Online volunteering: Unlocking untapped potential

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The Volunteering Research Papers aim to capture evidence on a wide range of topics related to volunteering and outline key insights for policy and practice. The Volunteering Research Papers are peer reviewed, and insights will directly inform the development of the National Strategy for Volunteering.

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Online volunteering: Unlocking untapped potential

Debbie Haski-Leventhal[1], Irit Alony, Paul Flemons, and Adam Woods

Key insights

- Online, virtual, or digital volunteering occurs when people give time freely towards the common good using online platforms.

- It is an important new pathway for volunteering which can increase people's 'volunteerability' (the ability to volunteer) as it is more accessible and flexible. It can also increase 'recruitability' (the ability of organisations to recruit) and allow volunteer involving organisations to tap into a new pool of volunteers.

- People are motivated to volunteer online for similar reasons to volunteering in general, but the flexibility, accessibility, and autonomy play an imperative role here.

- Online volunteering can be more inclusive insofar as it offers opportunities for people from rural areas, those with disabilities or mental health challenges, ethnic minorities, and other often-excluded groups, such as LGBTQIA+ community members.

- It is essential to ensure the online platforms for volunteering work well and that volunteers receive all their training and support virtually so that those who can only volunteer online can do so without barriers. Feedback and recognition are especially important for autonomous volunteers.

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What is online volunteering and why is it important?

Online volunteering (also known as virtual volunteering, digital volunteering, or e-volunteering) is defined by two main components: the volunteering component and the online component. Like traditional volunteering, it is unpaid work which requires volunteers' time investment and the creation of benefits for others.[2] However, unlike traditional volunteering, it occurs fully or partially on the internet.[3] Online systems play a crucial role in volunteer recruitment, facilitating tasks, and volunteers' work[4] and often involves specialised systems infrastructure, focusing on civic engagement.[5] A study on the topic highlights how volunteering, even when done online, can still help meet the volunteers' self-actualisation needs[6] with unique advantages in information processing and communication.

Online volunteering is attractive both to prospective volunteers and to organisations. Prospective volunteers are attracted by its convenience[7] and its accessibility. It is considered a 'low threshold activity' that does not necessitate extensive resources, social networks, or psychological engagement,[8] yet it holds important benefits to the volunteer, such as warm glow and positive self-esteem. Online volunteering can also benefit the community by offering unique services that are accessible to some groups, such as by offering psychological support to people who are home bound.

Furthermore, it increases people's 'volunteerability' - or their willingness, availability, and ability to volunteer – including by integrating it with another life demand: paid work.[9] It can also increase the volunteer involving organisation's 'recruitability', or their ability to recruit volunteers based on accessibility, as it is easier for people to volunteer anywhere and anytime.[10]

This is critical because, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia lost two thirds of its volunteers,[11] and less than 40 per cent of those who stopped volunteering had

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2   Ackermann & Manatschal, 2018; Wilson, 2012

3   Silva et al., 2018

4   Cravens, 2014

5   Mukherjee, 2011

6   Amichai-Hamburger, 2008

7   Haski-Leventhal et al, 2019; Mukherjee, 2011

8   Ackermann & Manatschal, 2018

9   Haski-Leventhal et al., 2018

10   Haski-Leventhal et al., 2011, 2018

11   Davies et al., 2021 https://theconversation.com/loss-of-two-thirds-of-volunteers-delivers-another-covid-blow-to-communities-159327

returned by 2022.[12] Young people (18-24) were the only age group whose volunteering rates had not started to recover since the pandemic and this group was also less likely to volunteer in traditional, formal settings,[13] even before 2020.

Motivation to volunteer online

Motivation to volunteer refers to the underlying drivers which attract people to engage in an activity,[14] and this includes altruistic, self-centred, and social motivations.[15] Motivational factors for online volunteering are diverse, may change over time, and operate at personal, collective, and external levels.[16] The existing research on online volunteering identified different motivations depending on the context and the volunteer, as shown in Table 1.

Population studied	Motivation to volunteer	Sources
Online volunteers	Altruism	Baruch et al., 2016
	Sense of impact and quality of contribution	Baruch et al., 2016
	Learning and career rewards	Silva et al., 2018
	Communication and ongoing relationship development with the volunteers	Dhebar & Stokes, 2008
	Personality traits: extraversion and openness to experience	Ackermann & Manatschal, 2018
Volunteers during COVID-19	Social solidarity	Kulik, 2021
	Excellence and achievement	Urrea & Yoo, 2021
Non-Volunteers	Attracted to online volunteering and assisting with scientific research	Haski-Leventhal et al., 2019
Citizen science volunteers	A sense of contribution to scientific research	Curtis, 2015
	Interest in content	Aucott et al., 2019
	Opportunities for learning	Cox et al., 2018
Citizen science volunteers	Recognition, feedback, awards	Alony et al., 2020
Older volunteers	Opportunity to contribute beyond one's immediate geographical location and to connect with others	Mukherjee, 2010

Table 1: Identified motivation factors for online volunteering among various populations

12   https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Volunteering-in-Australia-Research-Early-Insights-from-the-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf

13   AIHW, 2021

14   Wilson, 2012

15   Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991

16   Alam & Campbell, 2017

The volunteer functions inventory (VFI) describes six needs (or functions) that people seek to satisfy by volunteering in general:[17] values, understanding, enhancement, career, social, and protective. Table 2 shows the definitions of each of these functions with an example from the inventory.

Function	Conceptual definition	Sample VFI item
Values	The individual volunteers in order to express or act on important values like humanitarianism.	I feel it is important to help others.
Understanding	The volunteer is seeking to learn more about the hands-on experience.	Volunteering lets me learn through direct, world or exercise skills that are often unused.
Enhancement	The volunteer can grow and develop psychologically.	Volunteering makes me feel better about through volunteer activities.
Career	The volunteer has the goal of gaining career-related experience through volunteering..	Volunteering can help me to get my foot in the door at a place where I would like to work.
Social	Volunteering allows an individual to strengthen community service.	People I know share an interest in social relationships.
Protective	The individual uses volunteering to reduce own troubles.	Volunteering is a good escape from my feelings, such as guilt, or to address personal problems.

Table 2: The volunteer functions (based on Clary & Snyder, 1999)

Volunteering motives also affect volunteering outcomes. Nov et al.[18] compared the contributions of volunteers in three different citizen science projects over time. They found that contribution levels were affected by collective motives, norm-oriented motives, reputation, and intrinsic motives. On the other hand, contribution quality was positively affected only by collective motives and reputation. Furthermore, Baruch et al.[19] showed that what motivates initial online volunteering differs from what sustains it: the motivation for online volunteering is primarily altruistic. However, retention was affected by feedback and recognition. Online volunteers recorded lower satisfaction levels than traditional and hybrid volunteers (where people volunteer on- and offline), as feedback communicated via a screen did not satisfy their emotional needs of recognition and gratitude.[20]

17   Clary & Snyder, 1999
18   Nov et al., 2014
19   Baruch et al., 2016
20   Kulik, 2021

In addition, volunteer motivation has also been studied using self-determination theory.[21] The theory asserts that intrinsic motivation and engagement rises when three core needs are met: competence (how competent people feel in their tasks); connectedness (how connected they feel to others); and autonomy (freedom and control over duties and roles). Online volunteering can be used to develop new skills and offer connectedness, albeit virtually. However, its unique advantage lies in offering autonomy. People often look for flexible and autonomous roles in volunteering and undertaking volunteering online can meet this need.

Issues and challenges

Several common barriers prevent people from volunteering, both perceived and actual. Haski-Leventhal et al.[22] showed that barriers to volunteering could be divided into three groups: willingness, capability, and availability. Sundeen et al.[23] found that lack of time, interest, and ill-health are the main barriers to volunteering. An Australian study found that potential barriers included negative perceptions of volunteering activities, fear of getting rejected, such as ageism, and concerns about the increasingly regulated organisational environment.[24] In addition, non-volunteers have been found to have fewer resources than volunteers, which could act as a barrier to participation.[25]

Online volunteers are not a homogenous cohort, and barriers affect various groups differently. Older volunteers find overly complex website design, small font size, problematic internet connection, outdated or low-quality hardware, as well as non-response to enquiries by host organisations as significant barriers to participation.[26] The lack of contact with volunteer involving organisations and slow response to questions can leave online volunteers feeling isolated.[27]

Research has also recommended diverse outreach strategies to recruit new volunteers and retain current volunteers,[28] focusing on communication to facilitate continuous engagement. Volunteers are also motivated to join by experience or a deep relationship with the organisation.[29] Appreciation-based feedback,[30] training and communication of

21   Gagné & Deci, 2005
22   Haski-Leventhal et al., 2018
23   Sundeen et al., 2007
24   Warburton & Smith, 2003
25   Dury et al., 2015
26   Mukherjee, 2010
27   Feng & Leong, 2017
28   Crall et al., 2017
29   Nor et al., 2019
30   Tan et al., 2020

results,[31] and the development of a social and collaborative environment[32] online are suggested pathways to increase volunteer retention.

The role of volunteers in some areas of online volunteering is being impacted by artificial intelligence (AI).[33] This is particularly relevant to scientific research where, for example, tasks involving the identification of animals in images, often done by citizen science volunteers, are increasingly being carried out by machine learning algorithms. There continues to be a role for volunteers in helping to train machine learning algorithms and validating outcomes from AI applications. Opportunities exist for deeper learning for volunteers to enable them to contribute more complex data analysis beyond the current capabilities of AI.

Furthermore, some forms of online volunteering can be emotionally challenging. Mental health support organisations such as Beyond Blue[34] or Lifeline[35] offer online chats to people in need, and some of these services are operated by online volunteers. While most of these volunteers undergo extensive training and often have the necessary background and experience, it can still be emotionally draining to chat with someone who expresses the desire to end their life, not seeing their face, and often not knowing what happened to this person. Some helpline volunteers might suffer from secondary trauma, PTSD, depression, and anxiety.[36] While support is usually offered to these volunteers, the role can still be arduous to undertake.

Online volunteering – a pathway to diversity and inclusion

Online volunteering is a potential "remedy for existing inequalities in volunteering and a way to reinforce existing patterns of participation in increasingly digitised societies".[37] Indeed, the unique aspects of online volunteering remove some participation barriers[38] and can create a more inclusive form of involvement. It can provide an opportunity to engage diverse audiences by offering a low-barrier way to involve people with a range of abilities and mental states, members of the LGBTQIA+ community[39], or other underrepresented groups[40]. Since online volunteering can enable people with disabilities

31   Baruch et al., 2016
32   Feng & Leong, 2017
33   Ceccaroni et al., 2019
34   https://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-involved/volunteer-with-us
35   https://www.lifeline.org.au/get-involved/volunteer-as-a-crisis-supporter /
36   Taylor et al., 2019
37   Ackermann & Manatschal, 2018, p. 4453
38   Feng & Leong, 2017
39   https://www.queerspace.org.au/volunteer/
40   Richardson, 2021

to overcome accessibility issues, it can contribute to their mental and physical health[41] and overall sense of inclusion.

Handy and Cnaan[42] suggested that social anxiety often deters people from volunteering as new recruits. Based on a large-scale study in North America, they found that people with high anxiety levels did not want to start volunteering without knowing others in the organisation and preferred to donate money instead. Online volunteering offers volunteers anonymity and removes the need to leave their homes, which can be difficult for many. Volunteers can still have some level of interaction if they choose to in the future.

The case of DigiVol

One of the leading examples of successful online volunteering is the DigiVol program[43] at the Australian Museum[44] (the Museum) in Sydney. It is an extensive citizen science program with more than 11,200 registered online volunteers working on digitising the Museum's collections. This program is considered by many, both in Australia and internationally, as best practice[45] in assisting cultural institutions in digitising and preserving their vast collections. In 2011, the Museum collaborated with the Atlas of Living Australia[46] (initiated by The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation or CSIRO) to develop and implement a volunteer digitisation service model, resulting in the most extensive citizen science program in Australia. The program has won several volunteer management and engagement awards. Elements of DigiVol's innovative approach to online volunteering have been adopted by the Smithsonian Institute,[47] Kew Gardens and many other leading scientific institutions.[48]

In a recent study conducted with DigiVol, aimed at measuring volunteer motivations, barriers, and outcomes, 64 per cent of survey respondents were active volunteers in the previous six months. Among active volunteers, the purpose of DigiVol and the opportunity to learn about it, help others, feel better about oneself, and the benefits to one's career were the strongest benefits. Specific reasons for joining DigiVol included flexibility, wanting to volunteer online, attraction to science, and a sense of meaningfulness and purpose. The most common reasons for not volunteering (or not volunteering more) were

41   Shandra, 2017
42   Handy and Cnaan, 2007
43   https://australian.museum/get-involved/citizen-science/volunteer-with-us/digivol-online-volunteers/#DigiVol-Online
44   https://australian.museum/
45   Flemons & Berents, 2012
46   https://www.ala.org.au/
47   https://www.si.edu/volunteer/DigitalVolunteers
48   Alony et al., 2020

a change in personal circumstances, volunteering not being a high priority, and simply forgetting about it. The qualitative study also revealed problems with tasks and systems; lack of engagement; and situational barriers that prevented people from volunteering. A sense of meaningfulness and impact, positive perceptions of management, and realistic expectations kept volunteers active more and longer than those who did volunteer. Many volunteers met their competence, connectedness, and autonomy needs via DigiVol and recognition and feedback played a significant role in engaging volunteers and keeping them active.

Best practices

The accessibility of online volunteering lends itself to rapid recruitment through a broad range of media formats ranging from blogs[49] and social media[50] to more traditional media such as newspapers, radio, and TV. Word of mouth is also a beneficial way of recruiting volunteers, and there is benefit in asking existing volunteers to let their networks know about their volunteer work.

For people interested in volunteering online, the internet is the perfect place to start. General online recruitment services like SEEK[51] provide a range of opportunities, including volunteering from home. Furthermore, GoVolunteer[52] and other volunteer recruiting websites assist people in finding online and traditional volunteering opportunities. People can also volunteer online for international aid, such as through Australian Volunteers[53] or United Nations Volunteers.[54]

For recruiting organisations, such websites can be used to find volunteers in a complimentary way to using their own website. Online recruitment allows for the inclusion of links and automated onboarding mechanisms that streamline the recruitment process, which can result in large numbers of new volunteers when the media reach is broad.

The online environment requires a broader and more flexible range of approaches and tools for managing volunteers than onsite volunteering. Tutorials and videos can be used for training, newsletters for news, calls to action and updates, and online forums to facilitate peer to peer learning and a sense of inclusion.

49   https://volunteeringjourneys.com/17-volunteering-blogs-you-should-be-reading/
50   https://www.facebook.com/search/top?q=volunteering%20opportunities%20near%20me
51   https://www.seek.com.au/career-advice/article/heres-how-you-can-volunteer-from-home
52   https://govolunteer.com.au/volunteering?goodfor=12
53   https://www.australianvolunteers.com/assignments?q=&PositionType=Remote
54   https://app.unv.org/

Implications for practice and policy

Based on the existing body of knowledge and the research with DigiVol, several important implications for volunteers, volunteer involving organisations, and policymakers are offered.

For volunteers

Volunteers can find online volunteering opportunities on general websites like SEEK[55] or GoVolunteer.[56] They can also look for the specific websites of organisations offering services that volunteers might be able to provide, or which address causes they care about. As online volunteering is usually done alone, training and ongoing management is critical, and volunteers should check an organisation's volunteer management practices. Once volunteering has started, it is crucial that volunteers reach out to peers and managers and get the required technical, emotional, and administrative support. Volunteers can sometimes join online forums and groups for further support and problem-solving, and it can be valuable for volunteers to see if an organisation offers these supports and then to use them.

For the volunteer involving organisations

Given the current climate of technological advancement, all volunteer involving organisations could ask themselves what help they can receive from online volunteers. It is vital to set up working platforms, training videos, online forums, and virtual support to ensure that all volunteer work-related activities can be done online. Volunteer involving organisations should recruit volunteers using websites, social media, and word of mouth. More senior or experienced volunteers can act as online volunteer coordinators and offer administrative support to new volunteers. Another good idea is to provide digital volunteering options to employees of corporate partners, which can potentially be a revenue-generating opportunity for volunteer involving organisations.

Implications for policy

Policymakers and governments can support the rise of online and digital volunteering by doing the following:

- Acknowledge online volunteering as part of any conversation on volunteering in Australia. Online volunteering is as serious and important as any other type of volunteering.

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55   https://www.seek.com.au/career-advice/article/heres-how-you-can-volunteer-from-home
56   https://govolunteer.com.au/volunteering?goodfor=12

- Celebrate online volunteering as part of National Volunteer Week in May and International Volunteer Day in December.
- Provide research funds so that academic scholars can further explore this emerging phenomenon.
- Create online volunteering opportunities for people who want to volunteer for governmental organisations and as part of Australian Aid.

Conclusion

Online volunteering is on the rise for several good reasons. Post the global pandemic, and with the emergence of new technologies and social media, people will spend more time online, and some would prefer to volunteer this way. It is one essential pathway towards more inclusive volunteering, where people from many different backgrounds can overcome systemic barriers to volunteering. If done well, online volunteering can offer a meaningful experience to the volunteer and much needed skills to volunteer involving organisations.

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