VIRTUAL VOLUNTEERING:
Current Status and Future Prospects

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Virtual Volunteering

Virtual volunteering

- One-third of managers of volunteer resources reported having openings for virtual volunteers in their agencies.

- Virtual volunteers reported carrying out tasks such as data entry and database management, volunteer management, project management, technology support, language translation, community mapping projects, desktop publishing, and office and communications tasks.

- Virtual volunteers tend to be newer to volunteering than volunteers who accept on-site assignments.

- The majority of managers of volunteer resources see no difference in the reliability or quality of work of virtual volunteers compared to on-site volunteers.

Introduction

Volunteering without being physically present at the host organization's work site is not new. Telephone and mail have been used by home-based volunteers for many years to help with fundraising, bookkeeping, and other activities. The advent of the information and communications technology revolution has, however, opened the door to a much-expanded version of this type of volunteering that has come to be known as "virtual volunteering."

Virtual volunteering has been defined as volunteering "in which volunteers conduct their activities for agencies and clients over the Internet, in whole or in part" (Cravens, 2000). This report, based on research undertaken for the International Year of Volunteers, examines the status and future prospects of virtual volunteering in Canada.

Growing awareness of the potential for information and communications technology to expand volunteering has generated considerable enthusiasm (Cravens, 2000; Ellis, 1999; Ellis & Cravens, 2000). As governments have cut back on the direct provision of various services, organizations have felt the pressure to do more, often with less funding (Hosli, 2001). Among other things, this has led to an increase in the demand for volunteers. At the same time, volunteering rates have declined (Hall, McKeown & Roberts, 2001). In addition, the kind of volunteers that are coming forward, and their reasons for volunteering have been changing (Mattos, 2001; McClintock, 2002). Many of today's volunteers are looking for more well-defined,

time-limited volunteer opportunities that let them use existing skills and help them acquire new ones (Hall, McKeown & Roberts, 2001; McClintock, 2002).

As a result of these pressures on volunteer supply and demand, the concept of virtual volunteering has become attractive, allowing whole new groups of potential volunteers — people with disabilities, those with home-based obligations, or those who live too far away to come into an office — to volunteer (Cravens, 2000; Virtual Volunteering Project, 2001).

Although Internet-assisted volunteering has existed since the mid-90s, easily accessible systems to support it have only been widely available since 1999. This report looks at the virtual volunteering phenomenon by seeking answers to the following questions:

1. How much virtual volunteering is taking place?

2. What kinds of assignments are virtual volunteers undertaking?

3. What types of agencies are using virtual volunteers?

4. Who are virtual volunteers and where do they come from?

5. How satisfied are managers of volunteer resources with the dependability of virtual volunteers and the quality of their work?

The research process

We asked a sample of managers of volunteer resources, volunteers, and prospective volunteers to respond to questionnaires about virtual volunteering. These questionnaires were based on earlier interviews, pilot tests, and a review of the relevant literature. The questionnaires were completed in the fall and early winter of 2001-2002. Four different groups participated in the study:

- The "regional group" consisted of managers of volunteer resources who were members of Volunteer Victoria, a volunteer support and referral organization for the Capital Regional District of Victoria, B.C. They were mailed a questionnaire covering a number of topics dealing with the impact of information and communications technology on their volunteer programs, including virtual volunteering. In all, 250 questionnaires were mailed out; 129 were returned, for a response rate of 52%.

- The "national group" consisted of managers of volunteer resources from across Canada who were on the Internet mailing list of Volunteer Canada, a national association promoting and supporting volunteerism on behalf of volunteer centres across the country. This group was sent a questionnaire by e-mail that could be completed and submitted on-line. The questionnaire was very similar to the one sent to the regional group. In all, 1,100 surveys were electronically delivered and 365 were returned for a response rate of 33%.

- The "VOE group" consisted of prospective volunteers looking for volunteer opportunities on the Internet who logged on to Volunteer Canada's Volunteer Opportunities Exchange (VOE) Web site between October 2001 and January 2002. Those reaching this Web site were asked to complete an online questionnaire about volunteer-related matters, including their experiences with virtual volunteering. Overall, 1,745 people completed this questionnaire.

- The "traditional volunteer group" consisted of volunteers drawn from the lists of current volunteers of a stratified sample of member organizations of Volunteer Victoria. Our intent was to reach active volunteers who had no known connection to Internet-based services. Questionnaires were distributed to 500 of these volunteers; 196 people returned their questionnaire for a response rate of 39%.

It should be noted that, even though the respondents to our questionnaires were many and varied, they cannot be considered representative of all volunteers or volunteer-using organizations in Canada. The respondents from Victoria were all residents of a mid-sized city in one part of the country. The respondents reached through Volunteer Canada, although reflecting most of Canada's regions, included only those who used e-mail. It is not possible to say that

the results obtained from the survey are representative of all Internet users because we do not know the size of that population.

Although these restrictions limit our ability to generalize from our findings, we would argue that the total sample represents a considerable diversity of volunteers and managers of volunteer resources in terms of location, personal background, organization size, mission, and number of volunteers.

Findings

How much virtual volunteer work is taking place in Canada?

The short answer is: "not much." Our answer to this question is based on information from two sources: managers of volunteer resources and volunteers themselves.

Responses of managers
of volunteer resources

Of the 494 managers of volunteer resources who responded to our survey, only one-third (34% of the national group and 33% of the regional group) reported having any openings for virtual volunteers. When those who indicated they had virtual volunteering openings were asked how many placements they had made in the previous year, 72% of the national group and 85% of the regional group said they had made between one and five; 15% and 12%, respectively, said they had made "none." This suggests that the demand for virtual volunteers is still quite low.

Responses of prospective volunteers

A similar pattern emerged from the responses of the volunteers themselves. Members of the VOE group were asked if they had undertaken any virtual volunteer assignments as a result of contacts made through the VOE. Only 96 of the 1,745 respondents (6%) said that they had contacted organizations about volunteer positions through the VOE system. Of these, 93 (5% of the VOE group) had actually undertaken some type of volunteer assignment.

While the overall number of volunteer assignments taken on by the VOE group was minimal, almost three-quarters (72%) of these assignments were done virtually.
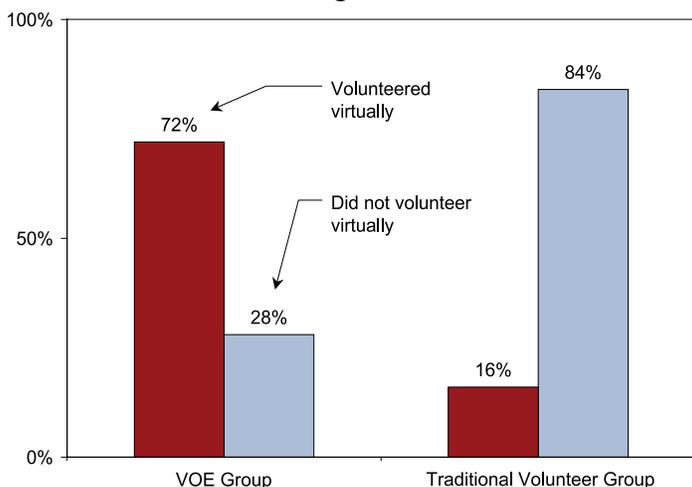
We also asked the traditional volunteer group if they had done any virtual volunteering. Twenty-eight (16%) of the 176 respondents reported that they had done so (see Figure 1).

Summary

It appears that while the potential for virtual volunteering might be great, it has not yet become a common feature of volunteering.

Figure 1

Amount of virtual volunteering in Canada

What kinds of assignments are virtual volunteers undertaking?

Although not all that common, virtual volunteering does exist. What kind of assignments do people handle when they volunteer virtually? We asked both managers of volunteer resources and volunteers themselves.

Responses of managers of volunteer resources

The top three types of virtual volunteer assignments reported by managers of volunteer resources were desktop publishing (14% of managers from the national group and 20% of managers from the regional group), Web site development and maintenance (12% of managers from the national group and 21% of managers from the regional group), and research (13% of managers from the national group and 18% of managers from the regional group) (see Figure 2).

Responses of volunteers

Nearly half (47%) of the VOE group reported that they were carrying out some type of virtual volunteer assignment other than those in the 10 categories that our previous research had suggested were the most common (see Figure 3). Following "other assignments," direct service delivery and desktop publishing were the two most frequently reported virtual volunteering assignments (13% and 9% respectively).

Unfortunately, our online questionnaire did not allow the VOE group to explain what their "other" virtual tasks were. To get a sense of what might be included in this category, we looked for clues in how managers of volunteer resources from the regional group and the traditional volunteer group described their tasks when they checked the "other" category in their surveys. In the regional group, "other" virtual volunteering included three cases of data entry and database management; three cases of volunteer management including recruitment, scheduling, and coordination; three cases of project management including event and community mapping projects; and

one case each of technology support, language translation, and accounting. Adding to this list, the traditional volunteer group included three cases of virtual volunteering relating to "virtual communications" including writing, lobbying, and consulting.

Figure 2

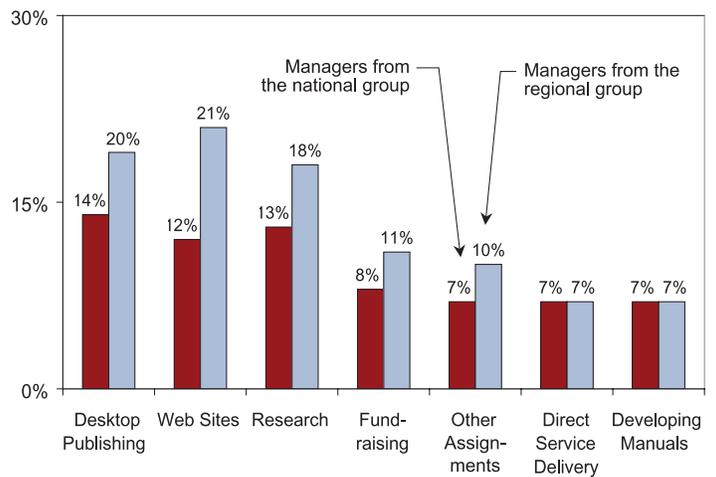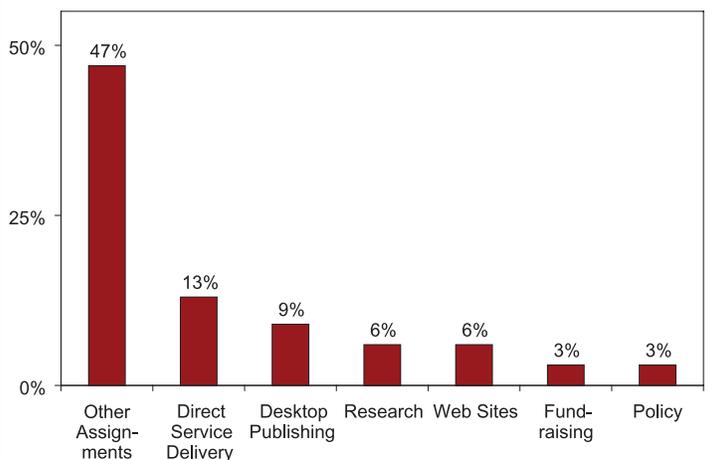**Virtual volunteer assignments reported by managers of volunteer resources**

Figure 3

Virtual volunteer assignments reported by the VOE group

Over one-third of the traditional volunteer group reported doing desktop publishing, office, and communications tasks, while over one-quarter reported undertaking Web site, fundraising, and leadership tasks (see Figure 4).

Summary

As might be expected, virtual volunteering — which by definition depends on the use of computers and the Internet — typically focuses on Internet and computer-related applications such as the design and maintenance of Web sites and desktop publishing. However, a number of other assignments were also reported, which suggests that many more kinds of volunteer tasks could be re-organized to accommodate virtual volunteers.

What types of agencies are using virtual volunteers?

Even though the demand for virtual volunteers is relatively small, we were interested in understanding whether certain types of voluntary organizations were more likely to be leaders in adopting this new form of volunteering. We looked at organizational features such as sector (e.g., social services, the arts, health, etc), size of budget, and size of volunteer programs (represented both by the number of volunteers and size of the volunteer program budget). We also looked at how much money was spent on information and communications technology in the volunteer program and the extent to which organizations had formal policies and guidelines covering information and communications technology matters. Interestingly, none of these organizational factors were significantly associated with the use of virtual volunteers.

Another possible factor related to the use of virtual volunteers is the background of managers of volunteer resources. We looked at characteristics such as gender, education, and computer experience and skills. Only one of these characteristics had any significant association with virtual volunteering: the amount of prior work experience as managers of volunteer resources. Managers with less than five years experience in their positions had more openings for virtual volunteers than did managers with more experience. This suggests that those relatively new to the job are more willing to experiment with virtual volunteering.

Who are virtual volunteers and where do they come from?

Are virtual volunteers different from on-site volunteers? Within the VOE group, there were those who took virtual volunteering assignments and those who took only on-site volunteer positions. Among the traditional volunteer group, there were a few virtual volunteers and a much larger number of volunteers who did only on-site work. Thus, we were able to compare two kinds of virtual volunteers: those from the VOE group who got into virtual volunteering via the Internet; and, those from the traditional volunteer group who got into virtual volunteering through regular volunteer work. We also compared "on-site only" volunteers from the VOE group and the traditional volunteer group.

Figure 4

Virtual volunteer assignments reported by the traditional volunteer group
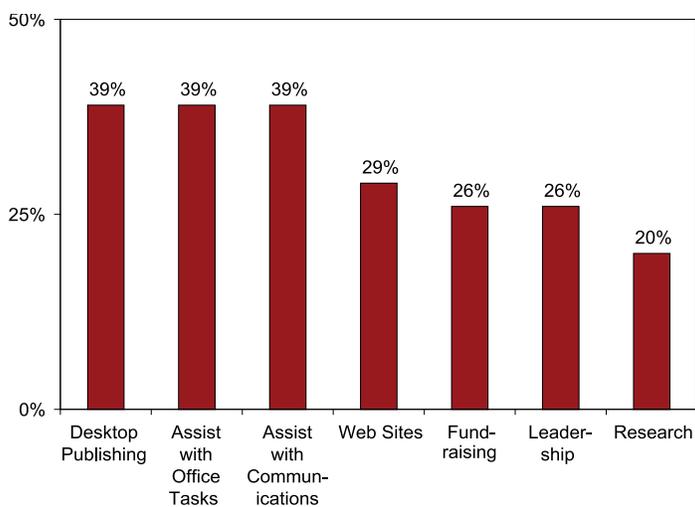
Source of volunteers

As reported earlier, only 5% of the respondents from the VOE group reported finding their positions through the VOE system. However 72% of this group engaged in virtual volunteering, while 28% volunteered on-site. Conversely, in the traditional volunteer group, only 16% did virtual volunteering and the rest (84%) did on-site volunteering (see Figure 1). It would seem then, that Internet-based volunteer recruitment services such as VOE are a much more effective source of virtual volunteers than are more traditional sources.

Volunteer characteristics

Virtual volunteers differed significantly from on-site volunteers in only a few ways (see Table 1):

■ Virtual volunteers in the traditional volunteer group were significantly more likely than on-site volunteers in the same group to volunteer more than five hours a week (50% vs. 22%). This may be because many of them were volunteering virtually in addition to volunteering on-site for their organizations. However, the opposite was true in the VOE group. In that group, virtual volunteers were *less* likely to volunteer more than five hours a week (49% vs. 81%) than on-site volunteers. This finding lends support to the belief that virtual volunteering offers opportunities to those who want to commit a smaller amount of time to volunteering.

■ The virtual volunteers in the VOE group were more likely than the on-site volunteers in this group to have no previous volunteer experience (51% vs. 19%). Seemingly, volunteers in the VOE group who take virtual volunteering positions are newer to the volunteer world than those who take on-site assignments.

Summary

These results suggest that virtual volunteers are newer to volunteering and more likely to be found if voluntary agencies approach them directly and ask for their help. Online services such as VOE appear to be the best places to find these volunteers.

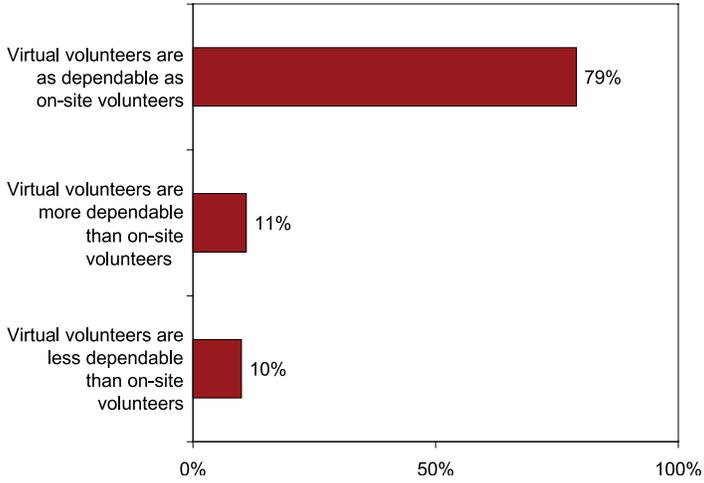## Table 1

Characteristics of on-site and virtual volunteers

| | Traditional Volunteer Group | | | | VOE Group | | | |
| | Virtual Volunteers | | On-Site Volunteers | | Virtual Volunteers | | On-Site Volunteers | |
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
Age								
Under 25	4%	1	8%	12	60%	40	50%	13
Over 25	96%	27	92%	136	40%	27	50%	13
Gender								
Male	29%	8	26%	38	21%	14	8%	2
Female	71%	20	74%	110	79%	53	92%	24
Employment								
Employed	82%	14	86%	64	62%	34	62%	15
Unemployed	18%	3	14%	10	38%	21	38%	9
Education								
No university	30%	8	39%	58	45%	29	35%	9
University	70%	19	61%	90	55%	35	65%	17
Volunteer Hours								
Less than 5	50%*	14	78%*	115	51%*	34	19%*	5
More than 5	50%*	14	22%*	33	49%*	33	81%*	21
Volunteer Experience								
Previous experience	16%	28	84%	148	49%*	33	81%*	21
No previous experience					51%*	34	19%*	5

Note: Because of the small numbers of virtual volunteers, it was necessary to collapse each variable into two categories.
Significant beyond the 99% (p<.01) confidence level

Figure 5

Dependability of virtual volunteers (according to managers of volunteer resources)

- Virtual volunteers are as dependable as on-site volunteers — 79%
- Virtual volunteers are more dependable than on-site volunteers — 11%
- Virtual volunteers are less dependable than on-site volunteers — 10%

Figure 6

Quality of work of virtual volunteers (according to managers of volunteer resources)

- No difference between virtual and on-site volunteers — 82%
- Virtual volunteers do higher quality work — 14%
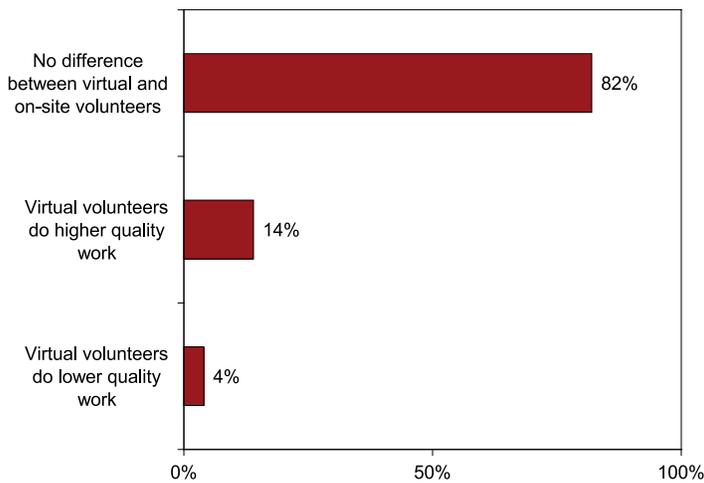- Virtual volunteers do lower quality work — 4%

How satisfied are managers of volunteer resources with virtual volunteers?

Managers of volunteer resources were asked to compare the dependability of virtual volunteers and on-site volunteers: seventy-nine percent of them reported no difference in the dependability of the two groups. Eleven percent said that virtual volunteers were more dependable than on-site volunteers, while 10% said they were less dependable (see Figure 5). We also asked managers of volunteer resources to compare the quality of the work done by virtual volunteers and on-site volunteers. Eighty-two percent reported that they found no difference in quality of work of the two groups. Fourteen percent felt the work of virtual volunteers was of higher quality, and 4% thought it was of lower quality (see Figure 6).

Summary

Some managers of volunteer resources said that they believed virtual volunteers would be less dependable because they had no physical presence in the organization. It appears, however, that virtual volunteers are really no different from their on-site counterparts in terms of their dependability and the quality of the work they produce.

Conclusion

What will the future demand for virtual volunteers be?

As of the winter of 2001–2002, it cannot be denied that, despite a lot of publicity, virtual volunteering is not yet prevalent in Canada. Does this mean it has no future? Not at all. Indeed, although the number of volunteers taking on virtual volunteering positions in our sample was very small, the research shows that there was a large number of potential volunteers using the VOE site who were willing to take on such positions. This suggests that the problem is not so much one of supply as it is of demand. However, it may be that demand for virtual volunteers will never be as large as many expected. After all, most volunteering still requires volunteers to work face-to-face with clients, help run fundraising events, help out in the office, sit on boards of directors, etc.

The potential for virtual volunteering in the future is considerable. For example, as the use of information and communications technology grows in the voluntary sector, so does the number of tasks that require gathering and disseminating information, and communicating with stakeholders via e-mail and Web sites. Volunteers using computers and the Internet can do much of this work away from the organization's premises. As noted in our discussion of what virtual volunteers do, many administrative, direct service, and fundraising tasks currently carried out by on-site volunteers may also be adaptable to virtual volunteering positions.

This suggests that a major role for managers of volunteer resources in the future could be educating their colleagues in the rest of the organization about the potential for virtual volunteering. What may be

needed is a review of all current volunteer positions to see if the work could be re-organized to become virtual rather than on-site. If so, training and technological requirements would have to be redesigned to support the new kinds of volunteers.[1] Once the demand for virtual volunteers has been created, the job of the manager of volunteer resources is to find the best people to fill those positions.

What about the future supply of virtual volunteers?

Even though the demand for virtual volunteers may not be large at present, it is likely to grow in the future. What does our research suggest about where to look and how to attract the virtual volunteers of the future?

Virtual volunteers may be found either by recruiting among an organization's current volunteers or among individuals posting their availability on online recruitment systems like the VOE. Once located, these volunteers need to be carefully recruited and selected. All this requires a planned approach that takes into consideration the following points:

- The potential of the VOE online volunteer opportunity matching system appears not to have been reached as yet. Further research is needed into why this system has not been more successful in yielding volunteers. From the present study, however, one problem appears to be the reluctance of managers of volunteer resources to search the lists of volunteer profiles. This reluctance may stem in part from the fact that the present system does not allow the organization to state a preference for virtual volunteers (even though the potential volunteers themselves can specify that they would like to do this kind of volunteering). It may also be that managers of volunteer resources "want to avoid dealing with an onslaught of prospective

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[1] For ideas on how to develop and implement a plan for using virtual volunteers, see the Web site of the Virtual Volunteering Project at the University of Texas at www.serviceleader.org/vv/.

volunteers" that are available through this system (Bowen, as cited in Ritchie, 2000). In any case, strong volunteer management is needed to ensure that prospective volunteers have satisfactory experiences (Cravens, as cited in Ritchie, 2000).

■ Once the virtual volunteering positions and new training and recruitment elements are in place, managers of volunteer resources will need to communicate with, and provide recognition of, their virtual volunteers as actively as they would any other volunteer. The difference is that this will require use of information and communications technology tools since it will have to be done at a distance.

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