve as reviewers for the Journal of Volunteer Administration. They are responsible for reading and evaluating all research manuscripts submitted to the Journal. All the work is done electronically, via email.

I have also worked with online volunteers who translated articles for the Journal, or training materials into Spanish and Russian.

Based on my personal experiences, working with online volunteers is not hard, but it does take some advance planning. Following are some of my tips for working with online volunteers.

- Have a written job description with clearly defined duties and expectation. Choose your words carefully and fully describe what you are asking them to do. Unlike onsite volunteers who can discuss the job description with you. Online volunteer depend upon you ability to clearly describe, in writing, the parameters of the assignment.
- Establish time frames for the work. Even if you have open-ended work, break it into sections with beginning and ending dates. Many online volunteers appreciate the ability to move in and out of the work and it is helpful to break the work into short term projects.
- Have a consistent communication plan/pattern. Online volunteers cannot stroll into your office each week to get the latest news. You have to take it to them. Answer inquiries promptly. Establish guidelines for answering questions or being available to respond via email. Consider a blog or “volunteers only” section on your website where you can post assignments, share organizational information, and acknowledge accomplishments. Lack of communication and the absence of informal information sharing is one of the biggest pitfalls when dealing with online volunteers. This can lead to a lack of connectedness. It can be more difficult to create a sense of togetherness (team spirit) when people are not physically working together. When volunteers are remotely located it is important to create intentional ways of being certain everyone is connected to a shared common mission.
- Be sure software is compatible between your organization and the volunteers. You don’t want to be surprised when your volunteer sends you a translated document or a newsletter in a format that you can’t access on your computer. Avoid the use of proprietary file formats as much as possible. Don’t save documents as Microsoft Word documents, instead save them as Rich Text Format documents. If you don’t have need for boldface and italics, then use plain old text instead.
- Create opportunities for synergy. When you work face to face, there are opportunities to bounce ideas off of one another and to build on someone else’s good idea. Create a strategy for “putting your heads together” so you can share ideas, solutions and strategies. Chat rooms allow for “real time” discussions, but can be challenging if you are working with volunteers in multiple time zones.
- Have a plan or procedure for handling problematic volunteers. Recognize that deadlines will be missed; work will be incomplete, and problems will occur. Be prepared to deal with these matters online.

If you are interested in engaging online volunteers, there are two excellent resources to help you get started:

- United Nations [Online Volunteer](#) program has guidelines and tips for organizations and volunteers.
- [ServiceLeader.org](#), a project of the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service at the University of Texas has information on virtual volunteering, including *The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook*.

Several years ago ServiceLeader.org developed sample tag lines to place on your organization’s website to attract online or virtual volunteers.

- Don’t just surf – Volunteer!
- Volunteer in your bunny slippers

- Wear your pajamas to work
- Do Good from your desktop
- Click into action
- Surf & Serve
- Click & serve
- Download good deeds
- Volunteers can do it – ONLINE
- Engage in a little mouse to mouse resuscitation
- Volunteer whenever you feel like it.
- Nighttime, daytime, anytime is the right time to volunteer online.
- Make a difference — Virtually!

Online volunteers are a great addition to onsite volunteers. Because you are drawing from a much larger pool of potential volunteers, you have greater opportunities to find someone with the special skills and experience you are looking for. You don't have worry about providing office space, parking, supplies or computer access. Volunteers that perform their service online can work the hours that are most convenient for them. They can work from their home or their workplace. They can draw upon additional resources through their co-workers and connections. They can help you diversify your volunteer corps to better serve the needs of our diverse communities.

Online volunteering can be attractive to potential volunteers because there is a low barrier to entry. Applications and interviews can be done online. There is no commute. Volunteering can be done anywhere there is access to the Internet, like sitting in an airport while on a business trip or from a hotel room while on vacation. You can be young, "mature," shy, homebound, male, female, disabled, recovering from an illness or accident, a student, a professional, retired or unemployed — and it may all be irrelevant as an online volunteer. In the online world, the saying is: No one knows you're a dog!

You can post online volunteering opportunities and find such opportunities at [UNV's Online Volunteering service](#) (if your organization serves the developing world) and at [VolunteerMatch](#).

Online volunteers are volunteers without frontiers.

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