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**THE IMPACT OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY ON  
VOLUNTEERISM AND THE NONPROFIT SECTOR: A  
RHODE ISLAND CASE STUDY**

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## **The Impact of Information Technology on Volunteerism and the Nonprofit Sector: A Rhode Island Case Study**

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This paper demonstrates how the transition from a manual matching system to a web based system is affecting both volunteers' and agencies' views of recruitment and volunteerism as a whole. It also describes how the growth of the internet in general, and the use of the Volunteer Center of Rhode Island (VCRI)'s online interactive database in particular, is affecting the operation of nonprofits in Rhode Island. It then explores how Rhode Island nonprofits have kept up with the technological revolution. Finally, it discusses how the use of information technology (IT) has and has not increased nonprofits' effectiveness as well as the effects on civic participation.

In its transition from a manual matching system to an interactive web based matching system, VCRI has had the opportunity not only to view how nonprofits throughout the state are changing due to technology, but also has the opportunity to play a hand in affecting that change. In April of 2000, VCRI launched a much awaited, truly groundbreaking, web site which includes a database system with the ability for agencies to list and edit their volunteer opportunities; individual volunteers to search for opportunities; corporate volunteer programs to have their own customized sites; agencies and volunteers to collect and report feedback, and for short-term volunteer calendar programs. Working as the Director of Programs at VCRI before, during, and after this transition, has given me the unique, birds-eye view of how all constituencies are responding and using not only this web page and database, but also to IT in general.

VCRI works with 1,600 nonprofit, governmental, and healthcare proprietary organizations throughout RI. Before the system was launched, if an agency needed a volunteer,

they would call VCRI, request a form, have it mailed to them, fill it out, and mail it back to VCRI. When they needed to request publication of the volunteer opportunity, they had to resubmit the form. When a volunteer wanted to be matched with an opportunity, they would call us, we would send a form to them, they would fill it out, and return it to us. Once it was received, it was often ten days before an interviewer called them, often to only leave a message and begin the phone tag game. It was not unusual for a volunteer to wait more than a month from their original request to eventually receive a list of matching opportunities. At this point, they would then try contacting the agencies on the list. It could be a significant amount of time before they actually began volunteering. This was not only a strain on volunteers, but also a strain on staff of VCRI and the agencies we work with.

Using a web-based database system, potential volunteers receive the results of their interests immediately. Volunteers search the database themselves, match themselves, and contact the agencies themselves. This places the power, and the responsibility, in their hands. The system does the same for agencies. No longer do they have to wait for VCRI staff to manually process their forms. It is their responsibility to both learn and make the time to use the tools VCRI offers. It is even their wording that volunteers view on the site.

It was in response to growing dependency on the web as a tool for information seeking, and the increasing lack of patience in the community as a whole to the outdated manual system, that inspired VCRI to move to an online system. In doing so, we have already seen how both volunteers and agencies are expecting the immediacy of the connections. Even though we have only had the ability to make these immediate connections for the past few months, it seems neither volunteers nor agencies are willing to wait two to three weeks, as in the past. We have not only adapted to the growing dependency on IT, but we are also adding to this dependency.

The internet is profoundly affecting the way that nonprofits in RI operate. For many of the nonprofits in Rhode Island, using [www.vcri.org](http://www.vcri.org) is the first time they are using the internet for anything other than email. Many agencies, over the past few years, have recruited someone to construct a web page for them, simply because it seemed like the right time for it. Now, for the first time, they are using the internet to recruit volunteers, to obtain feedback from them, and to communicate in a much more detailed way than simple email allows. Several agency staff members have reported using the site for their personal needs; to search for volunteer opportunities for themselves. These individuals never used our services in this way before. The website, and the internet in general, is changing the way agencies behave and the way they think about doing their professional and personal work.

RI nonprofits have done remarkably well in keeping up with the technology revolution. While it's true that our most commonly asked question is how we handle the volunteers and agencies without the access or skill to use our new system (in which case we take the information from them on the phone), this has been much less of a real issue than we originally expected. In the winter of 1999, we conducted a test run to use as evidence. We listed holiday opportunities on our website. When volunteers called to request our annual publication of holiday opportunities, we told them it was posted on the website. Only 33% needed a hard copy because they did not have internet access. We expected that to follow through in the nonprofit sector and with our current volunteers. However, in that short time, only three of our 200 member agencies reported not having internet access. The ratio is similar with the other 1,400 agencies we work with. In the summer of 2000 about ten percent of volunteers requested help due to lack of internet access (these numbers have not noticeably dropped in the last quarter of

2000). That is a very large change in our constituency; for a three-month period. We expect the gap will continue to shrink.

We also overestimated the confusion that the change itself would cause. We expected a few of the agencies to be angry and frustrated with having to do the work themselves. We were also concerned about the loss of data from the old system to the new one. However, there has been very little negative feedback from the agencies. I think that this is due in part to the consistent changes in the RI banking industry. Almost every Rhode Islander has experienced the pains and traumas of computer system conversions. They have learned to accept it, even to expect the difficulties that come with these conversions. VCRI converted at a time when the staff at nonprofits already had the experience to interpret the change and were not particularly confused by it.

We did, however, underestimate difficulty with the hardware that nonprofits use. Many nonprofits are working on old, donated computers. These machines are made up of mismatched parts and have many kinks that go along with that. Perhaps more importantly, they are very slow. Many were not designed to handle the internet at all, much less a complex page with photos and an interactive database. VCRI itself launched its database and website without the proper hardware and software. We definitely did not take these issues into account to the extent they warranted.

The largest challenge we have faced, even more difficult than the hardware concerns, is resistance. Like all organizations who have experienced conversions, VCRI has faced its share of resistance. Resistance falls into two causal categories. First, there is resistance to technology change. This is especially fierce from new internet and computer users. Second there is resistance to change in general. This resistance comes from agency representatives who already

know how to use computers, the internet and databases, but simply do not want to learn how to use an additional one or who don't want to change the way they've worked with VCRI in the past. Arguably, this second cause of resistance has nothing to do with IT. However, it is so rampant, that it has the ability to affect the failure or success of the database, and therefore warrants further discussion.

Some resistance has been passive. Agency representatives are sent to the site and say they will try it but then they just "disappear". Some has been more active resistance; one agency threatened to drop their membership (although they haven't).

Some agencies resist the change to the new system because they are concerned about the time it will take. We have learned that the first time an agency uses the system it takes anywhere from 20 minutes to an hour. Once they become comfortable, it usually takes about five minutes. We have learned to deal with this by sharing this information with them before they attempt to use it. Simply by being up front about the time issue seems to eliminate a lot of the resistance.

Some agencies resist the change because they don't know, or, think they don't know how to use it. We have also learned that it helps eliminate some of the resistance if we guide the agency representatives through the process, step by step, on the phone the first time they use it. This guidance is especially important for those agency personnel who have only used the internet for email not at all. Because agencies are now using VCRI's web based database to recruit volunteers, it is imperative that we especially help those less experienced agencies to feel comfortable. We have found that this can take a significant amount of handholding. The system was designed to be user-friendly, but is admittedly more user friendly for volunteers than for agencies. VCRI is in the position where we are now teaching and coaching personnel from hundreds of agencies on how to use this system as well as the internet in general. We have found

that coaching over the phone the first time makes future updates more negotiable for agencies. Once they have had the opportunity to be “talked through” the process, we remind them that everything we did can be done by them through the internet. Once they have had this experience, they are more likely to take the active role in keeping their data up to date. We have found that this often helps eliminate some of the resistance, too.

Some agency personnel don't understand the link between using this system and work elimination. They do not understand that while using the database, they will decrease their work load in the long run. For example, when a volunteer opportunity is filled we do not delete that opportunity, we just remove it from the view of volunteers. Then, when the opportunity becomes available again, it is a very quick job to make it visible again. The agency representatives who do not understand this, ask if they can continue mailing, faxing, and emailing paper forms. Of course, if they do so, someone else has to manually take their information and add it to the database. This active resistance causes duplication of work.

This resistance to IT has not happened to VCRI alone. A perfect example of this work duplication came from a volunteer center representative who was resisting the conversion of the Point of Light Foundation's volunteer center listserv to an intranet site. This volunteer center representative asked, “Why can't we have both?” -- a perfect example of this particular form of resistance and its consequences. She probably understood that the new system was better and in the end would save time. Yet, she didn't understand that having two systems would duplicate work and would cause, not solve, communication problems. Having two systems, just as having agency personnel mail, fax, and email information, duplicates work and illustrates the lack of understanding that leads to the resistance.

Resistance from agency personnel persists even from those who do understand. Interestingly, many agency personnel report that they do realize that once they learn to use the system it will take less time to recruit volunteers (VCRI doesn't promise that this is true), yet they still do not want to learn. This resistance is not geared towards technology, but to learning, itself. Many of the agency personnel who fall into this category are internet savvy and regular computer users. They simply do not want to learn anything new.

There has been almost no resistance from volunteers. Having choices seems to be the key here. Volunteers can search the databases themselves on their own time. They can spend as much or as little time as they like. They have the choice to search for opportunities with or without registering, virtually eliminating the fear that we are collecting data from them. The statistical data we try to collect is clearly marked and optional. We even give them the option to not be contacted in the future. Volunteers are empowered by the system and are not reliant on us for information. Those that choose to work with an interviewer can still do so on the phone, and our turn around time is usually one week or less; a significant decrease from when we mailed out paperwork.

With or without resistance, it is a truism to say that "there is no going back." Famous linguist and anthropologist, Benjamin Lee Whorf not only says that language affects and reflects thought (1956), but also remarks upon the way that change induces change. As when we play that mind game where we look at a black and white vase, (or is it a set of faces, or is it a vase?), human beings have the inability to comprehend multiple realities (1963). Information technology is changing the way we think. When we learn to use a word processor, many of us lose the ability to write without one. As we learn to use the internet as a research tool, not only does using a manual library seem slow and less efficient, but our skills decrease. This is true for

VCRI's database system as well. Once the resistance is surmounted, agency representatives, volunteers, and VCRI personnel all lose the ability to work within the old system.

Information technology, as every nonprofit newspaper and magazine points out, is changing everything. It allows nonprofits to link up with whole new constituencies. It allows VCRI, for example, to make volunteer opportunities instantly available to employees at entire companies. It allows agencies to connect up with volunteers that were not previously accessible to them. Gone are the cliché, little old ladies in white gloves stuffing envelopes, and the board member absent but for some cash and a name on the letterhead. The internet allows agencies to connect with volunteers with very specific skills who want to share those skills. Of course, it also aids in solicitation of funds, communication, and governance.

Information technology is also changing civic participation. Volunteers can now research an opportunity to a much greater extent than they could previously. Before they even make that online connection, they have the ability to know much more about the agency and to be much better educated than they ever could before. In addition, they can even serve online. One local nonprofit volunteer coordinator told of recruiting a volunteer in Arizona to serve as webmaster. Another reported using a homebound volunteer to make a brochure. Several RI agencies are exploring email based mentoring programs.

VCRI is also learning to use this tool to cut our workload. We have already observed a drop in mail and phone calls. Agencies are communicating with us more via the internet and many volunteers are searching the web before calling. We are referring people to volunteer opportunities without ever speaking to the agency that has the opportunity, or to the potential volunteer.

All this said, using IT has not decreased time to accomplish work, at least not yet. Agencies are more careful about what they post to the internet and therefore spend more time filling out forms for VCRI than they used to. Additionally, their connections and hardware are so slow that filling out a paper form is, at least in the short term, quicker. It takes VCRI personnel about two hours per day to manage the database – to approve and reject volunteer opportunities and respond to newly registered volunteers.

While it is true that they can do so immediately, volunteers report spending more time, not less, researching opportunities. We do not know if this has increased, decreased, or had no impact on civic participation. In 1999, 397 individuals were referred to volunteer opportunities using the manual system. In the first six months of the online system, 667 volunteers registered for referral. This increase is even more striking when we recognize several factors. First, volunteers do not have to register to search and be matched to opportunities. This means that many more (we estimate three times as many) were matched in this time period. Second, we launched the system in the summer, traditionally our slowest time of the year. Third, we launched without registering our database with search engines. That said, if we hadn't had the system this past summer, those same people may still have chosen to volunteer. They may have chosen to research opportunities themselves, rather than wait the two to three weeks to obtain information from VCRI. So, while activity has definitely increased through us, it is impossible to say if or how civic participation has increased as a result of this technology.

Perhaps more importantly, most volunteers and agencies we work with report that they like the new system better -- they like the control it gives them. They also report that they enjoy the feeling of being part of, and not cut off from, what the greater culture is doing; they like

feeling “modern.” They also seem to believe, with almost the faith one has in a myth, that it will save them time eventually. And it may.

The transition from a manual matching system to a web based system is affecting both volunteers’ and agencies’ views of recruitment and volunteerism as a whole. The growth of the internet in general, and the use of the Volunteer Center of Rhode Island (VCRI)’s online interactive database in particular, is affecting the operation of nonprofits in RI. RI nonprofits have had mixed results keeping up with the technological revolution. Finally, nonprofits’ are hopeful that the use of information technology will help them be more effective and IT has greatly affected how people participate in their communities.

## Bibliography

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