

**WORKING DRAFT**

Please do not quote, cite, or reproduce without explicit permission from the author.

**THE POWER TO PERFORM: A PICTURE OF THE  
CAPACITY OF NONPROFIT VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS TO  
ACCESS AND USE INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**

Nancy Macduff and Tricia Dwyer-Morgan  
Points of Light Foundation

Prepared for the 2001 INDEPENDENT SECTOR Spring Research Forum

*The Impact of Information Technology on Civil Society:  
How will online innovation, philanthropy, and volunteerism serve the common good?*

Washington, DC  
March 15 – 16, 2001

## **The Power to Perform: A Picture of the Capacity of Nonprofit Volunteer Programs to Access and Use Information Technology**

*Nancy Macduff and Tricia Dwyer-Morgan*

### **Background:**

The power of information technology in civil society resides in its ability to empower nonprofits and government-based volunteer programs to perform more effectively and to adapt quickly to changes in the service environment. The independent sector, however, lacks a comprehensive picture of the real capacity of nonprofits to access and use information technology.

Three factors appear to influence a nonprofit volunteer program's power to perform; first an organization's ability to capitalize on available technological resources; second the interest and capacity of volunteers to utilize the technology; and third the actual technological resources available to the nonprofit, government agency, or the volunteer, and the person or agency at whom service is directed. (Phillips and Laforest) For example, in virtual volunteering there is an implicit assumption that volunteers have access to computers at home or work and the time to use the computer for voluntary purposes; that volunteer programs can effectively facilitate the interactions between volunteers and those at whom service is directed, and that the person or agency who is being assisted actually has the technology available to harvest the fruits of the virtual volunteering effort.

A key factor in the successful implementation of a virtual volunteer program is access to an internet e-mail account by programs and volunteers. It also requires staff time to manage the electronic exchanges and a special set of skills to communicate effectively in an electronic environment rather than in face-to-face encounters. These success factors are dramatically

impacted by the organization's and volunteer's access to and ability to practice with technological devices and knowledge.

Current studies on the use of technology by volunteer programs are often limited in size and scope. Some studies remain unpublished (Gannon), and others are frequently anecdotal in nature rather than statistical.

Results from these studies do show, however, that there is a great deal about the field of volunteer management and the use of technology that needs to be explored. For example, a study of 216 California nonprofits indicated that budget constraints, ineffective software, and low staff skills all influence the capacity of organizations to carry out their work. (Center for Excellence in Nonprofits, 2000). In another study, the Points of Light Foundation surveyed 320 US volunteer centers and found that just half of the centers have web sites, and only 22 % have dedicated information technology staff. (Points of Light Foundation, 2000).

An unpublished 1999 study of voluntary programs in the United Kingdom (Great Britain, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) showed that half did not have e-mail, 75% did not have a web site, and just a little over 30% employed an information technology staff person.

A 1997 study on the history and development of internet resources for volunteer programs (web sites, e-zines, list serves) from 1995 to 1997, showed a dramatic increase in availability of such services. (Hawthorne, 1997)

One way to clarify the potential impact of information technology is to explore how it is used to promote and maintain the infrastructure of the sector's volunteer workforce. By studying the connection between volunteers and their organization, one can begin to determine the true power of information technology to perform the miracles it promises.

Capacity, which is the power to perform, is influenced by an organization's ownership of or ability to utilize the hardware and software of ITS; by the sophistication and skills of its staff in using and maintaining ITS; and the availability of ITS to clients, volunteers, and donors.

A 1999 study of computer use (among 51 congregations of a mid-west Protestant denomination) showed that respondents recognized a need to acquire more sophisticated and specific computer hardware and software to track their information. Results of the survey illustrated, however, that the desire to increase performance did not always match the capacity of volunteers or staff to select an adequate hardware and software package or to make use of the system. Limited access to information technology appears to be more than a localized phenomenon. In July 2000, American Demographics magazine reported the percentage of people with internet access. Most cities in the middle of the US had fewer than 35 % of their population wired; San Francisco had the highest access at 61 %; Cleveland, the lowest at 36 %. The impact of information technology on a nonprofit's work is driven by capacity, and nonprofits should be concerned that technology initiatives could be increasing the digital divide and creating new forms of exclusion.

### **The Study:**

This paper reports on the capacity of volunteer programs to access and use information technology systems (ITS) to promote and maintain the infrastructures of their volunteer workforce.<sup>1</sup>

The Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA) in cooperation with the Points of Light Foundation (the Foundation) conducted a study in late 2000 on the use of information

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is a preliminary analysis of data from a survey conducted in late December 2000. Permission to use data from the survey or reproduce it must be received in advance from the authors.

technology systems by managers of volunteer programs. AVA is the professional association for managers or directors of volunteer programs. The organization provides educational activities, a credentials program, and routinely does such things as salary surveys. The 30-year-old organization has a code of ethics for members and exists, as do other professional associations, to enhance the public perception about the profession and train members in best practices.

The Points of Light Foundation in partnership with the Volunteer Center National Network provides training and technical services for its members through conferences, youth volunteer training, training for corporate volunteer programs. It is ten years old.

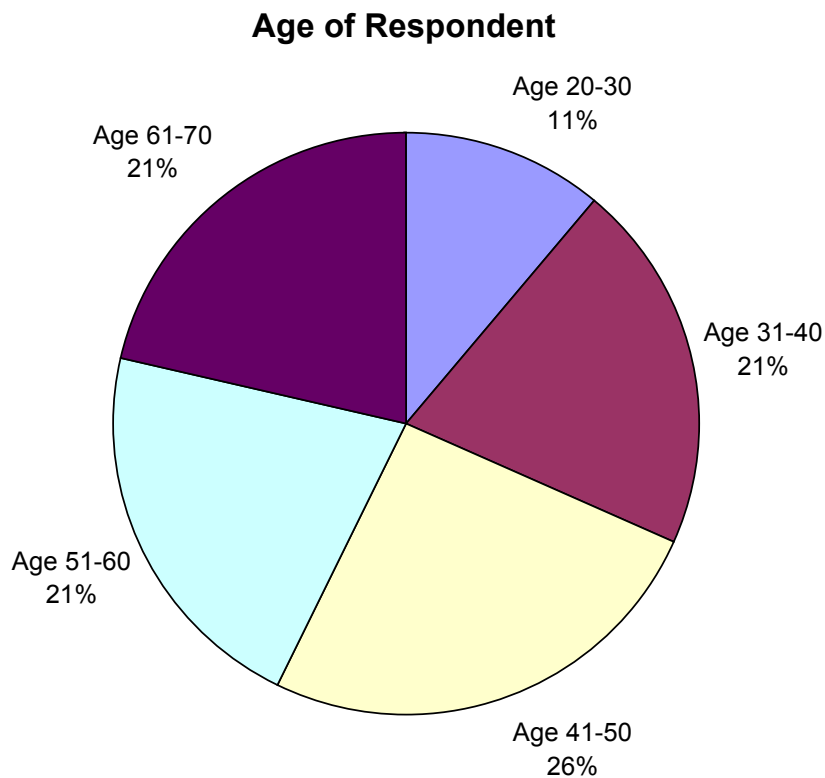
For this survey, information technology included everything from the telephone use to web access. Respondents were asked to tell about the equipment and activities of their organization and also the access of their volunteers to various types of technology. (Copies of the survey are in the Appendix).

A randomized sample of AVA's 2,000 professional volunteer managers from around the globe and the Points of Light Foundation's approximately 2,000 corporate, government, and nonprofit volunteer program manager members received the survey. Surveys were mailed to 375 members of AVA and 375 members of the Foundation. Eighty members of AVA and 42 members of the Foundation returned surveys for a total of 122, a 16.2% return rate; 119 surveys contained enough information to be used in the survey results section.. (Copies of the survey are in the Appendix).

Respondents locations ranged from Washington State to North Carolina to Texas to Carolina. Thirty-four states, Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico were represented among the 122 respondents. Of the 122 respondents, nine were from Canada

Nonprofit organizations made up 67% of the sample, government based volunteer programs were 25%, and corporate volunteer programs accounted for 8% of respondents. The largest volunteer program had 90,000 volunteers, and the smallest had 6 volunteers. The average size of all the programs was 2,168 volunteers, with a median program size of 400.

Thirty-six of the respondents reported no budget for the operation of the volunteer program. The 76 programs reporting available money for the volunteer office had budgets ranging from \$2 million to \$1,500. The average budget was \$128,008, with a median value of \$30,000. The survey asked for the organizational budget, as well as the volunteer office budget. One organization had a budget of \$688 million; the smallest organizational budget was \$30,000.



Sixty-eight % of those surveyed are over age 40. As a group the respondents are well educated with 81% reporting a bachelor's degree or better.

### **Results Highlights:**

**In Part II** of the survey, volunteer program managers answered questions about access to technology by staff within their volunteer programs. Ninety-six percent of volunteer program managers who responded indicated their organization possesses or has access to a fax machine.

One hundred and five of volunteer program managers or about 88.2 % of those responding indicated their program had access to at least one computer. Within the individual programs about 69.7 % of the managers said that at least 81 % of their staff have email addresses and access to email at work.

The majority of volunteer program managers responding, 85.7 %, said their organization has a web site. Sixty-eight percent indicated their volunteer program has at least one page on the organizational web site , and 6.7 % have a volunteer program web site that is not part of the organizational site .

Sixty-three percent of volunteer program managers indicated that their organizations' provided computers or access to computers for all their staff. Forty seven percent of volunteer program manager's organizations dedicated at least some computers for work by volunteers.

Sixty-two percent of volunteer program managers indicated their organizations own cell phones which are made available for use by on-duty staff ; 21.8 %, make cell phones available for use by on-duty volunteers.

**Part III** of the survey asks volunteer program managers what types of technology they actually use in their programs and to what uses they put the technology. More than 95 % of

volunteer program managers say their programs use the telephone and fax machine for volunteer management activities. Volunteer program managers responding to the survey indicated that uses for the phone include conference calls (42.2 %), telephone tree calls (24.7 %), and voicemail boxes for volunteers (24.4 %). Twenty-two percent of volunteer program managers use the fax machine for blast faxes, 12.6 % for fund raising appeals, and 23 % offer fax-on-demand.

Greater than 96 percent of respondents said computers were used by the programs in the management of volunteers. The uses of the technology included maintaining a database of volunteers (87.4 %), award/recognition records (84.9 %), and volunteer training (68.1 %). Access to the internet and the web is available to the majority of volunteer program managers with 87.4 % having internet access, 82.4 % with web access. Approximately 28 % of volunteer program managers indicated that their volunteer program's internet and web access was filtered or limited by their organization.

Fifty-nine percent say they use a web site to recruit volunteers and 20.2 % provide an informational web site for "placed" volunteers. Five percent of programs offer "chat rooms" for volunteers, and 46.2 % conduct on-line recruiting, while 25.2 % offer on-line volunteer applications and screening; 52.1 % share volunteer position information on-line, 13.4 % offer on-line volunteer tasks, 20.2 % have training for volunteers on line, 14.3 % connect volunteers, clients, and members on-line, 9.2 % utilize a third parties web site such as ServeNet, and 10.9 % offer a link or a page on their web site to raise donations.

Email capabilities were also utilized in varying degrees by volunteer programs: email to volunteers, 75.6 %, discussion groups/list serves, 15.1 %, e newsletters, 38.7 %, fund raising, 21 %, on-line volunteer jobs using email, 35.3 %.

Cell phones are available to 35.3 % of volunteer program managers and 20.3 % of managers have loaner cell phones available for volunteers doing volunteer jobs, while 13.4 % use the cell phones in fund raising activities.

**In Part IV** of the technology survey, volunteer program managers estimate the percentage of volunteers within their programs who have access to various types of technology. They also describe the types of services volunteers provide using technology. *(After analysis of the volunteer program manager's answers, Question 42 was determined to be a poorly written question and the results are not included in this section.)*

Eighty-two percent of volunteer program managers reported that between 81-100 % of their volunteers had access to the telephone. This technology had the largest percentage of accessibility for volunteers. Access to computers by their volunteers was estimated in lower numbers by volunteer managers. Approximately 30 % of volunteer managers estimated at least 61 % of their volunteers had access to a computer at home; approximately 40 % estimated at least 61 % of their volunteers had access to a computer at work. About 59 % of volunteer managers indicated at least 41 % of their volunteers had access to the internet, a similar percentage, 58 %, indicated that at least 41 % had access to the web.

Five percent of volunteer managers said they had volunteers who mentored or tutored online; 37 % said volunteers communicate with clients using technology; 52 % indicated volunteers use technology for administrative support such as creating newsletters, or for record-keeping; 17.6 % of volunteer managers say volunteers help maintain a web site. Approximately 42 % of volunteer program managers indicated that at least 41 % of their volunteers had access to a personal cell phone. Fifty-two percent of programs said that no cell phones were provided from their organization for volunteer use..

A series of questions in Part IV asked volunteer program managers about the use of the web as a recruiting and fund raising tool. Thirty-seven percent of volunteer program managers said the web did increase the number of people applying. However, just 23 % of program managers were able to answer more detailed questions such as what the percentage increase was in volunteer applications and the actual numbers of volunteers who responded to online recruiting in the last 12 months.

Forty-seven percent of volunteer managers did not know if the use of the internet or web increased the amount of money donated to their organization, while 36 % said that it did not.

The various forms of technology were found to be effective by more volunteer managers for managing volunteers than in recruiting volunteers. The telephone was indicated as an effective recruitment tool by 79 % of volunteer managers, but an effective management tool by 89.1 % of volunteer managers. Cell phones were not as widely regarded as effective tools by volunteer managers with 12.6 saying personal cell phones of volunteers were effective tools for recruitment and 30.2 % saying they were effective tools for managing volunteers. Cell phones provided by the organizations were deemed effective by 9.2 % of volunteer managers for recruitment and 21.8 % for volunteer management tasks.

Computers at home were said to be effective tools for recruitment by 38.7 % and 47.9 % for management. Computers at work were regarded by 57.1 % of managers as effective tools for recruitment and 75.6 % as an effective tool for management. Similar numbers of volunteer managers found internet (62.2 %/recruitment, 58.8 %/management) and web access (63 %/recruitment, 57.1 % management) and email (64.7 %/recruitment, 76.5 %/management) to be effective tools for recruitment and volunteer management.

The fax machine was regarded by 61.4 % of volunteer managers as an effective tool for management and by 44.5 % as an effective tool for recruitment.

### **Comments:**

As stated earlier in this paper, the technology survey seeks to help answer such questions as: What is the current capacity of the internet for fundraising and volunteering? How technologically sophisticated are nonprofits? Is there a digital divide between volunteers and the organizations they serve?

Looking at the raw data provided by the random sample of volunteer managers at it relates to the above questions, several areas for further inquiry and consideration have become clear.

1. It appears access to technology and the use of technology do not necessarily go hand-in-hand. The current capacity of the internet for fundraising and volunteering will depend not just on providing access to technology to nonprofits and volunteers, but on the willingness of programs and volunteers to use the technology; as well as on determining the appropriate role technology should play in volunteer and volunteer management activities. This survey demonstrates that volunteer programs have the equipment but appear to be using them in limited and unimaginative ways.
2. It will be necessary to clarify what we mean by technologically sophisticated. It appears the majority of our volunteer managers know about the various types of technology available, and use many types of technology on a regular basis. However, the comfort levels they exhibit with the different forms of technology appears to vary widely among respondents. Some program managers have strong opinions as to the appropriateness of

different forms of technology. Nine percent of surveyed volunteer managers said that they preferred phone contact because it was more “personal.” Other respondents said they would not use certain forms of technology because they felt they were “intrusive.”

3. There does appear to more than one type of digital divide between volunteer program managers and volunteers. Access is not just a matter of what volunteer programs’ have access to, but what volunteers have access to. The implications of the filtering of web and internet access by some companies of their employee computer systems is a virtually unexplored area of inquiry. Also, as some volunteer program managers wrote in the comment section, a volunteer’s access to a computer at work does not mean their employer will allow them to use the technology for non-work purposes.
4. Lastly, respondents inability to answer some questions demonstrated that there is a great deal that volunteer managers do not know about their volunteers’ use or preferences in technology.

## **References:**

Wired Locales, *Volunteer Today*, August 2000 (a web newsletter).

Points of Light Foundation, Volunteer Center Technology: 1999 Volunteer Center Survey Report, Washington, DC.

Center for Excellence in Nonprofits, Wired for Good: Technology Survey Report, San Jose, CA March 2000.

Leaders' Attitudes and Computer Use in Religious Congregations, *Nonprofit Management & Leadership*, Summer 1999.

Electronic Advocacy by Nonprofit Organizations in Social Welfare Policy, *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, December 1999

Kuhlmeier, David B., Srite, Mark, Thatcher, Jason., The Effect of Information Technology on the Structure of Non-Profit Organizations: A Case Study of the World Wildlife Fund. Paper presentation, Association for Research on Nonprofits and Voluntary Action, New Orleans, November 2000.

Phillips, Susan, and Laforest, Rachel, Expanding the Technology Capacity of the Voluntary Sector: A Canadian Experiment in Government-Sector Collaboration. Paper presentation, Association for Research on Nonprofits and Voluntary Action, November, 2000, New Orleans.

Gannon, Mark, Get Yourself Connected: Managing Volunteers Through Technology, *Voluntary Action*, V.2, No. 2, Spring 2000, London.