

Virtual Volunteering



volunteer ireland
obair dheonach éireann

Introduction

Volunteering without being physically present at an organisation's offices is not new. For years, volunteer drivers, visitors, mentors, book keepers, fundraisers and the like have volunteered off-site and they have used occasional face-to-face meetings, the telephone, fax and postal mail to communicate with 'HQ'. However, the recent revolution in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has opened up many new possibilities for volunteering.

What is virtual volunteering?

Virtual volunteering is voluntary work completed, in whole or in part, over the internet. It is sometimes known as online volunteering or cyber service. It is not a replacement for face-to-face volunteering, neither for the organisations, nor for the volunteers themselves, and a combination of on-site and on-line volunteering usually works best for everyone. It does, however, allow an organisation to involve more volunteers and thus achieve more of its aims.

Why virtual volunteering is an attractive concept

- There is a growing awareness of, and enthusiasm for, the huge potential of ICT.
- Many voluntary and community organisations are under pressure to do more, often with fewer resources.
- As the use of ICT in the voluntary and community sector grows, so will the requirement for ICT-based tasks.
- There are fewer 'traditional' volunteers available to assist organisations.
- Virtual volunteers tend to be younger and tend to be relatively new to volunteering.
- Virtual volunteering suits all sorts of people, especially those with home-based obligations or those living far away from an organisation
- Time zones are unimportant and it can therefore be suitable for those with time constraints and/or unusual working hours.
- Most virtual volunteers are highly skilled.
- Involving virtual volunteers is relatively cheap, though not free.
- It is environmentally friendly.

What do virtual volunteers do?

The list of possible projects virtual volunteers can undertake is endless, but can be divided into two types of work, each requiring a different approach to volunteer management:

1. Technical assistance – that is, assisting the organisation itself – in which the main focus is on managing end results
2. Direct client contact – that is, assisting the organisation's client groups – in which managing the process is as important, if not more so, than managing any end results.

Examples of each are found below:

Technical assistance	Direct client contact
Website design/maintenance	Electronically 'visiting' someone who is house bound
Desk top publishing / graphic design	Sending emails to users of support groups
Research and policy work	On-line mentoring
Media monitoring	Welcoming people about to go into hospital
Language translation	Distance learning
Writing / copy-editing	Language teaching
Data entry / database management	Moderating a chat room, listserv or newsgroup