

WORKING DRAFT

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UTILISING TECHNOLOGY IN VOLUNTEER-INVOLVING ORGANISATIONS

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Introduction

“Although they may seem mysterious, computers are only machines for recording, organising, processing and retrieving data” (Ellis and Noyes 1990, p51). Quotes like this from just over a decade ago neatly illustrate the immense change in terms of our attitude to ICT and its potential uses. As early as 1992, the potential of ICT for the voluntary sector was being recognised (Community Development Foundation 1992). Now, few volunteer managers would be without ICT in some area of their work. The technological revolution that is currently sweeping the world is affecting every area of life although it does have specific implications for volunteering. “Competition for funding and volunteers is becoming more acute as new organisations enter the marketplace and as changes occur in the nature of funding available and patterns of volunteering” (Burt and Taylor 2000, p131). This paper aims to examine the various ways that information and communication technology (ICT) can assist volunteer-involving organisations to meet these changing demands and enable them to increase the number and diversity of the volunteers they involve, improve the effectiveness, efficiency (and possibly quality) of their volunteer management and at the same time make it easier for volunteers wishing to offer their time to do so.

The following discussion does come with a caveat. ICT can be used in many beneficial, however, it can also be socially exclusive in nature as the ongoing debate about the ‘digital divide’ illustrates. This means that some organisations and individuals are left in inequitable positions in terms of their ability to access and utilise the available technology and subsequently the many benefits that utilising can accrue. Some research and discussion suggests that this divide is wider than ever and likely to increase. In the UK, however, any

digital divide may be offset in the future by initiatives to develop a more inclusive information society, such as the funding by the New Opportunities Fund to assist local communities to gain access to information and community resources through ICT. See Appendix 1 for more resources on the 'digital divide'.

The Context

This paper is set within a context of advances in technology, an increase in the use of ICT and changes in volunteering. Recent changes in the UK volunteering landscape have meant that organisations are now facing competitive pressure in volunteer recruitment. The move towards the professionalisation of volunteer management in the UK has also meant that volunteer managers are now actively seeking volunteers with specific skills rather than adopting a generalist approach to volunteer recruitment.

Demographic shifts have also meant that those looking to recruit volunteers have had to begin to think of slightly more innovative ways to do so in an attempt to attract those from underrepresented groups. The main demographic changes in UK volunteering identified by the 1997 National Survey of Volunteering (Davis-Smith, J. 1998) included the following:

- A drop in the total proportion of people volunteering between 1991 and 1997 from 51% to 48%.
- A decline in the rate of volunteering by those aged 18 to 24 from 55% to 43%.
- The 18-24 age group also experienced a dramatic decrease in the average weekly hours volunteered; down from 2.7 to 0.7 hours per week.
- An increase in the participation of those aged 65 and over from 30% to 40%.

The diverse nature of the UK volunteering population, coupled with growing recruitment problems and the more focused approach of 'professional' volunteer managers has meant that more and more of the UK's volunteer-involvers are beginning to think how technology can assist them. Research by the Institute for Volunteering Research (1999), however, shows that some work may still be necessary before UK volunteer-involvers can get to a position where they can fully embrace the potential of ICT.

A survey of over 400 volunteer-involving organisations showed that many lacked even the most basic ICT. Over half of organisations did not have email (52%) although anecdotal evidence and recent research by Burt and Taylor (2000) suggests that this is changing. Only 28% of organisations surveyed had a web site, although these consisted mostly of simple 'presence' sites and didn't interact with the user to any great degree which can be a turn-off. "Having a web site can bring you results, but only if it properly designed and managed" (Graven *et al* 1998, p39).

In terms of hardware, the majority (66%) had less than 10 PCs in their whole organisation with only 18% of respondents having more than 50 PCs. Less than half of the organisations (44%) had their PCs networked and of those that did, only 53% had all their PCs networked. ICT was not particularly well resourced in the organisations surveyed, with only 1/3rd of them employing specific IT staff. Almost 60% of organisations had an expenditure on ICT in the previous year of under £10,000 (around US\$14,650).

These findings show that despite the huge advances in available technology and the range of innovative things that are being done in volunteering globally, there is still some way to go for UK volunteer-involving organisations so they can be at a stage to fully explore the bounds of ICT in their work. The 'unconnectedness' of some UK voluntary organisations was also identified by Burt and Taylor (2000) in their research. Some of the examples in this

paper, however, show that innovative practice is achievable within the bounds of current ICT infrastructure and resources.

ICT can be utilised by volunteer-involving organisations in a number of ways, ranging from simple desktop publishing or word processing to online activity. Of all the ICT available, email and the Internet probably provide volunteer-involvers with some of the most exciting opportunities. Email technology in particular has the potential to be the most powerful of all ICT in volunteering due to its nature as a 'push' technology.

Of the ways that ICT can be utilised in volunteering this paper identifies four main ones. These are:

1. *ICT as Resource*: This involves ways that technology can assist with information gathering or sharing;
2. *ICT as Visibility*: This is about the ways that technology can be utilised to 'get the message' out and have a 'cyber-presence';
3. *ICT as Accessibility*: This is about how a) organisations can use technology to create an environment where they are attracting more and diverse volunteers and b) individuals have greater choice in the type and form of their volunteering;
4. *ICT as Assistant*: This is simply the ways that ICT can make the job of a volunteer manager easier, in terms of day-to-day tasks.

ICT as Resource

"Perhaps the greatest benefit of information and communication technologies (ICT) is the capacity to share information" (Rykert 1999, p180). This may be an active process in that people become involved in online networking specifically to share information or it may be more passive in that people simply put information 'out there' in the hope that it will be

discovered. However, ICT should be used in a strategic way to meet the needs of volunteer-involvers and volunteers whether actively or not.

In terms of email, one of the best ways to gain and share information on volunteer programme management is to join one of the many email discussion lists available (some are listed in Appendix 1). These allow practitioners and academics to share ideas and good practice or can act as peer support networks. A huge benefit of email discussion groups is that they transcend geography and therefore widen the knowledge base at the disposal of the volunteer manager. The nature of volunteer management as a profession, in the UK at least, is that it is quite small community. can lead to the same ideas being regurgitated by the same individuals. A simple email discussion list can easily and quickly give an injection of new ideas that may never have been available through traditional channels of communication. It is also provides instant access to expertise that is unbounded by geography.

Web-based resources are also extremely important and can take various forms. They can include resources for volunteers managers, volunteers or others like researchers and policy makers. There are many 'good-practice' type websites online offering advice on how to recruit volunteers, how much expenses to pay or how to draw up a volunteer agreement. There are also links to books online with some excellent online bibliographies and sometimes the full text or summaries of publications. The Internet is also an excellent place to find data on volunteering. Many of the voluntary sector and volunteering representative and intermediary bodies have online resources as do many of the worlds volunteer centres. Some of the national volunteer centres have extremely advanced websites with very useful resources.

A huge benefit of the Internet, to volunteer-involvers at least, is that by and large the resources on it are free. The downside to freely available information, however, is that quality

control is fairly difficult to ensure. This is an issue with the Internet generally though and not just volunteering-related resources.

Case Study: The National Centre for Volunteering is the national representative organisation in England on issues around volunteering, mainly dealing with national and regional organisations. Because they are based in London, getting information and resources ‘out to the regions’ has often been an issue. It has been given greater prominence with the Centre’s recent move towards involving community based organisations in their work. One of the main ways that the Centre has tried to reach it’s geographically dispersed constituency is through it’s website, which has developed considerably over the past two years and is an excellent example of how organisations can utilise ICT to provide a resource for it’s constituency and beyond.

Like all effective web sites, the Centre’s has been extremely well planned and designed and anyone visiting it can see the resources that are available immediately. The site is broken into several sections: About the Centre; Working with volunteers; I want to volunteer; Campaigns and Research. Each section contains an impressive array of resources. The ‘Working with volunteers’ section for instance includes all of the Centre’s information sheets in both PDF and Word format, summaries of their ‘Good Practice Guide’ and ‘Recruitment Guide’, and full articles from *Volunteering* magazine.

The site is also becoming much more interactive. People can order publications through the website and as the next stage of development, the Centre will be creating a chat room for hosting real-time discussion sessions and an e-information service where people get responses to queries via email. The Centre’s website is enabling the organisation to extend its reach both in terms of the types and range of organisations using its resources but also in terms of geography. Many queries and orders now come from outside the UK. The Centre

has identified the use of ICT as one of its key strategic objectives for the next three years and the Internet is likely to be one of the key facets in this plan.

ICT as Visibility

“A key benefit of the new technology is that it gives ordinary people and community groups access to inexpensive publishing and broadcasting media, the power to express their knowledge and describe their activities to a wide audience, to give validity to their experience” (IBM 1997, p53). This is indeed one of the most useful and liberating aspects of the Internet. Organisations no longer need huge resources to get their message out. This can be effectively done via a simply designed web site and a bit of complementary marketing. In fact, volunteer-involving organisations can get the message out about their work without having to rely on any of the traditional means of communication.

Part of ICT as visibility is telling others about your work, but for volunteer-involving organisations it is also about trying to attract volunteers by having a well crafted online message. Just as someone applying for a job will go and seek the organisation out on the Internet, so too volunteers are likely to look for organisations online either once they have decided to volunteer or as part of their overall search for volunteering opportunities. It is becoming vital therefore that organisations have some web presence. Although, presence sites tend to be utterly uninspiring and are as likely to put off potential volunteers as having no website at all. The Internet and email can make volunteer-involving organisations and their opportunities more visible to people who they would not usually come in contact with. This might mean people who are physically or social excluded or people who would simply never have thought about volunteering before.

Case Study: ‘Do-It’ is the UK’s national online volunteering database. It matches volunteers to volunteering opportunities and also have lots of information for volunteer-

involving organisations and potential volunteers. This could easily be a case study of 'ICT as Accessibility' but it also serves as a good example of ICT as Visibility.

The database is only one section of a wider website called TheSite.org, which is produced and managed by YouthNet UK, a small registered charity founded in 1995. TheSite.org is designed to connect young adults (18-25) in the UK to the best information, help and advice available. It tries to enable these people to make informed decisions for themselves. The 'Do-It' bit of the website was conceived as a place which could offer to the public as many opportunities as possible, from one central online database, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. This way, finding the right opportunity is easy. You can do it from home and you can do it when you want. You can also search for vacancies relevant to your interests and your location.

The placement of a national online volunteering database on a site dedicated to young people is a perfect case study of making 'volunteering' visible, but visible to people who may never have come across or even thought about volunteering in before.

TheSite.org is also designed, packaged and presented in a very youth-friendly way so that it makes volunteering look attractive and like something that a young person might actually want to do. This is one of the reasons why there has been a decline in the participation of young people in volunteering. Young people are less likely to be turned on by traditional approaches to volunteer recruitment, therefore, utilising ICT in the way that TheSite.org shows the power of the Internet.

ICT as Accessibility

Potentially the most important aspect of the new ICT is its use in accessibility. This refers to 2 separate but related aspects:

- a) volunteers finding out about an organisation and finding routes into its volunteering opportunities; and
- b) how technology can assist people to physically volunteer..

Online matching is an excellent example of the first point. There are numerous sites on the Internet (see Appendix 1) that have large databases of available opportunities that will present potential volunteers with lists of volunteering opportunities based on criteria that they specify. The previous case study is a good example.

In terms of actually involving volunteers through innovative use of technology, there are several exciting initiatives (see McNutt 2000; Graven *et al* 1998). By far the most innovative and exciting of them is ‘virtual volunteering’, a major new advance in volunteering in the last few years. This does not mean volunteering without a real person, but is more about the ‘style’ of the volunteering. “ ‘Virtual Volunteering’ refers to volunteer tasks completed, in whole or in part, via the Internet and a home or work computer. It’s also known as online volunteering, cyber service, telementoring, teletutoring and various other names.” (Ellis and Cravens 2000, p1). This would include tasks that are key to an organisation but need not be completed on site, such as web design, research, writing, etc. Therefore, it cannot replace a lot of the volunteering that currently goes on, but might be seen as complementary to what currently happens. It might allow volunteer managers to do those things that they would like to do but maybe do not have the time, space or money to get volunteers to do.

There are many advantages to virtual volunteering. The main advantage is that the volunteers do not physically have to locate to where the organisation is. There are, therefore, savings in terms of workspace but also working materials and travelling expenses. It also enables organisations to search for the right person with the right skills and not be constrained by distance. The right volunteer could be within 10 metres of the office or might be 10,000 kilometres away. With virtual volunteering the only constraint is the depth of your imagination in how to involve online volunteers. Susan J. Ellis and Jayne Cravens have written an excellent book on the subject called ‘The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook’ (2000)

which is available to download for free (see Appendix 1). As well as an in-depth look at virtual volunteering, the book also contains an excellent section containing links to relevant Internet-based resources. Despite taking a while to download and print off at around 130 pages, this really is a brilliant resource and should be in the possession of any volunteer manager contemplating utilising volunteers in this way, or indeed any volunteers thinking of donating their time ‘virtually’.

Case Study: A good example of a virtual volunteering website is the one hosted jointly by NetAid.org and United Nations Volunteers. The website can be found at <http://www.netaid.org//OV/> and is particularly good as it not only enables volunteers to search for opportunities and for volunteer-involving organisations to post them, but it also gives some interesting and useful background information, explaining why and how people should volunteer online and why and how organisations can host online volunteers.

For those still unclear what virtual or online volunteering is, then the site also gives good examples of the types of things that online volunteers can do. The range of activities potential volunteers can undertake are limitless and examples of assignments on this site include Spanish translation, online research, fundraising, database development, creative writing, development of teaching materials and online medical advice. The nature of the work also means that it is very much international in focus, although it can obviously be carried out wherever there is a PC, highlighting the benefit of virtual volunteering.

Virtual volunteering has many benefits, as already discussed, but it is also a way to include people often socially excluded from society, such as people with disabilities or older people. Whilst not a replacement for traditional volunteering, it is undoubtedly an exciting development that volunteer managers can harness quite easily, but with astonishing results.

ICT as Assistance

ICT does bring with it the promise of benefits beyond mere improvements in administrative and operational effectiveness and efficiency, however, usefulness of ICT in day-to-day working should not be overlooked in the rush to be innovative. Some of this day-to-day use of ICT can involve specialist software (or hardware), but much of it can be done within the limits of current organisational skills, resources and technological capabilities.

Office software is the most obvious ICT tool that can be used in this way. Volunteer managers can use simple databases in some very powerful ways. Simple word processing packages can also be used quite imaginatively. The mail merge function available in most office suites, for example, is of huge benefit to all volunteer managers, but particularly those from smaller organisations with few staff. Mailing lists and labels can significantly reduce the administrative burden and allow volunteer managers to concentrate on other tasks. Word processing packages can also be used to create templates of documents that are regularly produced such as standard letters, agreements, newsletters or memos.

Another 'simple' office programme that can be extremely useful is the spreadsheet. This allows volunteer managers to keep a variety of basic data on their volunteers ranging from lists of information for management purposes to more detailed financial information. Spreadsheets also allow volunteer managers to carry out some data analysis without needing the skills to be able to query a fully functioning database.

Computerised databases can help volunteer managers who are swamped with paperwork and therefore maybe cannot keep track of much of the information that could be useful to them. They can also assist in making much of the data that is collected about volunteers useable. Volunteer managers can use this data to possibly justify programme expansion or seek more funding. It may also be used for the direct benefit of the volunteer acting almost like a computerised curriculum vitae of tasks carried out, hours, volunteered, training history and skills portfolio. Collecting simple data on volunteer programmes means

that some evaluation can be done alongside the identification and then targeting of under-represented groups.

There are also a range of commercially available database packages which volunteer managers could utilise. These are specifically designed for storing, retrieving and analysing information on volunteers and volunteer programmes. Whilst these custom built systems are often extremely professional and full of features, they can be priced at levels which are prohibitive for many small organisations. A list of the available programmes can be seen in Appendix 1.

The great thing about these ‘assistance technologies’ is that almost everyone has access to them and most people know how to use them. This means that those organisations that are unable to fully take advantage of the prevailing online technologies can still use ICT to assist them in their work and even these simple technologies can garner huge rewards in terms of time management and the availability of information.

Case Study: Bristol Zoo Gardens is one of the pilot organisations testing a new computerised volunteer audit system called Involve. They have 120 volunteers doing a range of activities from giving talks on aspects of the zoo’s work to visitors to doing outreach work. Before using the software, Carola Vorlop, their volunteer manager, admits that managing all these volunteers was very time consuming and not always easy. “Previously, I relied on a lot of paper information. Sometimes I had 6 or 7 separate pieces of information for one volunteer, but now all the information is in one place”. Carola was particularly impressed with the amount of features that Involve had and it’s ease of use: “The system is very user friendly, clearly designed and getting reports from the system is very easy”. Overall, the aim of the software for volunteer managers is to make it a much simpler task to store and extract the information about their volunteers that they need. Carola thinks that the system achieves

this goal: “It certainly makes my life as a volunteer manager easier and is much quicker than how we did it before”.

Conclusion

Some people feel that the world “will be better when the opportunities for citizens to engage are many and the efforts of this engagement work towards better circumstances in the lives of those around us. ICT introduces abilities for our collective minds and hearts to move from working isolation to working together” (Rykert 1999, p192).

This paper can only hint at the innovative ways that ICT can be used in volunteering and will never be able to fully capture the constantly evolving nature of the prevailing technology, however, hopefully this paper will act as a starting point in terms of thinking about these issues. ICT is certainly changing the way everyone works and specifically the way volunteer managers do. It is up to everyone to ensure that these changes are to the benefit of the sector.

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APPENDIX 1: Volunteering Related Web Resources

ICT as Resource

- Nonprofit Resources Catalogue: [http://www.clark.net/pub/pwalker/GeneralNonprofitResources/Volunteerism and Activism/](http://www.clark.net/pub/pwalker/GeneralNonprofitResources/Volunteerism%20and%20Activism/)
- Online resources for Volunteer Managers: <http://www.serviceleader.org/vv/vonline.html>
- UK Communities Online: <http://www.communities.org.uk>
- Citizens Connection: <http://www.citizensconnection.net>
- CyberVPM.com: <http://www.cybervpm.com/navbar.htm>
- United Nations: <http://www.unv.org/volstats/index.htm>
- Points of Light Foundation: <http://www.pointsoflight.org/involved/VolunteerFactsStatsSheet001.htm>
- Independent Sector: <http://www.indepsec.org/programs/research/factsfigs.htm>
- Institute for Volunteering Research: <http://www.ivr.org/organisation/bulletins.htm>

ICT as Visibility

- The Internet Volunteer Initiative: <http://www.4laborsoflove.com/>

- Volunteer Now!: <http://www.SERVE.net.org>
- ImpactOnline: <http://www.impactonline.org>
- Nonprofit Career Network: <http://www.nonprofitcareer.com/volunteer/volunteer.htm>
- Action Without Borders: <http://www.idealists.org>

ICT as Accessibility

- TimeBank: <http://www.timebank.org.uk>
- The Virtual Volunteering Project: <http://www.serviceleader.org/organisation/vv/>
- Austin Online Mentoring Programme: <http://www.vvonlinementors.org>
- Telecommuting for Persons with Disabilities: <http://www.muskie.usm.maine.edu/research/disability/empguide.html>
- The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook: <http://www.energizeinc.com/art/electbooks.html>
- VolunteerMatch: <http://www.volunteermatch.org/>
- Helping.org: <http://www.helping.org>

ICT as Assistant

- Involve: <http://www.ivr.org.uk/connected.htm>
- The Nonprofit Software Index: <http://www.npinfotech.org/tnopsi/volunteer/volindex.htm>
- VolunteerWorks: <http://www.redridge.com/Products/volunteerworks.htm>
- Samaritan Coordinator: <http://www.samaritan.com/>

Discussion Groups and Email Alerts

- Virtual volunteering email update: <http://www.serviceleader.org/vv/vverve.html>
- Charity Channel 'Technology': <http://charitychannel.com/forums/technology.htm>
- Professional VM: <http://www.egroups.com/group/professionalVM>
- UKVPM: <http://www.egroups.com/community/UKVPMs>
- NACVS list of lists: <http://www.nacvs.org.uk/networking/index.htm>
- Onelist list of lists: <http://www.onelist.com/search?query=volunteer>
- Distance Volunteering: <http://www.distancevolunteering.cjb.net/>
- IYV Discussion Board: <http://webboard.iyv2001.org/~iyv>

Digital Divide

- Computer User.com Report: <http://www.computeruser.com/news/00/06/19/news18.html>
- Digital Divide Network: <http://www.digitaldividenetwork.org>
- Americans in the Information Age Falling Through the Net: <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/digitaldivide/>
- Benton Foundation: <http://www.benton.org>

Case Studies

- Bristol Zoo Gardens: <http://www.bristolzoo.org.uk/suppframe.html>
- National Centre for Volunteering: <http://www.volunteering.org.uk>
- The Site.org: <http://www.thesite.org/do-it/>
- Samaritans: <http://www.samaritans.org/sams.html/help.html>